

A DARK CAPTIVE ROMANCE



DEGRADATION

- ELLIE SANDERS -

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ELLIE SANDERS

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CONTENT WARNING

If you've read the two before this, then you won't be surprised that this book continues those fucked up themes. It IS PITCH BLACK. The male main character is irredeemable, dangerous, and downright abusive. The female main character is a sweetheart who endures far more than any human being ever should.

There are numerous and detailed rape scenes, sexual assault, physical assault, etc... if you do not like books with this type of content, then this one is absolutely not meant for you.

I can't put the full list of triggers here because, well, the bots... but the main ones are listed below. For the full list, please see my website – www.hotsteamywriter.com

Other triggers include:

- Abduction / kidnapping
- Abuse
- Anal sex (forced)
- Attempted suicide
- Auctioning off of a person
- Blinding
- Branding
- Breast slapping
- Bondage
- Blood play
- Bodily Mutilation

- Blow jobs (both consensual and non-consensual)
- Cannibalism
- Clit slapping / pinching /abuse
- Cult themes / ideology
- Dacryphilia
- Degradation
- Detailed, explicit, & graphic rape scenes.
- Drugging
- Drug rape (off-page)
- Dubious Consent
- Electrocution
- Enucleation
- Familial Abuse
- FGM (off page)
- Forced orgasms
- Forced exhibitionism
- Forced anal sex
- Food deprivation and starvation as a means of control
- Forced feeding
- Forced pregnancy themes
- Forced sharing
- Hitting
- Humiliation
- Human Taxidermy
- Hair cutting as a form of dehumanisation
- Imprisonment
- Knife play
- Mentions of CSA / abuse (historical and these are in passing, not detailed.)
- Murder
- Misogyny
- Necrophilia (unintentional)
- Organised crime
- Orgasm denial
- Psychological abuse and torture
- PTSD
- Rape

- Religious themes / ideology
- Self-mutilation
- Sexual penetration by objects ‘beyond the norm’
- Sexual torture
- Secret Societies / cultish and or/ religious themes
- Skin carving
- Spanking
- Torture
- Trauma
- Violence
- Whipping
- Waterboarding

Your mental health matters. Reader discretion is advised.

Do not read this book if you think you will find any of the above content triggering.

Also, do not read this book and then come crying to me about the content because you didn’t take this warning seriously. Yes, Julie, I’m talking to you...

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For all the readers who secretly crave a monster of a man to come take you away.

*You'll never tame this one, never soften his edges.
But if you're lucky, very lucky,
he might just kill for you.*

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CHAPTER

ONE



Devin

W_{here the fuck is she?}

I searched her room, *their* room technically. I searched the garden too, though I know she doesn't go there anymore. I've searched everywhere and I can't fucking find her.

Fear, something I've never felt, erupts in my chest.

Has her husband done something? Has he got his disgusting hands on her? Or worse, is he even now, forcing her to fuck one of his snivelling mates?

An alarm goes off, that high-pitched ringing of the bells that tells me something has happened, that we're under attack.

What the fuck? I know it's not a drill. It can't be. Has someone come for Gunther? Have they finally figured a way in and taken the chance to try and

kill him again?

Or is it Paityn, have they gotten to her, have they hurt her? Have they taken her?

I race through the Palace, all sense of reason gone entirely.

Ahead, I can see five of the other guards sprinting down the corridor. They're all running in the same direction, racing as if they know exactly where to go.

I sprint after them, my boots thundering against the polished marble flooring. All I can think about is her, if she's hurt, if she's in danger.

The men burst through a side door, then down the shitty old staircase that leads to the grain store.

I can hear something, some sort of screaming, something that sounds so close to her voice. But it's distorted, wrong. I push past, push them out the way, and come to a complete stop at the scene in front of me.

She's here. She's alive.

But it's not relief I feel when I see her, it's confusion.

She's on her knees, she's huddled over what I'm only just registering to be a body. She's covered in blood, her golden hair is awry and she looks like a thing possessed.

Malik takes a step towards her and she's quick to cut through the air, to slice at it with that blade held so tightly in her fist. "Stay back." She hisses. "Stay the fuck away from me."

I blink, taking my own measured steps nearer. What the fuck is this? What the fuck is going on?

"It's Gunther." Someone murmurs.

I stare at the body, realising he's right. It is Gunther, it is her husband, our Chapter Lord.

And it's more than obvious that he's dead.

There's too much blood for it to be otherwise. Besides, the fucker could never stay still for more than a moment so why would he be laid out here, on the floor, in the dirt?

He never shut up either, it's almost eery to look at him and not see the twitching, not hear the mumbling.

Gunther is dead.

Did she do it? Did she... no, she must have found him, she must have... but how the fuck could she have done that? She'd never have made her way down here by herself.

None of this makes sense, and especially not the way she's cradling his body, the way she's acting like she cares about him, the way she's turning this into a standoff.

"It was me." She screams suddenly, sounding more possessed. Sounding more feral. "I did it. I killed him."

I stare at her, then down at the blood-soaked blade.

My stomach drops as the realisation hits me. It's my blade. My fucking dagger. The same one she stole from me. Was she so stupid to think I wouldn't know? Was she so stupid to think she'd get away with this? Christ, what was she thinking?

I had a plan. I had a damned good plan to get us out both out of here.

Why the fuck did she do this?

When I look at her face again, her beautiful features are twisted into something of pure hate.

"He deserved to die." She spits. "He deserved it for what he did to me."

I don't recognise the person before me right now, I don't recognise this avenging beast.

She raises the dagger, my dagger, and points it at her throat. Her face now morphed into such contempt, such hatred.

"I'd rather die than let that man touch me again." She half-screeches.
"I'd rather die than let any of your arseholes touch me again."

Her words, her anger, it's too real, too raw to be pretend.

Has she been playing me this entire time? Was that what this was? Was she tricking me, luring me in? Turning me into her little pet monkey?

She never told me she loved me. When I whispered them to her, she never said those words back, did she? Christ, I'm a fool. A stupid fucking fool.

And the fact she's used my dagger, my fucking dagger. My heart twists, my own fury explodes.

She manipulated me. She used me. I don't doubt if she hadn't been caught red-handed, then I would be the one going down for this. Enough of the guards know who that dagger belongs to. Enough of them will recognise the hilt.

She set me up. This bitch set me up.

She screams out, dragging the knife across her throat and half of me can't wait to see her bleed out. But the other half wants to make her pay, wants to make her truly suffer.

The guards nearest are quick to bring her down, to incapacitate her, because as always, she's too slow for us. I see as she falls, as she lands in that same pool of now congealing blood.

And then something in me snaps. That last tangible grip on reality goes. I don't consciously move, I don't consciously do any of it, but I'm lashing out, going completely and utterly berserk.

She fucking killed him.

She killed him and she set me up.

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BEFORE



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CHAPTER

TWO



Pailtyn

The sun is a weak, pale thing as it struggles to pierce the heavy drapes of our drawing room. My mother stands by the window, her gaze fixed on some distant point beyond the glass, beyond the formal gardens, beyond our ridiculously gilded cage.

My tutor, Madame Petale, drones on in her nasal voice. Today's lesson is focusing on the various ways to please a man. I try not to roll my eyes, try not to let the sigh building in my chest escape my lips. This is the third time this week we've covered this particular topic. As if my future husband will be so unimaginative that I'll need to cycle through the same tired tricks to keep his interest.

"Remember, my dear," Madame Petale says, her eyes magnified behind her overly thick glasses, "a happy husband makes for a happy home. And a happy home is a peaceful home."

I want to tell her that a peaceful home is one where the wife isn't forced to perform like a trained pet, but I bite my tongue. My mother always says my cheek will be the death of me, but we both know where I got it from. After all, the apple doesn't fall that far from the tree.

"Paitlyn," My mother says, turning from the window, her eyes meeting mine. There's a softness there, a warmth she reserves only for me. "You'll be grateful for Madame Petale's teachings on your wedding night."

I can't help the scoff that escapes me. "At this rate, I'll be an old spinster before that day arrives. We've been locked away so long, I doubt anyone even remembers we exist."

My mother laughs, a sound like tinkling bells, light and carefree. It's a sound I don't hear often enough. "No one forgets the Heseltines, dear. And certainly, no one will forget your pretty face."

The compliment makes me squirm. I know I'm attractive; after all, my mother has spent a fortune to ensure it. But beauty is a double-edged sword, a weapon I've yet to learn how to wield effectively because I've been locked up in this bloody house like a princess in an ivory tower.

The sound of heavy footsteps echoes down the hall, and my stomach clenches. I know that the arrogant gait only too well. My uncle, Pearce, walks in, his eyes narrowing as he takes in the scene before him.

"Why all the merriment?" he asks, his voice its usual cold, icy tone. "Shouldn't you be learning something useful?"

He's nine years older than my mother, and his balding hairline does nothing to help the harshness of his appearance. He's dressed in his usual tweed waistcoat and I'm certain his wife is the reason why. She barely graces us with her presence but whenever she does, she too, is dressed in tweed, as if it's the only fabric acceptable to be seen in.

I hate him. I hate the way he looks at me, the way he speaks to me, the way he lords his power over me. If it were just Mother and me, life would be, well, not happy exactly, but certainly more bearable.

He thankfully doesn't live with us but he's here often enough to ensure he has total control over our day-to-day existence. I know he's trying to prove a point. That he's in a petty little fight with my Guardian because our Grand Master deemed him an unsuitable candidate to ensure mine and my mother's safety after my father died.

"We are learning, Pearce," My mother says, her voice calm, placating, just like usual. "Madame Petale was just teaching Paitlyn about marital

arts.”

Pearce snorts, a cruel smirk twisting his lips. “Is that so? Well, let’s see what she’s learned, then.”

He strides over to me, picking up the wooden instrument that we so often choose to ignore. It’s meant to replicate a man’s penis. I’ve often wondered how accurate the thing really is but I guess if I’m lucky enough to be married I’ll find that out for myself.

“Show me how well you can suck a cock, niece.” He says, smirking.

My cheeks flush with humiliation, but I don’t dare glare at him. I’ve felt the sting of his hand too many times to risk it.

My mother’s eyes meet mine, with a silent plea in their depths. She hates this as much as I do, but since my father died, she’s almost as powerless as I am. We both know the consequences of disobedience.

“Paitlyn is very accomplished,” My mother says, her voice barely above a whisper. She looks pointedly at me, and I know what I have to do. That I have to perform.

Pearce smirks, tossing the wood at my face, only, I fail to catch it, and it clangs to the floor with a heavy thud.

“Go on then.” He says, tauntingly.

I pick up the thing, my fingers trembling slightly as I wrap them around the smooth wood. I try to block out my uncle’s sneering face, try to pretend I’m alone in my room, that this is just a silly game I’m playing by myself.

I bring the polished wood to my mouth, my lips parting as I take it in, my cheeks hollowing as I mimic the act I’ve been taught.

Pearce narrows his eyes, clearly wanting to find fault and, as I start to slide the toy further back, he pushes my hand, forcing it all the way with a brutality that makes me instantly gag.

He’s wearing gloves, he always has to wear gloves when he’s around me, but that doesn’t stop the disgust creeping along my skin at the contact.

“There you go.” He grins, with a look that says he’s achieved what he wanted. “No husband wants a wife that only puts in half the effort.”

I look up, my eyes tearing as he holds the thing there, as he refuses to let me catch my breath.

“A man wants to watch his wife choke, Paitlyn. He wants to watch her suffer. That is what gives us pleasure, that is what ensures we know you bitches understand your place.”

I can't even nod. I can't even respond. My nostrils flare, I try to get the air in and just as I think he might willingly let me die, he pulls the thing out, leaving a trail of saliva down my chin, down my chest.

He tuts, wiping it with his thumb, dragging the leather covered digit down between my breasts in such a degrading way.

"Do try better next time, Paitlyn. For your own sake, if not for anyone else's."

I want to snap back. I want to call him out. But I don't dare. I just nod placidly and wait for him to strut back out and leave us to it.

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CHAPTER

THREE



Devin

The wind bristles through my hair, there's a chill to it, a hint that the hot summer is almost over and winter is finally on its way.

I like winter. I like the darkness, the storms, the fact that all those damned cheery faces and happy smiles of summer are finally packed up and gone.

I can see my brother, Magnus, stood, alongside all the other elite, watching this little parade as we finish. He's keeping his face measured, controlled, but I know inside, he's more than furious. Around me are a hundred other men, soldiers, warriors, all trained and ready to fight, ready to do what is necessary to defend ourselves and our way of life.

My new uniform is tight, itchy. The thick fabric of my ceremonial dress clings to my muscles, and I can feel a trickle of sweat making its way down my spine beneath my shirt. My boots are so well polished I can see my face

in them. I stand head and shoulders above everyone else, and I'm more than aware of the presence my physical appearance has on the people around me.

I can feel the glances of the Lords, the Ladies, all the people watching this little event. They're sizing me up – literally. Trying to figure out if I'm as big of a threat as I appear to be. I'm a Blake after all, and not just a Blake, I'm my father's son, in every sense of the word. I bare his semblance, his build, everything about me attests to what he was. My brother's Magnus and Conrad look like damned mice compared to the sheer brute of what I am. And I suspect that's the reason I'm here. Why I've been chosen.

Our family are reapers. We're not meant to serve in this way and yet, if the rumours are true, the Chapter Lord chose me personally.

I can hear his croaky voice as he drones on about duty and honour. He's stood on a dais, facing us all, wearing his long robes that billow behind him. He's an older man, in his fifties, with sparse grey hair and a pudgy, wrinkled face. He's been our Chapter Lord as long as I've been alive. And while most of that time, he's been conservative, boring even, in his leadership, something has clearly changed of late. Maybe he hit his head, maybe he's realised suddenly that he won't live forever because he's been making moves, making changes, and a lot of them have not been so popular with the masses.

It's another reason I'm here, that all the men around me are here. He made a ruling two years ago that all the men have to go for training once they reach adulthood, that it's compulsory, we have to learn to fight, to defend.

He's raising an army. He's preparing for war.

Only, no one seems to know who exactly we're fighting.

We're meant to be secret. We're meant to be elite. We don't want to alert the wider world to our presence because the consequences would result in our downfall. We have power, prestige, money too, because we exist in the shadows. If we announce ourselves, all of that goes.

"Scott Miller." He calls out, and a soldier steps forward. Marching to the front, before saluting to receive his papers.

I wait my turn. It doesn't take long. And then I'm marching up, receiving my own orders.

As I turn to leave, I can feel it, all those eyes on me. Yeah, they can look their fill, they can stare all they want. None of them are a match for me, for

us, for the Blakes.

I stalk over to where my brother is stood, and he beckons me further away. Conrad is no doubt fucking around somewhere because only Magnus was granted the honour of an invite.

He snatches the papers out of my hand, then scans the contents.

“This has to be a joke,” He mutters.

“It’s not.” I reply.

We haven’t seen each other in three months. He doesn’t even ask how I am, how the training went, not that I expected a cuddle or anything. Neither of us hold such weak notions as sentimentality.

He scans his eyes over me, that same look of derision apparent on his face. “You’re a Reaper,” he states. “That’s your role, that’s how you, me, the Blakes serve.”

“Apparently, our Chapter Lord thinks otherwise,” I say. I can hardly be a Reaper when I’ve been picked as part of Gunther’s personal guard.

He narrows his eyes, and I wonder for a second if he might just lose his shit entirely. That that cool, calculated demeanour might crack.

“We’ll speak to the Senate...”

“No,” I growl, cutting across him, like fuck I’ll let that happen. I’m not some schoolboy they can all pass around, can make decisions for. “It’s an honour. This position is an honour. I want to serve. And besides, you and Conrad are more than capable of doing all the reaping you like without me.”

He shakes his head, muttering something about how ‘that old fucker playing games again’ and I can tell he’s not convinced.

There’s a voice in my head that says this deployment might actually be a good thing. A chance for me to get away from them both, Magnus and Conrad. I can create a name for myself, can have some damned breathing space – and maybe, just maybe, that’s what Magnus fears. He’s never been able to control me the way he wants, the way he can Conrad. These orders will place me even further from his grasp. Will give me an independence he can’t fight.

CHAPTER

FOUR



Pailtyn

The maids chatter rings out down the hallway. I can catch words of it, but not the whole conversation. They sound excited. They certainly look it.

“Sally?” I half-whisper, anxious not to speak too loudly and earn more of my mother’s wrath. “What is it?”

Her face flickers with an expression I can’t read and then she glances at Rebecca beside her. “It’s nothing,” she says hurriedly.

I frown, hearing the obvious lie. They might technically be our maids, but they’re practically the same age as I am, and we’ve spent many an evening hanging out like friends rather than staff and mistress.

Rebecca gulps, nudging her shoulder, “Just tell her.”

“Tell me what?” I ask.

Sally grimaces, “We weren’t supposed to say, Mistress was very clear about it.”

I feel it, that familiar pang in my stomach that tells me some more shit is going down. Are we moving again? Is that it? I glance around the house, it’s nice enough, but it’s not a home, not our home. We were forced to leave ours, forced to downsize, when my father died, and then we’ve moved three times since. Apparently the first time was for our own protection. Antonio, my guardian stated that, as he stepped in, swooped in, and took me under his ever-watchful gaze. I know it had something to do with my uncle, I know he and Antonio were warring over who had the most say over us. I’m not sure what the reasons were for the next moves, I was simply told to shut up and pack, like a good daughter should.

I know why I’m locked away. Why my mother and I have been for years. Because my bloodline is precious, sacred even. I’m being kept nice and safe until the Brethren are ready to make a suitable marriage for me. I don’t really mind it, if anything a part of me can’t wait until I’m away from my uncle’s overbearing presence but still, the thought of marrying someone I don’t know, it’s doesn’t exactly fill me with ease either.

I let out a slow breath of air. It is what it is. It’s my destiny, my bad luck for being born a Heseltine. There’s no good fighting it. No good at all.

“Our Chapter Lord is looking for a new wife.” Sally states.

I let out a puff of air at her words. That’s it? Why are they acting like that’s a big deal?

“He’s sent out invites.” She adds.

“Invites for what?”

She glances behind her, before grabbing my hand, pulling me down to where the study is. I can see it on the desk, the fancy paper, the even fancier writing scrawled on it, and the seal that tells me that this came from the Palace.

“He’s cherry picked his options. Wants every girl on some list to be presented to him so he can choose.” She says.

My lips curl. I don’t know why they’re making such a fuss, who a Chapter Lord does or doesn’t marry doesn’t concern us. I’m a Founder. I’m off-limits. Those are the rules. Those are the laws a Grand Master established more than five hundred years ago.

But my hand shakes as I pick up the letter, as I scan the contents. It’s addressed directly to my mother, but there must be some mistake. He can’t

surely believe we would attend such a thing?

“Get back.” Rebecca hisses, pulling me so that I’m flat against the wall and hidden from view. I’m guessing my mother is out there, on the veranda. I can hear voices, hers and a man. From the tone alone, I can guess who it is, who has decided to honour us with his presence.

“Go.” I murmur. It’s bad enough that I might be caught but I don’t want to tie them up in this mess. My mother has a foul temper and she’s more than happy to make it clear when she feels our staff have stepped out of line. I don’t want them getting a beating because of me.

As soon as they’re gone, I tiptoe closer, using the thick curtain to hide myself and I press my ear against the cool glass so I can hear.

“Don’t do this. Don’t take her there.” Antonio’s voice sounds tense, angry even.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” My mother scoffs. “You know as well as I what the plan is...”

“You want her to marry him?” He half-snarls back and that makes me pause. He’s always so calm, so collected. My mother has taken great joy over the years to do her best to annoy him and up to now, I’ve never seen him take the bait. I know it’s because she feels loyalty to our family, that on some level, she wants to prove her loyalty to Pearce, but it feels so unnecessary, so petty too.

“It’s not about wants.” She says and I can her body language, the way she’s waving her arms like she knows what’s best for our family and shouldn’t be challenged.

“Vera, you know what he is, what he’s like.” Antonio states, stepping right into her space. “You really want that for your daughter?”

“He’s Chapter Lord.” My mother states pointedly, like that somehow explains all of this. Only, it doesn’t.

“Another reason why you shouldn’t go through with this.” He adds, shaking his head.

“What’s the matter, Antonio, you seem very invested in my family’s matters. In Paitlyn’s. One might wonder whether *you* have designs on the girl yourself?”

I shift, trying to gauge his reaction to that comment. Antonio’s face is neutral. He just stares at her like she’s lost her marbles.

Would I mind if that was the case? He’s not bad looking, even if he is more than twice my age.

He's a tall man, toned, with tanned skin and a look in his eyes that makes you feel like he's always plotting something. His hair is short, ruffled, dark, and contrasts against the grey pepper of his stubbly beard. When I was younger, when my father first passed, I wondered whether he was my future, my intended. That that was his purpose in our lives, that he was simply waiting until I was legally of age so he could take me away and marry me. It was my uncle who fixed that error, having found my diary, having read the contents before he cruelly laughed at my obvious stupidity.

No, Antonio wasn't to be my husband, he was my Guardian. Put in place to secure my survival. My bloodline. He works for our Grand Master, he follows his directions, being one of a handful of people on this earth who even know what our great leader actually looks like.

"Don't be absurd." He replies, bringing me out of my head. "Besides, it's against the rules."

It is against the rules. As my Guardian he isn't allowed to marry me. But I am fair game to the other Guardians, if our Grand Master signed off on it, of course.

"Gunther doesn't seem to pay them any mind, does he?" My mother taunts.

"That's another reason you should keep your daughter far, far away from him. He's dangerous. He's not in his right frame of mind anymore..."

"He's old." She sneers back, cutting across the last of his words. "He can be controlled."

"You're an absolute fool if you believe that. Control Gunther?" Antonio scoffs.

"Soon enough you'll see." My mother states. "He's hardly in the perfect picture of health as it is."

"So what, you're all are banking on Mother Nature to step in?" I can hear the absurdity in his voice, his tone. I can see the contempt too, as he looks down at her. "Who says Gunther doesn't simply die, what then? You'll have wasted her potential. Or worse, he lives for another twenty years. Would you condemn your daughter to such a life?"

"I will do what is necessary. As will she. She's a Founder after all. She has her father's blood. His strength, his ambition. She will be more than happy to play her part. To do her duty as her family dictates."

"You're sure about that?" He says, getting right in her face.

"Why don't we ask her, she's standing right outside the door."

My face heats instantly. I barely have a second to compose myself before those doors spring open and I'm there, exposed, and it's more than apparent what I was up to from how I'm wrapped up in the curtain.

"Paitlyn." My mother says with that irksome, expectant tone she puts on when we have guests and wants me to behave.

"Paitlyn." Antonio says throwing her a look.

My eyes dart between them, between the only parent I have and the man who even now, I still can't figure out.

"I..." I begin but fall silent when my brain refuses to come up with any decent sort of explanation as to why I'm stood here beyond the obvious.

"Paitlyn," My mother says again, more gently. "We were just discussing your future. A potential marriage offer has arrived. An advantageous one. One that would make your father proud..."

She thinks she's being so clever, so subtle, but we can both hear the manipulation in her words. It's Pearce. He's doing this. Forcing this. I know it.

"It's forbidden." I reply before I can stop myself. I know the laws as well as anyone. My mother made me study them, made me learn them all by heart. Knowledge is power, right? I had that fact drilled into me from the moment I could read.

She pulls a face. "Rules are made to be broken."

"That's not what you said..."

She cuts across me as if my opinion doesn't even matter. "Those were different times. The Brethren is far stronger now than it was, far more powerful. We no longer have to fear a blade in the dark, we no longer have to worry about uprisings and revolutions. We hold the power now. We can do as we like, and I for one think it's high time we stopped hiding, stopped acting like we have anything to fear."

"You're a fool if you believe that." Antonio states. "A fool and a traitor too."

"It's not treason." My mother hisses.

"It is." Antonio snarls. "Our Grand Master himself declared such statements as such. You're lucky I value your life enough not to report it."

"Or you'd what?" She sneers. "You'd see me taken away, sent to Oblivion, given over to those mongrels, the Blakes?" her dark eyes land on me and to my surprise she doesn't look in the least bit afraid. But Antonio is right. His word alone is enough to condemn her, to condemn me too if he

chooses. "Look at her," My mother says, "She's young, she deserves to live, to not be constantly hiding away."

"Marrying her to Gunther is not allowing her to live." Antonio snaps. "And as her Guardian, I forbid it."

"Gunther overrides you." My Uncle states loudly as he steps out from behind a bush like he couldn't be any more of a cartoon villain. I knew he'd be lurking somewhere. I knew he'd be listening in. Clearly, he's entangled with whatever this is.

My stomach turns as he struts up to us, looking more and more like the smug bastard I know him to be.

"We live in his Chapter." Pearce continues. "We live by Gunther's rules. And besides, it is a decision our family can make without you."

That's not true. We all know that. Antonio was made by our Grand Master, his family were made by them. He reports directly to him, not to some mere Chapter Lord.

Antonio narrows his eyes, but my mother turns, quickly grabbing my arm tightly, telling him the discussion is over as she pulls me back into the house.

As I glance back, I see them both squaring off and I wonder if this here will be the moment he finally decides to fight him. If this moment will be the tipping point.

CHAPTER

FIVE



Pailtyn

My mother brushes my hair, humming away, while I sit staring at my face in the mirror. I'm not unattractive, I know that much. My mother ensures I have the best products, so my skin is literally glowing, that my hair is so glossy it feels like literal silk.

When I was fourteen, I underwent my first round of cosmetic surgery, fixing the slight wonk on my nose; a wonk I inherited from her. After that, I had a few more, fixing other issues, other imperfections. When I was sixteen and had officially stopped growing, I underwent the most gruelling one, having the bottom two ribs removed, giving me what is now, the perfect hourglass figure. It took me months to recover from that one. Months of pain, months of rehab. But apparently it was worth it.

I have a personal trainer, I've been on the same strict, plant-based diet for years - I have endured everything necessary to ensure I look like a

damned goddess. That I fit the dreamlike image most men want in a wife.

“You’re just nervous, Paitlyn,” My mother says, her voice soft but firm. “It’s natural to feel this way. Marriage is a big step but think of the security it brings. Think of the family you’ll have, the duty you’ll fulfil.”

I turn to face her, the sunlight casting a warm glow on her features, softening the lines that time and worry have etched. “But what if it’s the wrong step? What if our Grand Master punishes us for this, punishes me?”

My mother’s smile is gentle, indulgent even, as if she’s humouring a child afraid of the dark. “It’s not the wrong step because God himself is putting this path before you. Why would our Grand Master disagree with God, when he is his mouthpiece?”

I want to believe her, to soak up her words like the parched earth drinks the rain. “So, I won’t go to Oblivion then?”

She waves her hand, dismissing my concerns like they’re mere flies to be shooed away. “Don’t be silly, Paitlyn, no one’s been sent to Oblivion for something as trivial as this. And you’re a Founder, remember, you can do as you please.”

Trivial. The word tastes bitter on my tongue. How can something that feels so monumental, so life-altering, be classed as trivial? I turn back to the window, staring out at the gardens. “But what if I want more? What if I want love, not just security? What if I want to choose, not just be chosen?”

My mother’s sigh is heavy, a sound that carries the weight of tradition and expectation. “Paitlyn,” She says gently, lovingly. “We’ve talked about this before. We don’t always get to choose our path in life. Sometimes, it’s chosen for us. And it’s our duty to walk it with grace and dignity.”

Her words spark a memory, a conversation I had with my father when he was on his deathbed. He told me that duty was like a road, one that we must follow even if it’s strewn with sharp stones. But he also said that the best roads were the ones we paved ourselves. I cling to that thought, that small ember of defiance in the face of my mother’s resigned acceptance.

“And what of my father?” I ask, turning to face her again. “Would he want this for me? Would he want me to marry someone, despite it being against the rules?”

My mother’s expression softens, her eyes glistening with what looks like unshed tears. “Your father always wanted what was best for you, Paitlyn. And sometimes, what’s best isn’t what’s easiest. He understood the importance of duty, of sacrifice.”

Sacrifice. That word hangs in the air like a stark reminder of what's expected of me. I'm not just sacrificing my freedom, my chance to choose my own path. I'm sacrificing the chance to love, to truly love someone who loves me in return, not just out of duty or obligation.

Oh, I know it's a foolish thing to think I could ever have the luxury of being in love. People like me, people like us don't get such things. We're granted power, riches, things ordinarily people could only dream of, and in return we accept that notions such as love are as unattainable as dancing on the moon.

"What if he decides he doesn't want me?" The words are out before I can stop them, a whispered rebellion against the inevitability that my mother presents.

I hear her sharp intake of breath. Her face betrays her for the minutest of seconds before she fixes that smile back on it.

"Why would he ever do that?" She asks. "You're the most accomplished, the prettiest and by far, the greatest prize out of all the Founder girls."

God, I hope that's a lie. I hope that's utter bullshit.

I nod back, giving her a placating smile. It makes no difference at this time anyway, Gunther will decide and all of us ultimately are just pawns in his hand.

CHAPTER

SIX



Pailtyn

I'm standing in a room with six other girls, all of us from the Founder families and that fact alone makes me more nervous. Did Gunther only invite us then? Did he decide to ignore all the other elite families and go purely for Founder blood? The only family missing here are the Ashers, but they haven't produced a girl in years.

All of us naked.

The flimsy gowns we were permitted to wear have been tossed at our feet, and we're on show, standing like statues for the entire Senate to appraise.

We're in the Great Hall, in the Palace. It's odd to be in this space, in this inner sanctum. My eyes keep darting to the walls, to the motifs, to all the beautiful artwork and gold that seems to cover every surface. The place is more beautiful than anything I could imagine. If I shut my eyes and tries to

conjure up the image of God's house, it would be like this, it would be this breathtaking, this magnificent.

There's a little table in front of each of us with our details. Our names, weight, health records, family history, and our pedigree; as if Gunther doesn't know it all.

I do my best not to shiver, to stay still and silent. If I can hold my nerve, there's a good chance I'll get through this entire thing unnoticed and unscathed. After all, the girls beside me are just as beautiful and odds are, he'll pick someone else.

With each step the Chapter Lord takes, the room seems to grow more tense. Our families are standing opposite us, watching this entire thing play out as if it's the proudest moment of their lives.

I can see my mother silently wringing her hands with anticipation, and her eyes haven't once left my body. I can see Pearce too, narrowing his eyes, staring at me in a way that makes me want to cover myself up. No doubt we'll have a conversation when we're back at the house about whatever transgressions he thinks I've committed.

Gunther takes another step, barely looking at the first girl or the second. The Senate echoed his every move, following him like a bad odour. I'm in the middle, nicely hidden amongst the crowd as it were.

He stops in front of the girl next to me, Tilly, flicking through her paperwork before his eyes fix on her body. She's a head taller than me, she has a heart shaped face, and fuller breasts. Perhaps it's just better genetics, or perhaps it's because I'm the youngest here but I'm also the shortest girl and I'm hoping that plays in my favour - that I'm ignored. Passed over, that Gunther wants a lithe goddess to stand beside him as his wife.

Gunther tilts his head, murmuring something we can't hear and then his eyes flicker to me.

In haste, I drop my gaze, but it's a stupid mistake.

I have no right to look him in the face. No right whatsoever.

I'll pay for that dearly, because I don't doubt my brother hasn't missed it.

My cheeks blush with shame and as his gaze lingers, I know it only gets worse.

"Little Paitlyn." Gunther says, smiling in a way that makes me shiver. "My, how you've grown."

I don't know how to respond. I'm not meant to. I just bite the tip of my tongue and pray that our past interactions are enough for him to disregard me. Only, to my horror he steps between the very tables, manoeuvring himself closer to me.

I can feel his warm breath on my skin as he stares down at my body.

With one calloused hand he reaches out, grips my chin and pulls my face up. Instinctively I look up, meeting his watery blue gaze and a gasp slips from my lips before I can stop it.

It's been years since I've seen this man. He used to meet with my father regularly, but that all changed when I was eight. When my father passed, when me and my mother had to go into confinement and technically retire from good society.

His fingertips brush against my cheek as he forces my mouth open, and he shoves them in there as if he expects any other reaction beyond me choking, but my body trembles more. Shame radiates off me because I know what he's simulating and it only increases as I feel him take the weight of my left breast, balancing it in his hand.

"You're very sensitive." He says as if I understand his meaning. Sensitive to what? Abuse? Violation?

"She's never been touched by a man, Chapter Lord." My mother says while the other families beside her scoff.

"All these daughters are pure." Tilly's father states almost flippantly. "Every one of these girls is a virgin."

"That's not what I meant." My mother replies boldly, too boldly considering the circumstances. After all, aren't we meant to be the subservient sex? "No man has ever laid a finger on her until today." She continues, "Not just her sex, but every inch of her is pure. Even her own father and uncle never touched her skin. Never held her."

As she declares this, the other families seem to murmur both in surprise and resentment, as if that fact alone makes me suddenly more worthy.

Gunther certainly seems to think so as his eyes light up. His other hand comes down from my chin to grasp my other breast and, as he begins to fully indulge in his ministrations, I have to bite my lip to hold back the curse I so dearly want to say.

Surely such actions, such behaviour goes against all public decency? He's clearly getting off on this, he's clearly enjoying every second. I hate

the fact that my nipples have hardened, that my heart is racing with the amount of adrenaline pumping through my veins.

I'm not enjoying this, I'm not, but my body is giving every signal that I am and that shame that I couldn't believe would get any worse engulfs me entirely.

I know what this means. Even as he steps back, even as he fondles the girl next to me and the one beside her, I know that I've scored the highest ranking.

It's everything I didn't want.

It's everything I was hoping to avoid.

My heart sinks to an impossible level, and it's all I can do to hold back the tears. I wanted to be a disappointment. I wanted to be overlooked. Sure, my mother would have been livid, would have almost certainly beaten me for my failure but what is one moment of pain versus a lifetime chained to a man like him?

My mother steps up to me, cloaking my body in a robe and she gives me the biggest grin.

“You’ve done well.” She says. “Very well.”

Like I had any say in the matter.

I don’t want to be Chapter Lady, I don’t want any of this. But what choice do I have? What power do I have?

None, that’s what. Absolutely nothing

CHAPTER

SEVEN



Devin

The music rings out, pissing my ears off with its merry little tune. Me and the other guards are stood, watching from the perimeter of the room. This wasn't what I imagined, not how I envisioned my day-to-day life to be when I became a Chapter Guard. I grit my teeth, biting down the annoyance that is already settling in.

I imagined drama, excitement, not stood watching a bunch of semi-naked girls twist and turn for our Lord's amusement. Sure, the sight isn't half bad. Some of the girls have nice tits that bounce as they move, but if I wanted to see naked women I could just as easily go to Oblivion, and at least here, I could have some fun with a slave or two.

"Look at them," murmurs Lyndon, his voice a low growl. He's one of the guards who did their training with me. "Like little flowers, waiting to be plucked."

The others chuckle, their eyes roving over the girls like hungry wolves. I don't react, but I can't help the wry amusement that twists my gut. Men are such predictable creatures, aren't we? All us see something delicate and our first instinct is to break it.

The red-headed girl is particularly captivating, her hair is like a flame that licks at the air as she spins. She moves with a wildness the others seem to lack, and that in my opinion, sets her apart from the others.

"Founders, all of them," adds Mace, another guard. He's older than me, part of the lot that have been watching Gunther for years. The stories he tells makes me question how much the wider Brethren are aware of his antics, or if they just turn a blind eye to our dear Chapter Lord's misdemeanours in favour of a simpler life. "This whole thing's a sham. Chapter Lord can't marry a founder, yet here we are."

I blink, surprised at his words. Founders? We're not even meant to know who the Founders are. That's forbidden knowledge, not for the likes of us.

I look at the still dancing girls with new eyes, with more suspicion, and then I glance over to where their families are stood on a nice little platform so they can have a good view of all of this. They are all complicit in this charade, their families are clearly willing to break the rules for a chance at more power.

But what does that mean for us? What does any of this mean for our Chapter if our leader is willing to ignore this sacred rule, what others will he disregard when it suits his fancy?

A noise in the corner gets my attention, I look to see two of the girls squabbling now that they're back from the toilets. Shaking my head I cross over to where they are and pull them apart. One has a chunk full of hair from the other girl. As she snarls at me, I can't help but smirk. These bitches are all livewires, aren't they?

I send them on their way, shooing them back onto the dancefloor.

The second girl batters her eyelids giving me her thanks like I'm some sort of hero.

"God, they're pathetic." Lyndon remarks as I resist the urge to tell her what for.

She saunters off, swaying her hips as if inviting me to come and fuck her right here and now, as if her arse is the finest thing in all of

Christendom. But I've seen better meat in Oblivion, and at least there, I can devour it the way I want to, without any concerns about consequences.

Suddenly, there's a gasp. One of the other girls, a blonde with eyes that are impossibly blue, stumbles and falls. She hastily picks herself up, her cheeks flaming with embarrassment and over at the gallery there's an eruption of whispers.

My gaze lingers on her for a moment, before I look away. The Chapter Lord is there, scooping her up, acting like he gives a shit, and I resist the overwhelming urge to roll my eyes.

I want this charade over with. I want this thing done.

I'm bored shitless and, in my mind, Gunther should have just picked out a wife based on whose tits he liked best. The rest is white noise. The rest is bullshit.

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CHAPTER

EIGHT



Pailtyn

I can feel their eyes on me. It's like a physical touch, cold and unwanted, as I twirl under the colossal chandelier of the great hall. The semi-sheer fabric of my dress, a supposed symbol of my purity, billows around me, revealing more than it conceals. I try to focus on the music, the sweet melody played by the finest musicians our Chapter has to offer, but it can't drown out the reality of this grotesque spectacle.

Mother and Pearce are up there, in the gallery, their silhouettes casting long, disapproving shadows. I can almost hear my mother's heels grinding against the floor as she shifts, her lips pursed in that way she does when she's displeased. I just can't tell if it's me that's pissing her off, or something else.

Pearce stands rigid beside her, his hands clenched behind his back. I know he's watching my every move, his eyes as critical as the scores being

tallied at the end of the hall.

Gunther struts between us, his grin a lecherous slash across his face. He reaches out, his fat fingers grasping at waists, brushing against cheeks, lingering too long on the small of a back.

I want to recoil, to scream, to claw at his face, but I bite my tongue and dance away, narrowly avoiding his touch as he moves closer. I won't give him the satisfaction of seeing me squirm, not after the other day.

The other girls are radiant, smiling, their cheeks flushed with excitement or fear, I can't tell. They spin and dip, their dresses like gossamer wings, as they vie for our dear Chapter Lord's attention. I try to mimic their grace, their eagerness, but my heart isn't in it because I can't forget why we're here, what we're dancing for.

Let them have him. Let one of them win this contest. Better I fail now than succeed and spend the rest of my life regretting this.

I wince, chastising myself for those sinful thoughts. I'd woken up this morning determined to be good, to be obedient. Only, all that went out the window the moment I laid eyes on him. I think I'd forgotten how grotesque he was. I think I'd somehow fooled myself that the person in my head wasn't that bad.

But the reality can't be denied.

Being married Gunther would be a living nightmare.

At the end of the hall, the evaluators sit, their quills scratching against parchment, tallying our worth like we're livestock at a market. They scrutinize our every move, our every smile, reducing us to numbers on a scoreboard. I don't even understand how they are marking us, what things we have to do and not do to get a good score. I just hope the other girls are better.

I wait for my moment, for the perfect opportunity to seal my fate. The music crescendos, and I spin, faster and faster, the room...blurring into a whirl of colours and sounds.

I see Gunther approaching from the corner of my eye, his hand outstretched, ready to 'sample the merchandise' as I've heard him joke already to his guards. Revulsion surges through me, and I know it's now or never.

I falter mid-spin, my foot catching on itself. It's a clumsy, graceless move that makes me tumble to the ground. My limbs flail, the sheer fabric of my skirt tears slightly as I make impact with the floor. I hear gasps from

the other girls, a sharp intake of breath from the evaluators, and the music practically stutters to a halt in such a dramatic fashion.

I stay where I've fallen, acting my part, acting like I'm just as surprised as everyone else. That I'm ashamed too, embarrassed. A voice in my head whispers with glee that this is it, this is enough. No one would want a bride who's a clutz, will they?

Only, before my triumph can truly set in, a pudgy hand reaches down, fingers wrap around my body, and I'm scooped up.

I stare back in disbelief at the man holding me and for a second it feels like the entire world stops.

In books, they describe these moments, when you stare into the eyes of another human being, and you know your life has irrevocably changed. That the stars have aligned, that you've met your soulmate. But the person staring back at me, he's not my soulmate.

He's my destiny, yes, my future, but I can already taste the ashes in my mouth.

I can feel the pain.

The destruction, every horrific moment of what is coming. What this man will do.

My heart slams into my chest, my body trembles, complete and utter fear reverberates through me, and I can't control it, I can't stop it.

"Poor thing." Gunther murmurs. "Do all these people make you nervous? Or is it fear of not being chosen that's put too much pressure on you?"

I gulp back and my voice refuses to work.

I thought he was a leech last time I encountered him, but now, now I'm certain he's so much worse than that.

He hooks a finger under my chin, lifting my face higher. "Such a pretty thing." He mutters. "A pretty, pretty thing."

I want to scream back that I'm not a thing. That none of us are. That we're human beings, people, not merely objects for him to enjoy. But my defiance falters as I realise everyone is watching us now.

He sets me on my feet, no longer staring at my face but now down, at my body, at the parts of me that are exposed solely for his pleasure.

And then he nods like he's made his mind up before he turns and walks away.

I don't want to look up, I don't want to see the anger on my uncle's face, but I don't know what else to do.

I look stupid, I look like a fool, stood here, right in the centre of the room.

The musicians begin to play, the other girls exchange glances with one another and then they start dancing again as if they can erase these last few moments from everyone's memory.

I swallow my pride and begin to move once more, trying to shut up the voice in my head. Trying to shut up the steadily growing scream that's getting louder and louder and louder.

CHAPTER

NINE



Pailtyn

Tt's happening. I know it. I can feel it.

I feel like I'm on a Ferris wheel, a merry-go-round that's spinning faster and faster and it's out of control, but I can't stop it. I can't.

I barely got any sleep last night and though my makeup is perfect, my hair pristine, I feel like an absolute wreck as I stand here, and I also feel like everyone else can see it.

My hands are trembling so badly I have to curl them into little fists. My uncle stands to my right and my mother to my left. They feel more like prison guards in this moment than family.

Gunther is stood with his back to us, having a conversation with someone while all the Senate behind him. I study their faces in their long fancy red robes, and, though they all seem to hold neutral expressions,

something about their body language tells me they're not happy about any of this.

My stomach twists more as that realisation sinks in. Antonio's words ring out in my head. His warnings. This is a mistake. This is treason. I can feel it in my very bones and yet, there is nothing I can do about it.

I glance around the hall, noting the smiles of all the other girls, the way their families all stand in similar poses. Jesus, no one here wants this, do they? We're all pawns, every single one of us. We're all marionettes caught up in the whims of this man who can do what he likes, can be who he likes... except, he can't. Not really. He may have power but it's not unlimited. He may be Chapter Lord, but he still answers to our Grand Master. And if he oversteps, if he grows too bold, there will be consequences. I know this. Everyone knows this. Besides, it wasn't that long ago that we had a living example of that – every Brethren knows the story, even though it was meant to be a secret. The Chapter Lord of the United States fumbled things so much an entire city went up in flames. His incompetence almost revealed what we are, who we are, to the entire world.

What if that happens here? What if all of this comes back and bites us all on the arse?

I tremble more, feeling sick from the amount of adrenaline swirling inside me.

“Paitlyn?” My mother whispers, clearly sensing how close to crumbling I am.

“Behave.” My uncle cuts across her. He moves his hand discreetly and pinches me through the fabric of my dress.

It’s enough to hurt. It’s enough to make me wince.

I don’t get time to do anything else as Gunther turns and the room falls to a hushed, expectant silence.

Pearce pushes me forward. All the other girls are now in a nice little line and I’m thankfully to the side, not noticeable. Not prominent.

Gunther’s stern gaze sweeps across us and even from this distance, I can feel the weight of his eyes as they pause on me. It takes everything I have to fight the urge to squirm.

Instead, I smile, demure and sweet, just as my mother has taught me. Just as I have been brought up to behave.

“Paitlyn, step forward.” His voice booms, echoing off the stone walls.

I hesitate for a moment, surprise flickering across my face. I'm not sure if it's feigned or genuine, but it seems to please the small crowd watching all of this. They murmur approvingly as I take one heavy step and then another.

My heart pounds against my chest as I come to stop beside Gunther. He takes my hand, his grip firm, and raises it high, and it's so fast he almost yanks my bone out of the socket.

"Your new Chapter Lady," he announces, and the hall erupts into cheers.

I stand there, smiling, trying to look as shocked and honoured as everyone expects me to be. And I am, in a way. It's just... not how I imagined my life would go.

But this is the Brethren way. This is what God has decided for me – I keep repeating that over. Repeating it like a mantra. That it will be okay. Everything will be okay. This is God's plan.

My mother and Pearce rush to me as soon as the ceremony ends, their faces glowing with pride. My mother pulls me into a tight embrace, her perfume enveloping me.

"I'm so proud of you. This is the best thing to happen to our family." She whispers, her voice choked with emotion. I stare back at her wondering if she's on something. Surely, she's not as deluded as that? Surely, she must know that despite the power, the prestige, this is wrong. All of this is wrong.

I don't bother to look at my uncle. I don't want to see his joy, his pride. I don't want anything to do with it. I just keep my mouth shut, my smile fixed, as people seem to surround me, as they seem to gush over me like I'm suddenly worth noticing.

CHAPTER

TEN



Pailtyn

It's quiet. After all the fanfare of the Choosing Ceremony, we're back home, back in our nice peaceful seclusion. Only, it doesn't feel peaceful.

I can hear my mother storming from room to room, calling out for various things that apparently are urgently needed now that I am to be wed.

I roll my eyes, and stare out the window, stare at the pretty ornamental garden below me. All the flowers are starting to dieback now. All the pretty flush of summer is definitely over. For some reason, that fact seems to fill me with more dread. More trepidation. As if even the seasons are revolting over this abject insult to nature.

Where is Antonio? Why hasn't he reappeared?

It's not like him to be absent so long.

And it's not like him to give up so easily, either.

He was so adamant, so vehemently against this match and now there's nothing but crickets. It just doesn't make sense.

I scrunch my nose up, rubbing absentmindedly at the skin on my arms. Am I imagining it or is there already a chill in the air? Is winter already knocking at our door? With our house on the Moors, it's not unheard of for this area to skip autumn entirely, and it's also not been unheard of for the first snows to come and kill off the last of the summer bloom.

I turn my eyes to the thick clouds on the horizon. Perhaps that's what's needed. A nice storm, something to clear the air. Perhaps that's what's wrong with me, that it's just the pressure playing havoc with my headspace. I let out a giggle at that, I mean, what am I, some silly country girl? Some character in a book?

No, I can tell myself all the lies I want, and it still won't alter the facts, won't change the truth.

I know this is bad, because this shouldn't be happening. My mother, the Senate, hell, even our Grand Master should be stepping in and stopping this abomination from proceeding. And the fact that no one is – well, that just proves how truly fucked I am.

“What are you doing?”

I practically jump out of my skin at the sound of my mother's voice. Normally, I'm so good at hearing her approaching footsteps.

“I was just admiring the garden.” I say. It's not a total lie.

She frowns, glancing over my shoulder like she expects there to be something forbidden there, like she expects the very devil to be sat on the bench, holding out a shiny apple to tempt me.

When she sees there's nothing, she lets out a deep sigh. “We need to get you bathed.” She says, like I'm an infant unable to do anything for myself.

“Bathed?” I repeat.

She nods, wrapping her arm around me in what feels like a loving gesture, but it also feels like one of restraint. “Now that you've been elevated, you have to have daily baths, in holy water, right up until the ceremony. It helps purify you. It helps wash away your sins.”

It's hard not to roll my eyes at that. What sins could I possibly commit while I've been here, under her and my uncle's watchful gaze for almost the entirety of my life?

I keep that comment to myself as she leads me through to where my suite is.

Rebecca stands, waiting for us, with her hands clasped in front of herself, and her head bowed. I can hear the water bubbling away as it fills the tub.

“You know your orders.” My mother says dismissively.

Rebecca nods, moving quickly to leave but at the door, I can feel her steal a glance my way. I can feel the weight of it. And I can feel something else lurking underneath it – is it sympathy? Is it concern? I don’t have time to dwell on whatever it is because my mother is chattering away, sounding far chirpier than she has in years.

She pulls down the zip on my dress, eases it off my body and tells me to get in.

I do as I’m told, wincing slightly at the heat of the water.

“It has to be that hot,” She says gently. “The heat helps with purifying.”

I meet her gaze and again, say nothing.

A knock at the door gets both of our attention and my eyes widen with shock as a man, a priest walks in.

“Is she ready?” He asks, speaking to my mother, as if I’m incapable of having any thoughts of my own.

My mother smiles, inclining her head. “She is.” She replies.

The Priest motions for her to move out the way and my fear erupts as this man, this stranger walks right up to me, as he stares at me, at my nakedness.

“What is going on?” I ask before I can stop myself.

“Be silent.” The Priest says immediately. “A woman’s tongue is filled with lies.”

I frown, feeling even more confused, and in truth, more horrified. What the hell is going on? I’m being treated like I’ve done something abominable. Something deserving of punishment.

My mother lifts her hand to get my attention and silently she gestures at me to lay back, to be obedient.

The Priest moves about, sprinkling herbs and oils into the water. They fill the room with a fragrance that is almost bewitching.

When he reaches my head, he starts chanting, speaking a language I don’t understand, saying words that to me, hold no meaning. But I feel as he places his hand on my head, as he pushes hard enough that I’m dunked under the surface.

I barely manage to hold my breath as the water rushes over me, as those herbs that smelt so nice now rush up my nose, now stick to my skin.

He twists his hand in my hair, using it as an anchor to control my movements.

When I breach the surface, I can't help but gasp.

"Be quiet." He admonishes again before he submerges me once more.

My hands jerk out, my feet kick and I know water must be sloshing everywhere but I can't help it.

When he's finally finished, he's dunked me so many times, I've lost count. My hair covers my face, that heavily scented water streams down and now the perfume feels suffocating.

The Priest struts to the end of the tub where my feet are and he stares down at my body, almost leering at my breasts.

"Well?" My mother says.

"She will learn." The Priest replies without taking his eyes off me. "A few more sessions and she will compliant enough to prove she is without sin."

I blink back, barely understanding what the fuck this man is talking about. My mother bows as though this is the greatest damned honour, and she walks over to him, placing a red velvet bag into his waiting hand.

As soon as he's gone, I let out a sigh that could be a sob. I don't even know where it comes from, but it feels like something deep inside me is desperately clawing to escape.

"There, there." My mother murmurs soothingly, grabbing a brush, moving to fix the state that is now my hair.

"What, what was that?" I ask. Why didn't she even give me a warning that that was going to happen?

"It's part of the process of washing away your old life and welcoming in your new." She says softly.

"So, do all brides do that?" Surely, someone would have told me of this before? Someone would have mentioned it?

"No, Paitlyn." She begins teasing out the knots, working out the damage that was done to my long hair. "Not every bride is going to become Chapter Lady."

"I don't want it." I say before I can stop myself. "I don't want him, I don't want this, I don't want any of it..."

I hear the brush hit the marble floor. I feel her arms wrap around me. “Oh, sweetie.” She says so softly. “I thought that was the case. I could see it on your face, could see it in your reaction when he choose you.”

Maybe I’m a fool, maybe I’m a simpleton, but the way my heart leaps at her tone. “So, we can stop this?” I gasp, turning around to face her.

Only, her reaction is not what I expect at all.

“Stop it?” She repeats. “No, Paitlyn, we can’t stop it. It’s too late for that. Far too late.”

“But...”

“If you’d spoken up this morning, if you’d told me before the ceremony...”

I gulp, gripping the side of the bath more firmly. Is that true? Would she have even listened to me if I had? It’s not like I haven’t tried numerous times. Besides, she was more than set on this match before the thing was even started.

“He announced you publicly. The only way you can get out of this now is if you’re dead.”

Dead? I tremble more, I let those bitter, angry tears fall as I stare back at her.

“But...”

“And you’ve dug yourself further into it by initiating the Purification Ritual just now.”

“But...”

“It’s too late, Paitlyn. It’s too late.” She says in such a firm, final voice.

“Momma,” I don’t mean to do it, I don’t mean to start sobbing the way I do but the fear, the confusion, the lack of control about any of this, it’s taking over and I can’t think rationally, I can’t even think at all.

She pulls me in, hugging me so tightly and in this moment, this touch of comfort feels exactly like what I need.

“It will be okay.” She reassures me. “Everything will be okay.”

“But how? How can it?” I don’t want to marry him. I don’t want to ever see that man again.

“Is there no way...?” Maybe I’m mad now, because all I can think about is faking my death, telling everyone I died in some freak accident, and then I could get away. It’s not like we don’t have money, and connections. Hell, we’re Founders. Maybe Antonio would do it, maybe he could sneak me out and then...

She shakes her head, brushing my tears from my face. “What’s done is done.” She says. “God has chosen this path for us. We may not like it, we may not want it, but this is our destiny.”

I draw in a long, ragged breath. It’s hard not to notice how she uses the term ‘we’ when it’s me who’s actually fucked here, not her. Me who’s going to have to marry that man. Who’s going to have to kiss him, and smile at him, and spread my legs and... my stomach twists at the thought, at the idea of Gunther, naked, and on top of me, of him in me, of him grunting away as he works his cock in and out.

Dear God, I can’t do this. I can’t.

My mother seems to read my mind. “I know it’s daunting, darling. But you’re strong. You can do this. And if you shut your eyes, you can pretend he is anyone. You can imagine that your husband is someone you desire, someone you want to fuck.”

My head is already screaming at me that I can’t. That this is the most reckless, most dangerous thing I could possibly think of doing.

“Even Antonio...” She says gently.

My eyes widen. Does she really think I’d do that? Yes, I once had a childhood crush on the man, yes, right now, I would absolutely marry him if that was the option, but that’s not because I’m in love with him, not because I fancy him, it’s because the alternative is so much worse. Antonio is an escape, nothing more. He represents the fantasy of a life I’m starting to realise I will never have.

“I don’t...” I begin but she places a finger over my lips to silence me.

“Sssh, it’s okay.” She says. “This is what it is to be a woman. This is what it means to endure. We do our duty in our marriage beds, we smile, and act pleasing for our husbands, but they cannot read our minds, they cannot control our desires. You may not be able to physically perform such acts, but in your head, you can do whatever you want, you can be with whoever you want. And that’s how we get our dreams. How we get our desires.”

I gulp back, hearing not logic, not reason, but alarm bells. What she says goes against everything we’re taught as Brethren. What she’s saying is a form of adultery. It has to be.

She smiles again, nodding in such a convincing way I almost believe her. And then she picks up the brush and starts combing through my hair once more. “Now, let’s talk about the marriage ritual.”

I feel a shiver run down my spine, but I nod, willing her to continue. I need to know what I'm facing. If tonight has proven anything, I need to be forewarned.

"The ceremony will be held in the cathedral, in front of everyone," she begins, her voice taking on a practical tone. "You'll be purified beforehand, of course. Then, you'll walk out in front of the waiting crowd, with all eyes on you."

I can picture it already. The grand cathedral, the press of the masked crowd, the weight of their expectations. My stomach churns again, but I keep my face composed.

"Gunther will be waiting for you at the altar." Mother states. "He'll lay you down on the crucifix, where the High Priest will confirm your... purity." She pauses, looking at me meaningfully.

I feel my cheeks burn, but I don't look away. I knew that part was coming. That's a given in every girl's first marriage. The bride must be pure. A voice whispers in my head that that would be a way out of it, if I could ruin myself, if I could spoil my virginity, then Gunther would never marry me.

But I would also *be* ruined.

My family would be ruined.

I know for sure that I'd be sent to Oblivion for such an insult.

"...then, as part of the ritual, Gunther will place his hands around your neck. It's symbolic. A representation of you leaving behind your old life and being reborn as the Chapter Lord's wife."

I nod, trying to absorb it all. It sounds terrifying, but what choice do I have?

None, that's what. The only thing I can do now is be a good bride, to do what is expected of me. Afterall, that's the only path left to walk.

My mother leans in again, her voice intense but quiet, as if she doesn't want anyone to hear. As if she thinks half the servants have their ears pressed against the door. "Paitlyn, listen to me. You must behave, obey and play the perfect wife. Long term, Gunther will grow old, and then everything will change..." She leaves the sentence hanging.

"Change, how?" I ask.

She cups my cheek, her eyes blazing in a way I've never seen. "Just play your part, and then, my darling, you will have the world."

Is she really saying that? Promising that? That, what, we'll take over, we'll somehow rule the Brethen? I want to laugh. I want to throw my head back and laugh so hard. Only, it's not funny. What she's saying is treason. More treason.

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CHAPTER

ELEVEN



Pailtyn

I should be in bed, I should be asleep and yet my mind won't switch off. It's the night before my wedding, the night before everything in my life changes for the worse.

I convince myself that I'm just going to make a drink, but as my feet walk silently through the house, the temptation to slip out the door, to disappear into the night and to disappear forever grows.

I could do it. I could grab a few things, a few valuable items. It wouldn't be enough to set me up for life, but it would be a start.

I chew my lip, imagining what such a life would entail. I barely know anything outside these four walls, outside this world created for me, outside the Brethren. I know there's more, I know so many millions of people exist with jobs and houses, and they live and die with no knowledge that we control it all.

It hits me then how utterly ignorant I am. How intentionally ignorant they've made me.

Leaving here might be saving me from one horrific fate, but I have no idea what dangers could be out there, could be lurking.

I shut my eyes, swallowing the lump in my throat, and continue on, past that tempting oak door and down the staircase towards the kitchens. But as my feet find the final step, I hear voices. Hushed voices.

“...just trust the process.”

“She’s barely more than a child, Pearce.”

“And all the better for it. She’s easier to mould, to bend.”

I freeze, pressing myself against the cold wall, listening to what I know I shouldn’t be hearing.

“She will do her duty.” He continues. “She will give him sons, and then we will make our move.”

“You’re so certain of it.”

“Vera,” My uncle half snaps, “you know as well as I that this is the right path. I’m done having our lives dictated to, I’m done bending to the wills of them, those bloody Americans. With Paitlyn’s bloodline, we can change everything.”

I hear my mother huff; I hear her make that same sound she always does when she’s not convinced but can’t be bothered to argue anymore.

“Just do your part,” My uncle instructs. “Ensure Paitlyn does hers, and in a few years’ time, we’ll be laughing.”

I wrinkle my nose at the tone. It’s obvious what he’s implying, that they sell me out, use me, and when Gunther finally becomes too frail to rule, Pearce will step in, he will control everything.

I’m being set up, sold, just as I knew I was, but it’s not for my own future, it’s for theirs.

I shut my eyes, trying to steady the panic that threatens to overwhelm me.

I could run. I could run right now and then... The sound of approaching footsteps makes my stomach drop in horror. One of them is heading for the door, heading right to where I am.

I don’t doubt that if they catch me here, eavesdropping, my uncle will certainly beat me. He’s not opposed to getting his hands dirty when it suits him, and I’m sure he’d rather I walk down the aisle as a battered bride than not at all.

I swallow down the cry and sprint back down the hall, I just need to get back to my room, back to my bed and pretend none of this happened.

And then what? The thought hits me as I make it up the stairs, as I get onto the ornate landing of the second floor.

“Where have you been?” Rebecca hisses, grabbing my arm, hauling me the last of the way to my bedroom.

“I was just...”

“Never mind.” She says quickly. “Get into bed, they’ll be checking in on you any moment.”

I nod my head, rushing over to where the fourposter is, and I slip under the covers, pulling them up enough to hide my face because I doubt I can keep any sort of control over my features.

Tomorrow, I marry Gunther. Tomorrow, I become Chapter Lady.

I can’t get out of it. I can’t escape this.

I’m fucked. Completely and utterly fucked.

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CHAPTER

TWELVE



Devin

My eyes scan the ornate interior of the Cathedral, the scent of incense is heavy in the air. The stained glass casts a kaleidoscope of colours onto the stone floor, and for a moment, I allow myself to appreciate the quiet before the inevitable storm.

Mace's voice crackles in my earpiece, a low grumble about Gunther's paranoia. I don't disagree, but I keep my thoughts to myself. The Chapter Lord's fears might be unfounded, but they're not mine to judge.

I move through the space with practiced precision, my gloved hands brushing over the wooden pews, checking for anything out of place, anything that might pose a threat. The silence is punctuated only by the distant echo of the High Priest's commands and the occasional rustle of robes.

For a moment my mind flickers to the blushing bride. The girl with the impossibly slim waist. She's in here somewhere, sequestered, being sanctified and prepared for her big day. My eyes glance at the giant stone where she'll be laid out and checked while we all watch on. I wonder what they will do if the little bitch turns out to be not as pure as they all expect. What will Gunther do? The scandal will no doubt ricochet, reverberate. Our dear Chapter Lord would be humiliated, especially after all the trouble he went to, to secure his precious bride.

“Blake.” The sharp call of my name snaps me back to reality.

I look up to see Gunther, in his ceremonial robes, looking the very image of authority and power.

In front of him, I can see my brothers in arm, other guards, all of them who undertook the training when I did, who have also been assigned to personally protect our leader.

My ceremonial boots echo against the stone as I make my way down to join them and it's hard not to be annoyed by the noise. I like stealth. I like silence. I've spent my life learning how to be invisible, how to be unheard. A man my size needs at least some element of surprise.

We kneel as one. Gunther stares down at us all with a mixture of expectation and something I can't quite place. Is it conceit, is it, fear? Maybe it's both those things. Afterall, he's placing his trust, his faith, his very life in all our hands. If we wanted to we could rise up, we could revolt. It's happened before; it's happened in enough other Chapters for Gunther to be wary.

But other guards have done that only when there was crisis, when their leader was so inept it put all our way of life in jeopardy. Gunther maybe mad, but he's controllable. The Senate see to that, the Senate ensure that.

I brush my concerns aside as a Bible is placed in front of me. It's an ancient thing, bound in leather and flesh of an animal I don't care to consider. The thing is older than all of us combined, older than this very Cathedral. Every word has been etched in like a tattoo because paper can decay, paper can disintegrate. This book here will last forever, it will last until the second coming and no doubt far beyond that too.

I place my hand upon it, the worn patch whispering secrets of a thousand oaths taken before mine.

“Do you swear to serve your Chapter Lord with loyalty and obedience, to lay down your life for his command, which is your highest honour?” the

High Priest intones.

“I swear.” I respond without hesitation. The oath is a chain, but it is one I have willingly accepted. One I willingly make. The Brethren has been my family’s way of life since Elizabethan times. It’s been the source of our fortune, of our success. Who am I to decide I’m better than this, that my dreams are worth more than duty and sacrifice. And besides, what dreams do I have? What dreams are there beyond power.

“Do you swear to guard, keep her safe and ensure she follows all her obligations graciously and dutifully, as our Chapter Lord dictates?”

I understand the gravity of what is being asked of me well enough; it’s not about protection, but control. We are to be her shadow, her shield, and if necessary, her jailer.

“I swear,” I say again quickly. We all know the Chapter Lady is nothing a symbolic role, a silent figure beside our leader. She’s there to smile and look pretty and if the Chapter Lord chooses, to breed with too.

The other guards swear just as quickly and then we’re dismissed.

I go back to sweeping the cathedral, checking for bombs. When I get to the benches that are practically in the rafters, I stop and stare down. These seats are for the lowest of the low. Lords and Ladies who hold no power, no significance. They’re far removed from the prestige my own is used to and I wonder for a second what it would feel like to be them. To know they hold no sway; to know they cling to the rest of our boots, desperate for any bit of dirt we toss their way.

Far below, I can see Gunther preening, posturing, making a fuss about something.

The ceremony isn’t for hours yet, and yet he’s all dressed up and ready like a child up at dawn for Christmas day. Will he be as eager to open his new toy? Of course he will, he was lecherous enough when he had all seven girls to choose between.

Poor little bitch, she has no idea what awaits her. Will she cry, will she plead, or will she lie there like most of them do, and accept her fate, accept that her life has now irrevocably changed and what little choices she had before, are now gone.

She no longer gets to decide anything.

She no longer will be permitted to think.

She’ll be a living statue now. A thing to use. A thing to discard, too, if she proves to be difficult.

With a smirk, I start my descent. For the ceremony itself, I'm to be at the very bottom, on hand, ready to die, just as my oath stated.

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CHAPTER

THIRTEEN



Pailtyn

The oil is cool, soothing as the two women slowly cover my entire body with it. I was brought to the Cathedral hours ago and was bathed, and cleaned, and had every bit of dirt they could find removed from my body. They scraped under my nails, scrubbed my skin raw, even made me take a tube up my arse where they flushed me full of water to “clean me out” – that was the most humiliating bit. To stand there, to feel my abdomen swelling and then be forced to wait until I was finally allowed to rush to the toilet. And all of it was under their watchful gaze.

My mother isn’t here. I expected her to be, but they made sure to send her packing the moment we arrived. Oh, she tried to argue but for what must be the first time in her life, she was told no.

It makes this worse. Not that her presence is particularly comforting, but I know no one here.

The chamber we're in is old, pretty, with medieval artwork and intricate tapestries covered in our Brethren emblems, adorning the walls. Images of angels and saints stare down at us, with all the gilding illuminated by the candles. The air is thick with an incense I can't place. It's almost suffocating and more than once I have to stop myself from falling into a full coughing fit.

The women huff whenever I do this, as if I'm being intentionally difficult, but I'm really not meaning too. I have asthma. Not bad asthma, but they won't let me get my inhaler, saying it will undo all their hard work, which makes no sense.

I draw in a low breath, trying to calm my nerves. There's a tiny voice in my head telling me to say I need the toilet or something and just run and run and not look back.

But that's a stupid idea, a stupid thought.

This here, is my future, the only future I will have. I'm not so naïve as to believe that I have any chance of escaping, and besides, Gunther maybe old, he may not be the man I would have chosen, but at least now I will be a wife, I will have the chance to bear children of my own. My heart leaps a tiny bit at that. I want my own family, I want my own home.

And Gunther is also powerful enough to ensure my uncle won't be able to play his games anymore.

I'm certain, if I'm a good wife, if I do as he asks, if I am obedient and good to him, then he will be good to me too. Maybe I can flip the script, outsmart my uncle, and find my own power instead. There's little hope of it, but that is all I have now; hope.

"Ten minutes," Someone says from beyond the door.

I turn my head, staring at the solid wood, and clench my fists. Ten minutes. Ten minutes and then my life as I know it will be over. I'll be a new person. Born again in the eyes of the Brethren.

I step into the delicate silk tunic they hold for me. It's traditional, and it hangs more like a sheet. I didn't get to choose it; I wasn't allowed to choose anything. My hair has already been tied out of the way in an intricate French braid. Unlike other brides, I'm not permitted to wear makeup, or jewellery. I'm to appear unadorned by worldly goods.

I glance across at the polished mirror and for a second I don't even recognise myself. I look too calm, too collected, for all the feelings that are whirling away inside me.

I can do this. I can be this person.

No one needs to know that I'm nervous. I just have to walk out, keep my eyes down and let everyone around me take charge.

A veil is placed over my head. It's plain, more like a shroud than a real veil. It covers my face, my features, making me look like a ghost instead of a person.

"Let's go." The taller of the two women says brightly, striding to the door and opening it.

I duck my eyes, stepping out, and I can see the robes of the two priests waiting for me. We walk with one in front, and one behind, both of them waving thurible's that fill the air with a thick stench of that same incense.

It almost burns my lungs as I take each step and I do everything I can to slow my breathing, to take as little air as I can. The hallway is cramped. The walls around us are made from great stone blocks that rise up, sweeping into great archways above our head. This part of the building used to belong to a monastery, before they had all the nuns shipped out to make more space.

I know this cathedral is old. I know it was built back when the Normans invaded. It was meant to be a declaration of our power, our prestige, my ancestors, my bloodline, my family are directly responsible for its existence. It's strange to be walking these halls, moving about in a space with so much history.

There's a spiral staircase ahead. It's made of the same heavy stone as the walls, and I have to slow my steps to ensure I don't accidentally trip and go tumbling down into the priest before me.

As we make our way, I can hear it, the voices, the chatter from all the people sat waiting, all the attendees invited to witness our union. I think that alone makes me more nervous, I'm not comfortable in crowds, in front of strangers. I've spent most of my life locked away, I don't know how my mother ever expected me to be otherwise continuing the way she brought me up.

When we reach the bottom, the Senate is stood, all robed up in their red gowns and masks. I hate those masks. I don't know what it is about them, but they put the fear of God into me.

I'm beckoned on. No one actually speaks a word, but I don't need them to. There's only one place to go, and with them all surrounding me, there's no way to escape this.

The Senate starts humming, the sound echoes off the walls and sounds haunting enough that my skin erupts into goosebumps.

I want this over with. I want this done. I don't think I can take much more of this.

I dare to glance up and then curse myself as I realise that I'm right at the entrance now. The Cathedral is filled, everyone is wearing robes, every face is covered – every face except the Chapter Guards, but I don't look at them.

Fear seems to wrap itself around me and it feels like every step is now a battle I have to fight.

Ahead, so far ahead, is Gunther. I can just about make out his figure, stood, waiting. He's the only other person dressed in white. He looks almost like a god from the way he's positioned by the altar.

I know my uncle is here somewhere. I know he is watching this. I wonder if he really is as proud in this moment of me as he professes to be. Or will he even now see my faults? Will he spot the bags under my eyes, will he see the way my feet shuffle, the way I'm a little too stiff?

There's a great crucifix. It's made of solid granite, and it's laid out so that a person can be tied to it. It's big enough that even the tallest of men would look tiny as they were strapped to it. My stomach drops as we get closer, my throat tightens even more. I can see the white fabric laid across the bottom half and I know soon enough that same material will be smeared with my blood.

My eyes take in the marks, the scuffs, all the wear and tear of the stone tiles beneath our feet. I count each step as if that might help to ground me. One step. Two step, three... I lose count, then start again, trying to keep my facial expression as serene as possible because I don't want anyone to see the inner turmoil raging inside me.

Around me, the Senate separate. I immediately come to a stop as they do it. Their hums continue but they move to circle the crucifix and in turn, surround both me and Gunther. The two priests with their incense move to the head and foot and they continue to fill the air as if that alone will purify us all and purge us of our sins.

Gunther steps up to me. I haven't looked at him. I haven't dared. I kept my eyes down, just as a dutiful Lady is expected to. He reaches out, grasping my chin through the veil and he lifts my head enough to give him a full view of my face.

"Beautiful," He murmurs.

I shouldn't blush. I know I shouldn't, but I want to make this man happy, that's my role, isn't it? That's my purpose.

"No smile for your husband?" He asks.

I blink back, wondering if I've messed up already and I give him a shy, bashful smile that seems to make him happy enough that he leans in and kisses me. His lips brush against the fabric of the veil and I gasp more in shock than anything else.

We're not married yet. We're not yet husband and wife. I don't know what the thousands of eyes watching us must think of this breach, but I stare back at him trying to work out if he's mad or simply drunk?

His eyes sparkle with amusement, it's as if he's made some joke, only I don't understand it. The rules are simple. The rules are there for all of us to abide by. But then, he's already pissing all over them by marrying me, isn't he? Not that most of these people sat here are aware of that fact. They know my family are of high status, but they don't know I'm a Founder. It's forbidden for them to know.

Gunther takes my arm, leading me to the crucifix and I'm pushed down, laid out on it like I don't have a choice in the matter. The cold stone sends a shock through me where my upper body makes contact. So much so that I don't at first register what is happening. That Gunther is yanking up the fabric of my dress, roughly exposing my entire lower half.

I try to stifle a cry, but it comes out anyway, ringing around me loud enough that all those masks closest to us must hear.

A priest kneels between my legs. Gunther is to my left and he's holding my stomach, placing a hand on me to ensure I'm obedient in this.

The priest pushes my legs apart and I whimper more, shutting my eyes, but I can feel it, I can feel the prodding, the way something pulls at me, at my core, opening me up to the cold air.

I'm being inspected, being examined. I don't know what they're expecting to find. Do they really think I wouldn't be pure? Between my mother and Antonio, I'd never have dared do such a thing, and besides, when would I have had the chance? I don't leave our house. I'm not even permitted to be in the same room as any man.

The only way I could lose my virginity is if I'd chosen to fuck myself with that wooden thing my mother makes me practice on, and what would be the point to that? Why would I do that? My only value is my

maidenhead. I wouldn't choose to destroy the one thing that gives me worth.

"She is untouched." The priest states loudly.

My face flames as he says those words. As if everyone here even believed there was a chance I wouldn't pass this test.

"She is also ovulating." The priest adds quietly, saying those words low enough that only I and Gunther hear them.

"You're certain?" Gunther replies quickly.

The priest shrugs slightly. "The signs are there. I'd put money on it and a wedding night baby..."

Gunther's whole body seems to react to that. "That would show them, that would shut them all up, prove that a Founder is the right choice, that God approves of this marriage, of me..."

I dare to look at him as he continues to ramble. He looks like he wants this more than anything, that a child is the sole motive for this marriage. I bite my lip, worrying more. Is that why he wanted me, my bloodline? But he already has sons, he has children, grown children.

Someone else clears their throat, as if they too are realising that Gunther right now is going completely off script.

He frowns, looking momentarily confused and then he drops his gaze back to me.

"Proceed with the ceremony." He orders.

Hands grab at me. My limbs are pulled further apart. I'm held down, spread-eagle as the Senate surround us, though now they're on their knees. That chanting increases to the level where they're practically shouting, and I want to tell them to shut up. To just shut up. The noise is driving me crazy. The fact that they're all around us, and that incense is still flooding my lungs.

I let out a cry as someone cuts the palm of my hand and Gunther grabs hold of it, pressing his own bloodied hand into the wound.

"Ashes to Ashes, dust to dust..." I can't hear. I can only grasp at words.

Gunther is saying something, but I don't understand one bit of it. He stands there, his hand clasped in mine as he starts delivering a sermon, starts citing one reading after another from our bible.

"Wives submit to their husbands as they do the Lord." He declares.

I nod as much as I dare. I'm not even sure if this moment here is for me or for the rest of the Brethren. He goes on and on, labouring his point. I'm

almost grateful for it, grateful that he's distracted but he is only putting off the inevitable.

When he finally runs out of steam he stands there, staring, as if daring someone in the audience to stand up and challenge him.

"Chapter Lord?" One of the Senate say after what feels like minutes of awkward silence.

He blinks rapidly, looking around before his eyes land back on me.

I don't know what to do. Do I smile? Do I hold his gaze? What is the appropriate response?

He drops his eyes, staring between my legs, at where I'm still being held open.

"Prepare her." He barks. That confusion twisting into something almost demonic.

I don't mean to do it, I swear I don't, but I cry out as my tunic is ripped right off, as my entire naked body is now revealed to the room. The Senate may be here, all knelt by the crucifix but the way the seats are all stacked up on tiers allows everyone here to get a clear view of this, of me.

I shut my eyes, trying to steady my breathing and I can feel that I'm trembling.

I just want this over with now. I need this done.

Gunther undoes his robes, making a great show of it. I don't know what I expect to see when he tosses them off but the fact that he's entirely naked, that makes me panic more. I imagined him to have something on underneath, something to make this less indecent.

He's hard. His dick is there, fully erect and it bobs a little as he pads towards me.

His belly is fat and round. A little round, hairy belly that pushes out beyond his frame making him look more comical than dangerous. But the way he's moving, the way he's strutting towards me, and that look in his eyes doesn't feel very funny, doesn't feel amusing in anyway.

He crawls on top of my body. His skin covers mine and maybe it's because mine's now so sensitive from being scrubbed raw but his feels rough, scratchy, like he needs a bath. I can feel his hot breath on me as he pants. I can feel the callouses on his fingers as he runs them up the sides of my body before he gropes my breasts, pinches my nipples, physically manhandles me like I'm just a piece of meat.

And the groan he gives out, that noise rings out for everyone to hear and it only amplifies my shame.

I can feel that thing dangling between my legs, I can feel something sticky touching me. He drags his lips across my shoulder, my neck, leaving a trail of saliva that makes me squirm more.

He reaches down, as if he needs to push my legs further apart, though there's no need to because the Senate are holding my ankles more than wide enough for what is necessary.

As his dick touches my core, I lock up.

“Wait,” I whisper. I just need a moment. One more moment to prepare myself.

He narrows his eyes, bucks his hips, and forces himself into me with all the brutality he can muster.

I scream. I scream so loud.

I don't mean to. I don't even realise I'm doing it until his hand slams against my mouth and he tries to silence me.

It hurts. It hurts so much as he pushes his way as far inside me as he can physically get.

Tears stream down my cheeks, I sob against him as he slides himself out and then does it again, slams himself right into me, hard enough that I jolt back an inch despite all the hands holding me down.

“I am your husband.” He mutters. “I own you now, and I can and will use you however I choose.”

I want to nod, I want to show to him that I agree, that I'm obedient, that I'll be good but it's too much, this pain is too much. He tears at me, his dick rips my insides and I can feel the way my body is refusing to give way. The way I'm ripping, the way I'm bleeding.

For me, it's absolute agony, but for him, for Gunther, he's clearly getting off on it.

“Sweet virgin pussy.” He grunts, bucking his hips, fucking me with more of a rhythm now. Around us are snickers, laughter from the stalls. Clearly, our audience is more than enjoying this consummation.

I can't hold it in, I can't keep my composure anymore. I start sobbing harder as he bucks and grunts.

And then his hands wrap around my throat. I open my eyes, meeting those blue-grey almost colourless ones. Is this it, is this a sign that he's almost done?

“As Jesus died and was reborn,” The Senate chant in unison, “You too shall be reborn. You are no longer a Brethren Daughter. You will be purged of your sins, purged of your taint. You will be reborn pure. Reborn obedient. And reborn ready to serve as our Chapter Lady.”

I can hear the words, I can feel his hands, but they feel too tight, too restrictive. My mother said this was symbolic. A gesture and no more. But I’m struggling to get any breath in. Maybe it’s the incense, maybe it’s my fear, but I’m gasping, twisting, trying to get free of all those foreign hands that hold me down.

“Reborn.” The Senate chant over and over. “Reborn free from sin.”

Gunther is still fucking me, still ravaging my body but that horror is no longer my concern. It’s what his hands are doing, it’s that look in his eyes as he’s staring down at me.

Oh god, I think I’m going to die here.

Is he angry at me? Did I do something wrong to warrant this? I can’t even scream because his hands are too tight to allow my voice box to work.

My feet are kicking, my toes are stretched out. My body is doing everything it can to try to survive but I can’t beat them, I can’t beat him.

Surely, he’s going to relent, any second now he’s going to ease up and it’ll all be over.

Only, instead, he tightens his grip even more. He lowers his face so that his nose is touching mine.

“Please.” I mouth the word and all it does is draw a twisted smile from his lips.

“Die.” He says back. “Die and be reborn.”

Spots prickle my sight. Great dots seem to get bigger and bigger. My blood is screaming in my ears. My heart is slamming so hard into my chest I think it might explode.

My hands try to claw at something, anything but there’s no way to fight with the way they hold me.

I just want to breathe.

I gasp out, choking on the last bit of air that I have and then everything goes dark, everything just stops.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



Devin

The girl looks petrified. It's obvious she's trying to hide it as she walks so slowly into the Cathedral. Her pretty eyes are downcast, she thinks she's got that whole 'demure obedient' thing down to a tee, except she's shaking so obviously her veil is almost sliding off her head.

She's dressed in a traditional marriage tunic. It's sheer enough that you can see the darkness of where her nipples are and it's cold enough for the outline of them to be poking through.

I guess the chill could explain her trembling, but I'd put money on it being more than that.

I know what fear is. I know what it looks like, especially when someone is trying to cover it up, trying to look brave, confident.

She comes to a stop and our Chapter Lord decides to break more rules by kissing her before it's permitted. I keep my face neutral, after all, I don't

have the luxury of a mask to hide behind. Behind me, I can hear the quiet murmurings.

Of course they have to inspect her first. Check that the bride is as pure as they say she is. Gunther shoves her down onto the crucifix and is clearly keen to get this little bit of the service done. I wonder if it's because another man is touching his bride, I wonder if it's jealousy driving him. The priest kneels between her legs, taking his time to examine her.

In my earpiece, I hear one of the guards make a comment and I make sure not to snigger as a few others reply.

The service itself is boring. Gunther isn't even meant to be leading it, but he decides to deliver his own sermon anyway and he starts issuing reading after reading. Talking of the sanctity of marriage, of the necessity of it. How the Brethren are all one family under god with the Chapter Lord as our father and his new bride as our mother. I glance at her, run my eyes down her body as she lays there still trembling. I doubt she's more than twenty. She looks young, naïve, her new husband is almost three times her age. It's clear why she's been picked, and it has nothing to do with her husband wanting a maternal figure beside him. No, he wants someone he can fuck, someone he can enjoy. I can't blame him on that front. I wouldn't want to be married to some shrivelled up old hag if I could pick a nice nubile thing instead.

When he starts fucking her, she actually screams. More comments come in through my earpiece, comments about the size of his cock, and the fact that she must be as tight as a nun's cunt the way she's crying.

Again, I keep my face neutral but around me enough people are reacting to put me on edge.

It's not unusual for some brides to be unhappy at their consummation. Enough of them are forced down the aisle for it to be accepted, but usually such matches are done in less public forums. The weddings are conducted in private, family only, not in front of the entire Brethren's elite.

It makes me wonder what kind of statement our Chapter Lord is trying to make. Add the fact that his bride isn't even permitted under our laws and perhaps my brother is right. Perhaps Gunther is becoming a serious liability.

"Sweet virgin pussy." Gunther groans out and we can all hear the pleasure in his voice, in his groans. Enough people laugh to defuse the tension, but we can all make out the pitiful sounds his new bride is making.

He wraps his hands around her throat as the Senate speak. “As Jesus died and was reborn. You too shall be reborn. You are no longer a Brethren Daughter. You will be purged of your sins, purged of your taint. You will be reborn pure. Reborn obedient. And reborn ready to serve as our Chapter Lady.”

It’s the final part of the ritual and in truth, I’m pleased it’s all almost over. I want a drink, I want a beer and I want something to fuck. I’m not turned on, not by our dear Chapter Lord’s display, quite the opposite. I want to replace those pathetic, snivelling sounds that even now are ringing in my ears.

Maybe I could head off, disappear to Oblivion for a few hours. It’d mean I’d have to pull an all-nighter with the journey back but it’d be worth it, worth the fun. Magnus is here somewhere anyway, he’ll be heading back...

“Oh shit.”

I look up, realising that I’ve been lost in my thoughts. Ahead, I have the perfect view of the crucifix, of the girl, and of our Chapter Lord with his hands wrapped around her throat.

He’s squeezing too hard.

He looks like he actually wants to strangle her. Her face is going purple, her limbs are thrashing as much as the people holding her will allow.

This isn’t meant to go down like this. Most Chapter Lords don’t do any more than simply place their hands around their bride’s throat.

Someone in the audience screams. Someone else shouts. The guards around me move to subdue them, but I’m not here for them, I’m here to protect Gunther. To protect his bride.

I step forward, just as the orders bark in my ear to hold my position.

“If she dies, she dies.” My commander says nonchalantly.

I’m not sure how our dear friends watching this will react to it if the bitch does die but I stay where I am, watching as Gunther continues to fuck and strangle her at the same time.

Finally, he comes, finally he growls out, jerking before he collapses on top of her. As soon as he does, the Senate drop their hold, someone pulls Gunther off and another is there, checking the girl’s pulse.

The man shakes his head slightly and straddles her body, doing compressions as the whole room sits in shocked silence.

He works away, pushing into her chest, breathing into her mouth. She just lays there, and then another man comes running in, holding a defibrillator.

“Move,” he orders before setting it up, placing the pads on her chest and shocking her.

She jerks, her entire body seems to jump up off the granite and it feels like the entire Cathedral holds its breath. If she dies, I don’t know what they would do but my gut tells me that it won’t be good.

I scan the room, and my eyes meet the blackened ones behind a mask. I’d put my money on it being Magnus. I’d state my life on it. And I’d also bet everything that he has that smug ‘I told you so’ look across his damned face.

She slams back down onto the granite after being shocked again and this time she rolls slowly onto her side, gasping, choking as she comes back to life.

Orders start filling up my ears. We need to move her, to get her out. I step forward, pushing through the crowd of people that are now on their feet. As I get to her, I can see our Commander has already got her in his arms, that he’s the one carrying her.

Gunther is stood, right in the middle of the carnage and he doesn’t even look concerned, he doesn’t even look guilty, if anything he looks proud of what he’s done. He waves his hand dismissively as if she’s a distraction and he wants her gone.

On the granite I can see that bloodied white sheet and Gunther snatches it up, waiving it about like a flag.

As we carry her out his voice echoes behind us, he’s giving a new lecture now, one about how God chose him as Chapter Lord and therefore, all his actions are divine.

CHAPTER

FIFTEEN



Pailtyn

I wake up in a bed. I know it's not my own, that the space I'm in is not my own. I blink, trying to sit up and in the dim light, I can see how ornate this room is. All the walls are covered in mother of pearl panels. They're intricate, delicate, it must have taken years of craftsmanship to create such a thing. For a moment I'm so awestruck by my surroundings that I don't register the pain, the bruising, the way it feels like my entire body has been beaten.

My hands wrap around my neck, and I whimper as the flashback hits me.

He strangled me. He tried to kill me.

It has to be a mistake, it has to be, but he didn't even need to squeeze, my mother said the whole thing was symbolic – what he did was anything but.

I pull my knees up to my chin, huddling under the ridiculously soft covers. I don't understand why he did it, I don't understand why he hurt me.

Between my legs there's an awful, agonising throbbing. I know it's from the way he fucked me. Shame heats my cheeks at the thought of it, of him on top of me, of the sound of him grunting as he consummated our marriage while all those people watched on.

"Paitlyn?"

I gasp looking up, unsure if it's relief or something else I feel as my mother's face peers around the doorframe.

"Mom-ma?" I stammer, sounding more emotionally than I mean. My throat is so painful that it hurts to speak.

She comes in, quickly shutting the door and she strides across the room, her eyes fixed on me. "Oh, sweetie," She says, holding her hands out to hug me.

I fall into her embrace, needing it to comfort me and before I can stop myself, I'm sobbing again.

"Ssssh, it's okay." She says, sweeping the loose strands of my hair back from my face. "You did so good."

I blink in confusion, what about anything that happened today could be considered good?

"I, I want to go home." I whisper. I don't want to be here. I don't want to be anywhere near that man.

"Ssssh," she says again, "you're just wound up. You're going to be fine. Besides, he's your husband now, you're Chapter Lady, you can't just leave." She chuckles before fixing me with that piercing gaze. "Let's get you fixed up, get you pretty again."

She takes my hand, leading me up out of the bed. I don't know who did it, but I've been dressed in some sort of nighty.

My mother undoes my hair, slowly eases out the knots and brushes it while I sit there, at the vanity, staring. Across my chest there's a strange square mark that looks like it could be a burn. My neck is so bruised my flesh is practically black. It's mottled with my blood.

He did that. My husband.

"I, I can't do this..." I begin and she immediately stops, fixing me a look in the mirror.

"Paitlyn, don't be ridiculous. This is your destiny. This is why you were born. You were meant to marry Gunther. You were meant to be given this

power..."

"Power?" I half gasp-half sob. What power do I have? I gulp and that searing pain shoots down my throat reminding me of what he did, how he strangled me. I can still feel his hands there, I can still feel them pushing against my throat, squeezing the very life out of me.

"He's old. He's a man. He's easy to manipulate." She states, grabbing my chin. "You just need to be smart about it. He chose you because he wants you. Use that. Make the man fall in love with you, wrap him around your finger and he'll do whatever you want, treat you however you want. Men think with their cocks, not their heads. You need to ensure that every day all he can focus on is how much pleasure you alone can give him and in return, he'll be putty in your hands."

I chew my lip, hearing the logic in her words. I just don't know if I can do that. If I have the skills to do that, despite all the years of training my mother has given me.

She starts brushing my hair again, before walking over to the closet and she pulls out a hanger, holding it up for me to see.

It's lingerie. I gulp as I stare at the pretty white lace set. It's sexy, sensual, the perfect thing for a bride's first night with her new husband.

"Put this on." She orders. "Make yourself pretty for him."

I get up, seeing the uselessness in disobeying. I don't bother to turn or hide myself. My mother has seen me naked enough times for me not to be embarrassed by it. I toss the nighty, putting the thong on first. It comes up between my arse cheeks in a way that's uncomfortable. I've never worn one before, it was made clear to me that items like this are for married women only. Married women and whores. I guess I should feel honoured that I'm finally graduating to this. I'm not sure honoured is the word I'd use right now to describe myself.

My mother holds the bra out, shaking it slightly to pull me out of my head. I give her a smile, and put it on, adjusting the straps. It's itchy, just a little around my nipples but I keep that complaint to myself.

That strange mark on my breast makes me pause and I brush my fingers over it, confirming that this is what it is, it is a burn. When did that happen? Was that after I passed out?

"You look stunning, Paitlyn." My mother says so proudly. "Gunther won't be able to keep his eyes, or his hands off you."

“I’m not sure that’s a good thing.” I stupidly mumble, dropping my hands to my sides.

She tisks, cupping my chin and making me look at her. “He will adore you, Paitlyn. Any man would. Even without your bloodline, you’re perfection, we made sure of that. And once you give him sons, he’ll love you even more.”

Sons. Children. The thought of being pregnant scares the shit out of me. Especially when I know that all Chapter Ladies have to give birth in the Cathedral, in front of those same baying eyes. I can’t imagine anything more shameful than lying there, having all my bits exposed while I push out a child and probably shit myself in the process.

No, I can, having Gunther fuck me the way he did and then almost murder me. That is more shameful. Far more shameful.

My stomach churns, another flashback of his hands hits me, and I wince as I swallow a wave of bile.

“Be confident, Paitlyn.” My mother instructs. “Men don’t want shy little girls. They want women who enjoy sex, who enjoy their husbands. If you can’t find pleasure in it at first, then fake it, moan and writhe and do everything I taught you...”

I nod back, remembering the moves, remembering the videos she made me watch too. Those types are strictly forbidden so she had to ensure Antonio never found out about them, but I am grateful that I’m not going into this completely blind. My mother took care of me, brought me up to ensure I had all the skillset to be the perfect fuckable wife, so why do I feel so horribly out of my depth now?

I hear footsteps. We both do. I can’t help but tense as I realise whoever it is, is heading in this direction, to this room.

My heart slams into my chest and I know I’m already trembling.

“Momma?” I half-whisper.

She gives me her biggest fakest smile. “You’ve got this. You know you have. Make your husband happy, do whatever he asks and you, my girl, will have the world.”

The door opens before I can reply. My eyes dart to it and my stomach drops even further when I see that it is him, it is my husband.

I bow my head quickly, showing as much respect as I can. My mother does the same before moving to stand beside me so my husband can see me all dressed up and ready for him.

“Chapter Lord.” My mother says proudly. “Your wife is ready and eager for you.”

He glances at my mother before running his eyes over me. As he walks up to us, he mutters something I don’t catch.

He looks calm, far calmer than he was back in the Cathedral. Perhaps he was just nervous too. Perhaps he was uncomfortable with all those eyes watching him and his brutality was a mistake.

I let out a low breath, trying to steady myself. I can do this. I can be this. I just have to smile and be nice and suck his cock and everything else he asks of me.

He reaches out, grabbing my jaw so quickly I don’t have time to react. “I did some damage then?” He growls as he inspects the bruising around my neck like it’s the first time he’s seeing it. Like he didn’t squeeze the oxygen out of my lungs so much I almost died.

“Nothing that won’t heal.” My mother assures him.

He doesn’t even look at her. Doesn’t even react to her words. He just stares at me, stares at my neck, then down to where my breasts are pushed up in this fancy bra. I can’t tell if it’s my cleavage he’s admiring or the burn.

“She’s got good tits.” He mutters. “Let’s see if her nipples are hard already.” I don’t know who he’s talking to, it’s not me, and I doubt from the tone it’s my mother either. But there’s no one else in the room.

He unhooks my bra, pinching my skin slightly as he does it, and, as it falls to the floor, I step back. It’s instinctual and I don’t mean to do it but that clearly annoys him because he quickly wraps an arm around my waist and pulls me back. “Where are you going, wife?” He says. “I want to play.”

“I’m, I’m sorry.” I half-whisper but I barely get the words out before his finger on my lips silences me.

He slides it down, down my chin, down to my chest bone, to my cleavage before he lifts his other hand and starts massaging my breasts.

“Such great tits.” He groans. “I loved the way they responded the first time. They’re so malleable, so soft...”

My cheeks heat. I’m more than aware of the fact my mother is stood here, watching this.

She doesn’t say anything, but she gives me a quick glance then silently heads to the door.

Gunther is still engrossed in his play but as she reaches it, he barks out the words. “You stay.”

My mother instantly freezes. I can see the flash of shock on her face but she's quick to cover it. To make herself impassive. "As you wish, Chapter Lord."

He doesn't look at her, doesn't acknowledge her words, he just grabs me, pushing me enough that I walk backwards and then my legs hit the bed. He pushes me again and I land on it, bouncing slightly from the force.

My long hair splays about me and he stares at me as if awestruck for a moment.

He reaches up, grabs the thong and yanks it down my legs before tossing it. So much for fancy lingerie then, it was barely on ten minutes.

"Come here." Gunther says, shouting over his shoulder.

My mother is still stood, pressed against the door and she walks slowly towards us as if trying to assess how best to deal with this situation.

"A mother's purpose in life in life is to see her children grow up and marry." Gunther states. "This here, is your crowning moment, Vera. Your daughter has achieved greatness in marrying me and the only day that will beat this, is the day she bears me a son. So you will stay, and you will bear witness to this moment. You will revel in it. You will celebrate just as I celebrate it with my cock."

My mother bows her head, nodding as if this is all perfectly normal. She comes to a stop right where he's pointing. Right by the bed, where she'll have a view of everything.

I can't look at her. I'm too ashamed, so I focus on him, on my husband, trying to guess what is coming next.

He's dressed in a shirt, in a suit. He undoes the buttons slowly, never taking his eyes from me as if he's daring me to move. As he pulls the fabric off, I can see his belly again. I don't mean to judge, the man is almost sixty so it's hardly surprising he isn't a toned adonis but still, he isn't what I imagined when I shut my eyes at night and prayed for a husband.

My cheeks heat more as the words whisper in my head that I would gladly have taken Antonio over him any day.

When he undoes his belt and drops his trousers, I expect his dick to be hard, I expect it to look like it did back in the Cathedral. Only, it doesn't. It looks floppy, lopsided. He gives it a grab, running his hand up and down it for a moment as if he's trying to wake it up.

"Shall we fuck her throat or her cunt?" He whispers.

I don't know which is worse. The thought of anything down my throat right now after what he did... but the thought of him there, back inside me, I'm still so sore from how he fucked me there too.

I want to ask him to wait. I want to ask him to let me have just this night to recover, but that didn't go well last time, did it? I fumble my hands together, bringing them up over my breasts. I don't even realise I'm doing it until Gunther glares at me. Does he think this is some sort of protest? Some attempt to disobey him? I'm quick to drop them, quick to lie still but the damage is done. I can see that. I've fucked up again.

Gunther clicks his fingers, "Come here, hold her arms. Hold her still." He orders as if my mother were a slave.

Noooo. I want to scream it, but I don't dare.

I just lie there, mute, paralysed by fear or shame or all the other emotions that are swirling inside me. My mother clammers onto the bed by the pillows, following the further orders my husband is now barking out.

She takes my hands, holding me so my arms are now up above my head.

Gunther grabs my thighs pushing my legs wide enough apart that he can lay between them. I can't look at him. I can't look at either of them so I stare up at the ceiling, at that pure white ceiling, praying that this will be over, that all of this will just be done, and I never have to remember how this night ended.

I flinch as he drags a finger down between my labia.

"You look sore," He comments, as if he wasn't the one responsible for it.

"New brides are always sore." My mother says.

Gunther glares up at her, "Be quiet." He snaps. "If I want you to speak, I will ask for it."

I tense more, hearing the anger in his voice. Is he going to hurt me more? Oh god, he is, isn't he. A tear slips down my cheek and I don't dare move, don't even try to hide it for fear he will turn that anger onto me.

"I was brutal with you earlier," He states, "I had to be, I had to make a point."

I don't know how to respond, I don't know what to say, if I'm even allowed to speak. What point did he have to make that would justify what he did?

“Do you want me to be gentle with you now?” He asks sounding suddenly so sincere.

I nod quickly. I don’t know what he means by gentle but I sure as hell don’t want the same treatment he gave me back in the Cathedral.

He blinks, staring at me a moment longer and then he pushes something into me. I bite my tongue, bite down the cry as I realise it’s his finger. He slides a second inside and the pain increases as it feels like he’s trying to feel my insides, feel all the damage he did.

“Does this hurt?” He asks.

“A, a little,” I whisper. I don’t want to admit that it hurts like hell. I don’t want to piss him off more.

He grunts, pushing deeper, stretching me in a way that feels like literal torture. More tears start to stream from my eyes. I clench my fists, forcing myself to be still. Maybe this is a test, maybe this is just another ritual that I need to endure and then afterwards it will all be okay.

“Such a tight cunt,” He comments but not to me, not to my mother either, he says it so quietly, as if he’s talking to himself.

He forces another finger in, a third, and I yelp. If this is gentle, I don’t want to think about what would not be. He starts thrusts, sliding his fingers in and out, only it doesn’t feel like sliding at all. I’m not wet, I’m not in the slightest bit aroused by this and it feels like he’s sanding away my flesh, wearing it down from how much burning there is.

“Please,” I gasp, my voice shaking.

He looks up at me, that same glint in his eye that he had back in the cathedral. “You are here to be used, wife. To be enjoyed as I see fit. That is your purpose. That is your reason for existence. It doesn’t matter if you want me to be gentle, it doesn’t matter what you want. Your wants mean nothing to me. You as a person mean nothing. You are a vessel, a cunt to fuck and womb to fill, do you understand?”

I nod, I nod so quickly but it’s not enough. I can see it, I can feel it from the way he’s now brutalising me with his hand.

He pulls out suddenly, giving me a moment of reprieve and then he’s getting onto his knees, pulling my legs up, angling my body and I can see his cock, I can see how red it is, how hard it is now. Was it the pain that got him off? Was that what he needed to get excited? He meets my gaze as his hand takes hold of it and he shoves himself into me, shoves himself all the way.

I scream again. I scream so loudly. Searing pain burns my insides as he works his cock in as deep as it'll go. My mother tries to soothe me, but it feels like a repeat of the Cathedral. Nothing about this feels normal.

He starts grunting, bucking, fucking me as my mother holds my hands. But I can feel from the way she's squeezing that she's trying to send me a message. Only, I don't know what it is. Is she telling me to relax? Is she trying to comfort me? Or is she just as angry and ashamed by this as I feel?

"Wives are to obey." Gunther states. "Wives are nothing but a cunt to fuck." He sounds deranged, he sounds like he's about to start breaking out into a tirade. "Say it." He orders. "Say it."

"Wa, wives are to obey." I say quickly.

He snarls, shaking his head, plunging his dick so hard into me I shriek again. "Both of you, both of you say it. You're a cunt to fuck."

"I'm a cunt to fuck." I say just as my mother half stammers on the words.

"Louder." He spits, and his saliva actually lands on me, on my chest, on my breasts as if he did it on purpose. "You're nothing but a cunt to fuck."

"I'm nothing but a cunt to fuck." I repeat, just as my mother does.

"Again." He orders.

What will he do if I refuse? Will he beat me? Will he beat my mother too? I don't want to risk it, and he's hurting me enough as it is.

"I'm nothing but a cunt to fuck." I gasp.

His hand strikes my face, I jolt in shock but the sting lingers long after he removes it. "Louder. Say it louder, bitch, keep saying it."

I say it again, I scream it, I say it over and over and above my head my mother states it too. I'm nothing. I'm nothing. I'm a cunt to fuck. I am nothing but a cunt.

He groans, he grunts, he continues fucking me as my mother and I repeat those words like a mantra.

His face gets redder and redder, I know what is happening and I can't thank god enough when he finally comes. His dick pumps away, I can feel it inside me, I can feel him filling me.

He stays where he is, his dick buried as deep as he can get and his hands either side of my body as he holds himself up. His head is dropped down onto my chest, his face is buried between my breasts and for a moment I wonder if he's fallen asleep. God, what if he has? Am I meant to stay like

this? Is my mother meant to stay like this? Are we meant to wait here, obedient, until he wakes?

I don't know if it's relief I feel when he suddenly groans proving he's not asleep at all. He lifts his head, staring at me and he's so close our faces are almost touching. "Remember what you are." He says. "Every day I fill your womb is a blessing."

I nod, far too afraid to speak.

He drags one finger down my cheek, no doubt feeling all the wetness from the tears I couldn't hold back. "So beautiful." He whispers. "Such a beautiful, sweet little thing."

I can't relate that action, the softness of it, to the brutality of what he's just done.

My mother is still holding me. I think she doesn't dare to move either. Gunther slides himself out, glancing at his cock as if he expects to see more blood there.

"Hold her legs up. Keep my seed inside her. I want her womb to drown in it." He says, staring at my pussy.

My mother clearly understands those words better than I do because she releases my hands, grabs my legs and pulls them so I'm curled over, with my body held at an angle that has my arse and most intimate parts up in the air.

Gunther walks out, walks to the bathroom and we can hear the toilet flushing, we can hear the taps running for a few minutes.

When he walks back in, he's dressed in a robe but it's open and his dick is dangling between his legs, flopping as he walks. It looks almost comical, but I don't dare laugh.

"You can get out." He snaps to my mother. "Her womb should have drunk enough."

I don't want her to go. I don't want her to leave me with him. I reach out, grabbing her arm but she squeezes my hand and this time I can tell it is a warning.

She clammers off the bed, bowing her head. "Goodnight, Chapter Lord." She says as demurely as she can.

He waves his hand dismissing her as if she were nothing more than a servant.

As the door shuts, I stay where I am, with my body still hunched over, with all of me exposed.

He walks to the end of the bed, staring at me, at the only part of me he clearly cares about.

“Sweet virgin pussy.” He says smirking. “Though not a virgin anymore, eh, wife? I fucked you good and proper, didn’t I?”

I blink back, my body trembling from both pain and exhaustion.

He tilts his head, staring at something I can’t figure out, and then he just turns and walks out of the room, leaving the door to slam behind him.

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CHAPTER

SIXTEEN



Pailtyn

H e leaves me alone to sleep.

He leaves me alone for days.

I stay in this room, unsure what to do. Food is brought to me, but I barely do more than pick at it. It's nothing like the meals my mother provided. I'm used to steamed vegetables, brown rice, simple, easy to digest. All these are thick sauces and rich spices that make my stomach churn, but I don't dare ask for anything else. What if he serves me stale bread? What if he decides to starve me instead?

The meat upsets my stomach, so I make a point of not eating that but with little else in the way of protein, I have a raging headache, and I feel so low in energy.

I have clothes hanging in my dressing room. I have makeup and perfumes and so many things all here but none of it is mine. It's all new. I have nothing from my old life, not even a keepsake, not even a photograph.

I don't see my mother again. I don't see anyone. I'm all but locked in this room with nothing to amuse myself with. I have no books, no tv, absolutely nothing but my own thoughts and as the days pass, they start to spiral more and more.

When my husband finally returns, I'm almost grateful to see him.

I spring up from the bed, crossing the room before I collect myself.

He tilts his head, taking in the silk pyjamas I've been lounging in. "Did you not think to make yourself pretty for me?" He asks.

I gulp, glancing down. "I'm, I'm sorry." I say quickly. "I didn't know you were coming, you've been gone for days now, but if I had..."

He snarls cutting across me. "You think you should be appraised of all my comings and goings, is that it? You think you have a say in where I go and what I do?"

"No." I gasp, dropping my head further. Christ, I'm fucking this up.

"You should always be ready for me. Always ready for your husband."

I nod quickly. "I will. From now on, I will always..."

His hand strikes my face and I fall, landing on the floor with a cry.

"Why the fuck are you still stood here then?" He says, towering over me now. "I didn't come here for a conversation. You think I want to get your opinion on anything? You think I want to hear your damned voice? Get on the bed, spread your legs like a good little wife and let me sink my cock into you already."

I whimper, crawling across the floor and hastily pull the clothes from my body.

As I get onto the bed, I don't know how best to lay so I copy the pose he had me in last time. I place my arms above my head and widen my thighs while I try so desperately to stop the shaking.

My cheek stings from where he struck me but if that's the only pain I have to endure today, then I'll happily take it.

He undoes his tie, undoes his belt, holding it out like a whip. "Maybe I should give you a beating, maybe then you'd learn." He growls.

"I'm sorry." I gasp before I bite my tongue to shut myself up. Speaking has only gotten me in trouble, I need to remember to keep my mouth shut.

“Sorry?” He repeats and then it’s like something softens, something he changes. He tosses the belt, climbs onto the bed and he cradles me as if all that anger has just vanished.

His arms wrap around me, he buries his face into the warmth of my neck and thankfully the bruising has gone down enough for me not to react in anyway that might just piss him off again.

“I want you to be good, wife.” He murmurs while stroking my face. “I need you to be good. I need you to understand your place. To understand what this is.”

I nod back, “I want that too.” I reply. “I don’t want you to be angry with me. I want you to be happy, I want to make you happy.”

He lifts his head, catching my face, “You mean that?”

He’s almost childlike now. I frown trying to figure what the fuck this is. A voice in my head tells me that this is the moment my mother spoke about, this is how I wrap him around my finger, how I ensure that I control him and not the other way around.

“I mean it.” I say.

His lips curl, he grabs my face, plunging his tongue into my mouth and I almost choke as he starts swirling it around. I’ve never kissed anyone. Beyond the almost chaste kiss he gave me in the Cathedral, I’ve never even put my lips onto another person.

His tongue engulfs mine. I don’t know if this is how it’s meant to be but it feels sloppy, messy. His salvia comes down onto my chin and I can feel it sitting there.

He groans, grinding against me before he takes my hand and wraps it around his soft penis. “Make me hard, wife. Make me ready for you.”

I run my hand up. He’s not particularly big, not compared to the models my mother showed me. I’d thank God for that fact, only, he’s clearly big enough to hurt me still, isn’t he?

He’s so soft. His dick flops in my hand and I try my best, but it doesn’t seem to have any effect.

He watches me, watches what I’m doing, and I can tell I’m pissing him off again.

“Should I use my mouth?” I ask. Maybe if I seem willing to suck his cock that will make him happy.

He narrows his eyes just a little. “Go on then.” He says clearly losing patience.

I roll over, crouch over him and place his flaccid dick in my mouth. It feels even worse than in my hand. His skin feels so wrinkly, his dick just sits there as I try to suck. I don't want to voice the words in my head, the ones that tell me he's too old, that that's the issue. That he should see a doctor, get some medicine.

He grabs my head, wrapping his fingers up in my hair.

"Suck it like a lollipop." He instructs as if I haven't spent the last five years learning how to give head.

I rock my hips, bobbing my head back and forth as I work away. I can taste something musty, something weird. I know it's his dick and I don't want to think about the last time he washed himself.

I drop my hand to fondle his balls, and he shifts to widen his legs, and I get a whiff of body odour. His balls are small, hairy, like the rest of him. It feels like his entire legs and groin are covered in wiry black hair. It tickles my nose as I work away, and I do my best to not wrinkle my face up.

I'm moaning, sucking, doing everything I can, trying every trick in the book to make this man hard and it has zero effect.

I know he's going to grow bored. I know any minute now this docile husband of mine is going to flip back into a monster.

I can't stop it. I can't do anything.

His grip on my hair, the milliseconds of pain are all the warning I get before I'm wrenched off, pulled back and forced to lay there as he snarls down at me.

"Useless fucking whore." He growls. "I bet any bitch from Oblivion could do a better job than you right now."

I stare up at him, knowing this isn't my fault, but that won't spare me whatever punishment is coming my way.

He grabs my breasts, twisting the nipples around and I scream. I scream so loud.

Another slap to the face knocks the life out of me and I lay dazed as he pulls my body around.

His fingers plunge inside me, I can feel the way his nails are scratching my insides. "You want my cock so badly." He says as he thrusts away. "Needy little bitch. You won't even let me have a moments peace. A moments rest."

I don't understand what he's saying, don't understand what he's going on about. He was the one who initiated this, he was the one who put my

hand onto him.

“Filthy fucking slut,” He spits. “That’s all you bitches are. I thought a Founder would be different, I thought you’d know how to behave but you’re just the same as all the rest of them. You’re full of sin. Full of lust.”

I’m crying again. Sobbing. His fingers are hurting so badly as he’s tearing into me.

“Slut.” He spits. “Dirty fucking slut.”

I want to fight back, I want to stop him, but I know if I do that, I’ll only make this worse.

He grabs my throat, hauling me off the bed and he throws me down onto the rug. As I land, I roll over, curling up into a defensive position. His foot slams into my spine, into my side, into my legs. He’s not kicking hard enough to do serious damage, but it hurts enough.

And then he stands over me, panting like he’s been in a battle. He grabs his cock that even now is still completely flaccid, and he aims for my body as he starts pissing.

“I’ll cleanse you.” He snarls. “I’ll baptise you right here and cure you of your sin.”

It stinks. His piss absolutely stinks as it covers me, as it covers my stomach, as it trickles down over my skin, my arms, my legs, over all of me. He starts twisting, turning, spraying it so that it covers my hair, my face too. I’m drenched in it.

“Take that, you lustful whore.” He bellows. “Take my piss, fucking drown in it.”

I can taste it. I can smell it. I think I even have it in my eyes. I’m drenched in it and the stench of ammonia makes me physically gag.

When he’s finally finished, he gives me one final hard kick and then he walks out leaving me here.



I GET IN THE SHOWER, WASH IT ALL OVER, SCRUB AT MY SKIN AS IF THAT might rid me of the smell but nothing, none of the fancy soaps or products, seem to have any effect. Maybe it’s in my head. Maybe I’m imagining it, but I swear it’s not water raining down on me.

When I hear movement in the room, I freeze, so fearful he's back, that he'll punish me now for not staying put. Or will he punish me for not being ready for him again? God, I can't win.

My legs give way, I sink onto the tiles, and I can't keep the wail in despite bringing my hands up and stuffing them into my mouth in some desperate attempt to do so.

The door opens, I look up, feeling my heart slam into my chest but it's only the maid. She stares at me for a second before she grabs a towel and turns the shower off.

"You're okay." She says so kindly.

I shake my head. I'm not. I'm so far from okay right now and I don't know how to fix this. How to fix any of this.

"Come on, let's get you dry." She says, gently pulling me out, wrapping the towel around me and then slowly drying me off.

I try to help, I try to walk, but it's like my body won't respond properly. She all but carries me back into the room, grabbing some pyjamas for me to put on.

I fumble with the shorts, the fabric catching on my feet and she catches me quickly to stop me from falling over and landing on my arse. When the top is on, she disappears off and comes back with a mug of hot chocolate.

I grip the drink so tightly, feeling like I need its warmth to soothe my very soul.

"Drink." She says. "It'll help calm you down."

"Nothing, nothing helps." I stammer, though I know that's not exactly true. One thing will help me, one significant thing; my husband no longer being my husband. Only, that's impossible.

"I'm sorry." She replies. "He, he's not a nice man."

Yeah, you can say that again. I just don't understand why someone would be a cruel, as unnecessarily violent as he has been. If I'd done something, if I'd offended him, then fine, but I haven't. I know I haven't.

"He..." I pause, worried about saying it, about admitting it out loud but then, what choice do I have? I can't improve my situation if I stay here, simply taking the blows. Not that I expect her to be able to do anything about it. "He can't get hard." I state.

She blinks at me and my cheeks burn with the shame.

"I don't know if it's his age or..."

"I've heard the rumours." She says flatly.

“What rumours?” God, what is everyone saying about him? Is this common knowledge?

She tilts her head, glancing at the door and then back at me as if she wants to make sure she isn’t about to get caught saying something she shouldn’t. “He used to have slaves brought here. Used to enjoy them a lot. The last time it happened though...” She gulps.

“What?”

She draws in a breath. “I don’t know the exact details, but I know he killed them, killed all of them. He said they were poisoning him. That they’d done something to him. A doctor was called for, but he wasn’t sick. The rumour is, he was impotent, and instead of seeing it as his failure, he blamed them.”

I stare back at her for a second as it registers that that’s exactly what he did with me. He blamed me.

“Oh god.” I wail, as if feels like my entire world comes down on me. There’s no fix for this.

She leans in close, her voice a whisper. “I can help if you want. I can slip something into his food. A little something to stimulate him, if you know what I mean. It will make sure he can perform his duties as a husband.”

I shake my head, my stomach churning at the thought. “I can’t, I can’t do that. It’s wrong. It’s a sin.”

The maid’s expression softens, her eyes filled with sympathy. “I understand. But you must think of your own safety. If he can’t get it up, he’ll only grow angrier, he’ll only hurt you more. This is the lesser of two evils, is it not?”

I know she’s right, but the thought of drugging my husband, of ensuring he has the means to fuck me whenever he wants, it makes me sick to my stomach.

But then, what’s the alternative? Have him beat me, have him piss all over me, repeatedly?

I *have* to do something, even if it means compromising my own morals.

I take a deep breath, steeling myself for what I’m about to do. “Okay.” I whisper, my voice trembling. “Do it. Just, just make sure he doesn’t know it was me.”

The maid nods, a small smile tugging at her lips. “Don’t worry. I’ll take care of everything. You just focus on healing and staying safe.”

She goes to leave and I grab her hand back. “What’s your name?” I should know it, I should know who my ally actually is.

“It’s Kora.” She says.

“Kora.” I repeat. “Thank you, Kora.”

She gives me a small nod before looking at the mug. “Drink.” She says. “He’s gone out for the night. He won’t be back till morning now. Enjoy the peace while you can.”

Peace. It doesn’t feel like peace, it feels like stolen moments, fragments of time where I’m still in purgatory, waiting for the devils to come and drag me back into the furnace again.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



Pailtyn

I can't breathe, the weight of his body is crushing me against the unforgiving mahogany of his enormous desk. Each thrust is a sharp reminder of my place here, a lesson in power and submission that I never asked to learn, nor needed to.

My hips ache from the relentless pressure, and it feels like the wood grain is etching itself into my skin like a brand.

I bite my lip, hard, tasting the coppery tang of my blood. It's a reminder that I'm here, that I'm human, that I'm even alive.

He had me escorted to this part of the Palace hours ago. He had me standing in the corner like a statue while he worked away.

I don't know what changed, but one minute he was rifling through paperwork, and the next, he was barking for me to get over here, to spread my legs, and fulfil my purpose.

I guess the silver lining is, he hasn't struggled to get hard, has he? Whatever Kora is doing, it's working. I escape the irony that fixing his impotency doesn't take away my pain, it just changes the parameters.

Gunther's sweat mingles with mine, his grunts of pleasure echo around the opulent office that has now become my personal chamber of horrors.

I'm whimpering, creating a pathetic soundtrack to our sordid encounter, but I dare not cry out. I've learned that my pain only fuels his desire, and I refuse to give him the satisfaction of knowing just how much he actually hurts me.

I tell myself that it could be worse. I could be married to a man without power, without wealth. But as he fucks me, as he brutalises me more and more, the truth washes over me; I would have traded it all, the title, the prestige, the power too, for a chance at true happiness. Even the lowliest lord would have been a better fate than this.

The door creaks open, and my face flames with shame as Senate Leader Aldric steps into the room. His eyes take in the scene with a clinical detachment, and for a moment, he stands there, an unwelcome voyeur to my torment.

"I can see you're busy, Chapter Lord." Aldric says, his voice betraying no hint of surprise or disgust. It's as if he's merely commenting on the weather.

Gunther grunts in response, his pace never faltering. "Give me a minute." he growls, his hands gripping my hips with bruising force. He leans down, his breath hot against my ear. "You hear that, whore? You're putting on a show now."

The words are a knife in my heart, but I refuse to let him see me bleed. He continues his assault, his insults just as degrading as his actions.

"Such a sweet cunt." he whispers, and I feel the bile rise in my throat.

We can all hear the slapping of his flesh against mine. Aldric stands there, staring right at where the action is as if he has no shame, and I can't look at him, I can't.

I stare at the wood, trying to keep my tears at bay.

I can cry when I'm alone. I can weep and wail then.

When Gunther finally finds his release, he collapses onto me, and his body is a dead weight that steals what little breath I have left.

He heaves and he gasps as if he's just run a marathon, before he pulls his sweaty flesh off mine and does his trousers back up.

“Go.” he commands, without even looking at me.

I scramble to obey, my torn dress barely covering my modesty. I can feel their eyes on me, and it makes the bile in my mouth threaten to overspill everywhere.

I am nothing more than a piece of meat to them, I know it, I can feel it. I’m an object to be used and discarded.

“I see your wife has given you a new lease of life, Chapter Lord.” Aldric muses as he watches me.

Gunther laughs back. “Her cunt certainly has.” He agrees.

Somehow, I make it to the door, my legs shaking from how I’ve been held down for so long.

“Get some rest, whore.” Gunther calls after me. “I plan to spend the entire night with my cock buried in you.”

I know he’s playing to the audience. I know he’s being a boastful piece of shit. But that doesn’t stop the whimper, and I pick up pace, fleeing the room, as they both laugh more.

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CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



Devin

The room is stuffy, even with as few people as there are in it.

I think our Chapter Lord seems to like it that way, likes the very air to feel oppressive.

I shift in my boots, trying to ignore the way the sweat seems to be building between my toes.

Gunther is waffling on, more muttering than actually speaking, but every so often I catch a word, a snatch of the conversation.

The Senate are sat around, though enough of them are absent to make me wonder if they too grow bored of these meetings. The only thing of note is that he brought her; the wife.

She's stood behind him, like a silent sentry, a guard, just like the rest of us, only she's not nearly as good at standing still as we are. I can see the

way she moves, the way she almost jumps from one foot to the other as if she's too weak to stand properly.

She looks like shit. She has big bags under her eyes, there's a mark on her cheek that I'd put money on coming from being hit, and her neck is still showing the lingering evidence of what her husband did to her on her wedding day.

But her hair is pretty. Her makeup is all done, and she's wearing a sexy little dress that hugs her body, showing to us all that she has very little to no underwear on under the fabric.

"Why has it not been done?" Gunther snaps, slamming his hand down onto the table.

Enough of the people around him jump. His wife practically shits herself.

All ten of us guards spread around the room don't move a muscle.

"With respect, Chapter Lord, your order is somewhat controversial." The Leader of the Senate says. "Child brides are not something the Brethren in general will ignore, and we cannot go against the greater teachings of our Grand Master."

"They're not child brides." Gunther retorts. "If they're old enough to bleed, they're old enough to breed."

The Senate exchanges a look that says what we're all thinking.

Gunther grabs his wife, dragging her forward. "This girl would have given me a dozen sons if I'd be allowed to marry her at twelve."

"It's not healthy." One of the older members states. "Girls having children that young. It doesn't produce good offspring, and it certainly shortens the mother's lifespan."

"Who gives a fuck about the mothers when we're concerned with sons?" Gunther sneers, shoving her back and out of the way and she nearly slams into the wall from the force of it.

"Chapter Lord." A different man says. "With respect, the families of the girls would feel differently. And it would lead to a shortage, many would hold their daughters back and then that would cause friction between those who don't and those who do."

"Do I care if they have a pissing contest?" Gunther remarks.

"You will if they turn on you." The Leader of the Senate replies. He's the only one bold enough to dare to make such a comment.

“Fine. We can add to the ruling then; we can amend it. We can allow Lords to take more than one wife and that will fix that issue of families feeling left behind.”

“Excuse me?” Someone splutters.

“Enough other cults do it, don’t they? I believe the Mormons have a dozen a piece. Can you imagine it? A dozen wives to fuck? Why, you could have one in the morning and a different one at night, every single day of the week...”

Silence follows that statement. Gunther looks at them all as if he’s waiting for something and then his entire expression seems to change. He clicks his fingers, hollering for his wife to come back.

She blanches, taking one timid step and then another but it’s evidently not quick enough for his liking because he’s grabbing her, slamming her down onto the table and he’s wrenching her dress up far above her waist.

She screams, she snatches out, but her hands can’t grasp anything and he’s undoing his belt, pushing himself into her and starts fucking her right there, in front of us all.

“Imagine it.” He says groaning. “Imagine a different cunt day and night.”

“Chapter Lord?” One of the Senate splutters.

He grunts, grabbing hold of her dress and he tries to pull it up, over her head, exposing her more.

“Noooo.” She gasps, trying to stop him and he backhands her hard enough that we can feel the impact of his hand on her face.

She falls still, falls silent, letting him use her as the Senate sit there and watch.

All the bits of paper beneath her start to crumple, we can hear something squeaking as he bucks away.

“That’s better.” He comments as he stares down at her, at where his dick is sliding in and out. “Pretty little cunt.” He adds. “You just need to remember that’s all you are. A cunt to use. A cunt to fuck.”

It’s not a lie. It’s literally the purpose of all wives.

He doesn’t even stop thrusting as he fixes the man with his beady little eyes. “Go on.”

“But...” another begins.

“Chapter Lord, we can clearly see that you’re, uh, busy, how about we break for lunch and...”

“How about you finish your business before I have you thrown off the Senate.” Gunther snaps back.

He can’t do that. He doesn’t have that power. But the Senate exchange glances like they don’t want to piss him off.

And the whole time, his wife is whimpering, gasping, clearly not enjoying any of this.

He grunts as he slides in and out of her. His hand moves to hold her head down and with his spare, he wrenches her hips up, finding better rhythm. The sound of his skin slapping against hers fills the air and I swear I can see it, his balls dangling, slapping against her soft skin as he rocks back and forth.

“She’s doing it again.” One of them guards mutter into their earpiece.

I glance around catching his eye for a second.

“Lazy bitch doesn’t even try to make it good.” Our commander says quietly.

A few of them snigger. Thankfully the sound of his grunting covers the noise, but I drop my eyes watching the scene. It’s hardly salacious. An old man whose balls are so shrivelled up they look like little prunes.

And the girl... I’ve seen more effort from the slaves in Oblivion.

“...so you see, I think it would be a mistake to lower the age. Many families will not be happy with this change.” One of the Senate says.

Gunther snarls, shaking his head, “It’s my decision to make. And I have decided. The Lord has spoken to me directly. He has said any girl who has had her period is old enough to be married.”

The Senate exchange glances again.

Gunther slams his hand down, narrowly missing his wife’s head. “I am Chapter Lord. Me. I can do what I like. Change what I like. I make the decisions. And all you snivelling fucks have to do what I say.”

As if to emphasize his point, he comes, roaring out as if he thinks he’s some sort of beast. The wife lies there, her eyes shut, her breathing erratic.

He pulls out, wiping his dick on those plump little cheeks of hers and then he reaches forward, drags her back by her hair, and dumps her at his feet.

“Stay.” He orders, like she’s dog. “Stay right fucking there, until I have a need for you again.”

CHAPTER

NINETEEN



Pailtyn

Tt's quiet. Peaceful almost.

My husband has been away, on an urgent trip, at least, that's what the maids tell me because it's not like I'm privy to his diary, is it?

I'm grateful for the respite, but I know when he comes back, he'll be wanting to make up for lost time.

The only consolation I have is that our plan is working. Giving him that medicine is working. No, I don't like the way he degrades me, but it's better than him failing to get it up at all and pissing all over me again.

And if I can get pregnant...I let out a sigh. I can't even believe that I'm hoping for that. Why the fuck would I want his child? But that would be the answer, that must surely solve this issue. And if I'm pregnant, there's no way he'd hurt me as much. Would nine months of living a pain-free

existence be worth the pain of childbirth? And the humiliation of having every Brethren Lord and Lady watching me as I do it? I'm not so sure.

The door bursts open behind me and I yelp, turning as Kora and the other maid come rushing in.

"He's on his way back." Kora says.

I don't need to ask who. The fear creeping through my veins already tells me exactly who they are talking about.

They flit about, pulling things out, clearly having been given instructions to make me pretty, make me presentable.

I sit in front of the mirror, allowing them to do my makeup, my hair, to make me the very epitome of perfection.

Kora holds out a dress for me to put on and it's sexy, *too* sexy. A sliver of something creeps down my spine and that old fear screams in my head to run again.

I swallow it down, force it down, as I reach for the thing and hastily put it on.

I'm barely ready in time when a knock at the door gets our attention. Gunther doesn't knock. Gunther never knocks. I frown as a servant sticks his head around it and tells us to hurry the fuck up.

It's curious how there's no ceremony, no respect when Gunther isn't around. It's like we're all in this together, we all know what a horror my husband can be, so we don't waste time with bullshit. We all just do what needs to be done, we all help one another to ensure whatever happens, it doesn't result in one of his fits.

I follow after him, following him through this Palace that I've barely had more than a few stolen glances of. The dress they've laced me into is a confection of silk and lace, the colour a deep crimson that seems to drink in the light.

It's beautiful. The kind of gown that should make a woman feel powerful, desirable. But all I feel is a steadily increasing sense of dread.

As we reach the bottom of the grand staircase, Gunther is there, stood beside a man, a guest, someone I don't recognise.

My husband's predatory gaze crawls over me, his lips curl into a smile that sends chills down my spine. I've learned to recognize that look, it's the harbinger of some new humiliation, some fresh degradation he's cooked up for his entertainment.

I'm led through to where drinks are being served. Gunther and his friend move to lounge in huge leatherbound seats and Gunther pulls me into his lap.

The pair of them exchange idle talk, non-consequential bullshit while they puff on cigars, and I have to turn my face away for fear my asthma will turn me into a choking wreck.

"What do you think of my new wife?" Gunther murmurs, grabbing my face, pulling me out of my daydream.

His friend smirks, running his eyes over me, focusing particularly on my breasts as if he has x-ray vision and can see right through the fabric.

"Very nice indeed." He says back.

I shut my eyes, blocking out the rest of the conversation. The insults that the pair of them clearly see as compliments.

And then, abruptly, the man gets up, giving Gunther a pointed look, before he struts off, leaving us alone.

I don't know what this is. What is happening but it's clear *something* is up here.

Gunther finishes his cigar like it's the last one he'll ever savour and then he gets up, holding his arm expectantly for me to take.

I don't want to. I feel like I'm about to sign away my life, more of my life. He gives me a glowering look that makes me even more fearful, and I do as I'm bid, allowing him to lead me like a lamb to the funeral pyre at the alarmingly fast pace he sets off at.

My heart pounds in my chest as we approach the room.

Gunther opens the door and nudges me inside. The room is lit by a set of lamps, positioned around the room. There's a bed in the middle. It's a big bed, with what looks like freshly ironed sheets.

By the far wall is a table with... my eyes look away instantly as I recognise what those things are. Forbidden items. Prohibited things. Things that would get you a beating and more.

Why would he bring me here? Is he planning on using them on me? God, no. I swear my legs start to tremble as my mind races.

And then a figure steps out from the shadows. It's cigar man. I can just make out his tall, broad shoulders, in the dim light, those bushy eyebrows, that leering smile.

I frown, feeling more confused, more bewildered by what this is. Cigar man reaches up, undoing his tie, loosening the cuffs on his shirt as he stares

back at me with a look in his eyes that makes me physically sick.

Something fumbles with my dress, the zipper at the back is dragged down so quickly and I spin around, staring in horror at my husband.

What the fuck is this? What the hell is he doing?

This has to be a mistake. This has to be some kind of sick joke.

Only, Gunther's voice cuts through my panic.

"Behave, Paitlyn." he says, his fingers brushing against my cheek in a grotesque parody of tenderness. "Be obedient. Show my friend what a delicious cunt you have, and you'll get a pretty little diamond in return."

Horror washes over me, cold and nauseating. This can't be happening. Gunther can't possibly expect me to... but the look in his eyes confirms my worst fears.

I shake my head as a silent plea for mercy slips past my lips.

The slap comes hard and fast, the sting of it sharp against my skin. "Stop pretending you aren't a whore." Gunther hisses, pushing me back, making me stumble so much I almost fall into those eagerly waiting arms of his disgusting friend.

"It's a sin..." I stammer. "It's a sin..."

But he doesn't wait to hear it. He clearly doesn't want to. He walks out, shutting the door with a finality that makes my heart sink.

Cigar man approaches me, his eyes roaming over my body with a greediness that makes me want to puke.

"Lie on the bed." he instructs, his voice devoid of emotion.

I'm so shocked, my body moves on autopilot. I clamber on, trying my best to keep my dress up, as if the fabric is a shield and could protect me in this moment.

This must be a dream, a nightmare from which I'll soon wake.

But it's not a dream. The weight of him on top of me is all too real, the roughness of his hands as they tear off my gown.

"You *are* a delicacy." He groans, grabbing my breasts, kneading them with both hands.

"Please." I gasp as guilt and disgust churn in me with equal measure. "I'm not your wife, I'm not..."

He shoves a hand over my mouth, silencing my words that he clearly doesn't want to hear.

He lowers his face to my ear, his hot breath making my skin crawl more. "Do you think I don't know that?" He snarls. "Of course you're not

my wife. My wife is at home, doing her duty, growing fat with my son, my heir..."

I cry out as he digs his fingers in further, as he claws at my flesh.

"...I get to fuck you anyway. Do you get that? I get to do what I want with you for a few hours and if you had any wits at all, you'd make sure I enjoyed myself. You'd wrap that pretty mouth around my cock, and you'd imagine it was your dear husband you were pleasuring, if that eased your conscience."

I moan back, I gasp under his brutal grip, but it makes no difference whatsoever.

He grabs at my underwear, pulling it aside and I can tell from the fumbling what he's trying to do.

"No. No, please." I scream more. I kick out, but I've already lost this. I never stood a chance.

He shoves himself into me, jerking his hips with a snarl of satisfaction.

"Fuck..." He gasps. "You really do have a magic cunt, don't you?"

My tears are streaming. My mind is broken, shattered. I can't do anything but just lie here and take it as this man forces himself, as he rapes me.

It hurts. It hurts almost as much as when Gunther is forcing himself on me. I can feel my insides tearing, can feel my inner muscles ripping which each brutal thrust.

He's not as rabid, not as big a weight as my husband. I guess I should feel grateful for that. That he's not smothering me with his body while he rapes me. That my very oxygen isn't being forced from my lungs, only, I can smell him, I can taste him. I can feel his odour lingering on me as he bucks away.

He tuts, coming to a stop, glaring at me.

"Tears aren't fucking sexy." He snarls, as if I'm the arsehole here.

But I won't stop. I can't stop.

I can't do anything but continue crying uncontrollably as I realise that in so many ways, this man has damned me, my husband too has damned me. Adultery is a sin. It's one of the worst sins a person can commit.

I don't want to go to Oblivion. I don't want to go to hell either.

But now I know that's exactly where I'm headed.

He lets out a snarl, flipping me over onto my front and buries my face into the pillow like he's trying to pretend I'm not hating every moment of

this. And then he's fucking away, using me once more before he suddenly snarls and pulls himself out.

"Fucking bitch." He spits, slapping my arse hard enough to make me scream. "Stupid fucking bitch."

The door opens. I'm still laying here, still in the position this man forced me into as my dear husband waltzes in and comes to a stop.

"Well?" He asks.

His friend scowls. "She does have a nice cunt, I'll give her that, but she's such a whiney bitch, I've lost my appetite."

Gunther narrows his eyes, turning them on me. "She disappointed you?" He says in a tone that tells me I'm in so much trouble now.

"Bitch wouldn't stop crying." His friend sneers. "If I wanted that, I could have just fucked my own wife."

Gunther's rage is instantaneous. He lunges at me, his hands like iron shackles around my hair as he wrenches me off the bed and onto the marble floor. "You dare to displease my friend?" he roars, his spittle landing on my face. "You are nothing but a vessel for my amusement, do you understand?"

I can't hold back the words, fuelled by a mixture of both shame and defiance. "It's a sin to be with anyone but my husband." I state. It's the only defence I have, the only leg I have to stand on.

Gunther laughs in my face and it's full of malice. Full of contempt. "I make the rules," he declares, his voice booming as he points his fat finger right into my face. "I decide what is and is not a sin."

"You're not God." I snap back. "And you can't override his laws, no matter how much power you think you have."

It's a stupid thing to say. A stupid, foolish, idiotic statement and I know I'm going to pay for it the minute those words leave my lips.

His beady little eyes widen so much, his fury seems to explode out of him.

He starts spitting insults, calling me a whore and a heretic, as he drags me out, as he drags me past room after room.

I kick and scream, my nails clawing at the marble floor, but it's useless. Gunther is stronger, he will always be stronger.

"I'll show you what I can and can't do." He bellows. "I'll show you who is the God in this house, in this entire fucking land."

CHAPTER

TWENTY



Devin

Cigarette smoke fills the air. I take another swig of my beer, holding my cards close, watching as the four men around me do the same.

We're off duty. The night shift has taken over and while I could leave the compound, most days it's easier to stay. Besides, these men here are like my brothers, as good as brothers as my real ones. Perhaps even better because they don't know my past, my history and then don't keep bringing it up, giving me side-eyes when they think I'm not looking.

I don't feel judged here, I don't feel babied either. I'm a man, just as they are.

I glance at my cards. Poker is a new game to me, but I've got pocket two's which I guess isn't so bad. Beginners' luck has certainly been on my side tonight.

Curtis raises. Everyone else calls. The turn reveals another two, giving me three in total. Curtis goes heavy, reraising and while everyone else calls, I reraise too.

He looks over at me and grins that shit-eating grin, like he thinks he's got the nuts.

As the final card is laid, I know I've got more than a good hand. Quad twos and an ace. Not bad at all.

Everyone else folds, everyone except Curtis but just as I'm about to go all in, a commotion reaches our ears. We glance to the door and Lyndon comes sprinting through.

"Code red." He says in warning.

We all spring up, hiding the contraband, putting out the cigarettes, knocking back the alcohol before it's taken off us. Technically, we're allowed to smoke in here but still.

As I neck back the last of my beer, we can hear him, we can hear his voice echoing down the passageway.

Our barracks are just to the side of the main palace building. In total there are more than a hundred guards stationed here. But only fifty of us are his personal guards and from that, only twenty are in his inner circle. It's an honour that I've been selected to be where I am considering my lack of experience, but I know my size absolutely played into it. Gunther is all about appearances, and who wouldn't want to look like they have literal giants protecting them?

"I'll teach you. I'll fucking teach you..."

His voice rings out and it's more than obvious he's having one of his fits again. That he's in one of his tantrums.

"Here we go." Danos mutters beside me.

I draw in a deep breath, preparing myself for the tirade of abuse that's coming. He may be our Chapter Lord, he may have been put here to command us by God himself, but that doesn't mean he isn't a madman. And I of all people would know. Would recognise the signs, considering my own family's history.

A scream follows his words. It's high-pitched, definitely a woman's. We exchange glances and a few of the men start smirking as it dawns on us that it's not us in trouble here.

He storms in, his hands holding his wife's hair as he drags her beside him. She's got one hand clinging to a bit of fabric to try and hide her body,

but it only covers the front of her and the guards at the door no doubt get a great view of her arse.

“You want to be a bitch. You want to be a disobedient little bitch...” Gunther snarls throwing her down, slamming her body onto the hard stone floor.

She curls up, shutting her eyes, clearly aware that there’s at least twenty men here, twenty sets of eyes watching her now.

Gunther is seething, his chest is rising and falling as he starts pacing back and forth.

“Chapter Lord?” Commander Malik says.

He shakes his head, muttering beneath his breath like he’s having an internal battle. Like he too is filled with demons, and he needs to exorcise them.

“She needs to learn. She needs to fucking learn.” He snarls, slamming his hands into his own face, slapping his cheeks.

“Chapter Lord?” Malik repeats again, louder.

Gunther stops, he freezes, looking at all of us as if he’s not realised where he is. And then that face morphs from confusion into something akin to hate.

“Well,” he says. “What are you all waiting for? My wife is a disobedient little bitch. She thinks she’s better than me, better than us. She thinks because she has Founder blood that makes her special. That makes her precious.”

He reaches down, grabbing her hair again and wrenching her head up so she’s forced to look at us. “If she won’t behave then she deserves to be punished.”

“No,” She sobs. “Please, please I’ll be good, I’ll...” His boot slams into her side as she shrieks out.

“It’s too late for that. Far too fucking late.” Gunther snarls back before dropping his hold like she’s diseased. “You think you can lecture me? You think you tell me what the rules are?”

He looks around at us all again and his lips curl into a grin. “What are you waiting for?” He repeats. “Fuck her, use her. Make the bitch learn her place.”

I blink back. I think all of us wonder if we’ve misheard him. Surely not? Surely... he grabs Malik, grabs his collar and pulls him forward. Malik is a

big man, almost as big as me so he must allow the movement because there's no way Gunther has the strength to force him to do anything.

"Teach her a lesson." Gunther repeats. "My wife needs to learn what she is. That she's a whore. A cunt to fuck and nothing more."

There's nothing in the rules about this. There's nothing to say if this is permitted or not. Sleeping with a married man's wife will put you in Oblivion. Adultery would give you a good sentence too. But this, is this adultery when your Chapter Lord is the one commanding it?

I barely have time to contemplate that, when the men around me seem to give in, seem to move as one.

The girl is grabbed, is dragged kicking and screaming, and that tiny bit of fabric is ripped from her hands. She sobs, she cries as she's picked up and placed onto the poker table we were sat at only moments ago.

"Don't be afraid to make it hurt." Gunther shouts as Malik climbs up onto the table, completely engulfing her tiny frame with his.

I don't know why I'm holding back, I don't know why I'm stood here but there's a tiny voice in my head wondering if this is some sort of trick being played on us and not actually to do with his wife at all.

Are there more men lurking in the shadows, waiting to come out and gut us for this crime? Is that what this is, some fucked up test of loyalty?

She's putting up a good fight. She lands a few punches before someone grabs her arms to hold her down. Her knee comes up and she slams it into Malik's groin. He groans, collapsing onto her and she freaks out more.

"Stop." She sobs. "Please, please, don't do this. I'll be good. I promise, I'll be good..."

Gunther laughs at that. "Good?" He repeats. "I don't want you good. I want you obedient. And if you were obedient, you wouldn't be fighting right now. You'd be laying there and accepting your punishment because you know you deserve it."

She sobs harder, shaking her head. "I don't, I don't. I'm your wife." She screams. "Your wife. No one is meant to touch me but you."

Gunther narrows his eyes as Malik recovers. He undoes his belt, gets his cock out and says something to her that I don't catch above her shrieks.

"Wait," Gunther says. "You don't fuck her. Nobody fucks her. Use her, hurt her, but you stick your cock in her cunt, and I'll chop it off, you hear me?"

"What about her arse?" One of the other men ask.

The girl whimpers more.

"No one fucks her arse but me." Gunther says proudly. "I've yet to tap that delight." He rubs his hands together as if in glee and I can't look at him. I don't think any of us can.

Her scream rips through the room.

Malik laughs as he works his arm back and forth inside her. "No one said anything about hands." He states.

Her body jolts, her tits bounce and from where I'm stood, it's hard not to admire her. She really does have a nice figure.

Malik isn't being gentle with her. He's brutalising her as he thrusts away and she's sobbing, pleading, as if he'd stop.

"You hurt me, bitch. I'll hurt you back." He states.

Someone grabs her head, forcing her mouth open. "He didn't say anything about her other hole either." He says before ramming his cock down her throat.

She gags as he does it, her eyes go so wide, and she obviously screams more but the noise is muffled as he starts using her.

Two other men get their dicks out and start rubbing them along her skin, taunting her that they're dicks are gonna be the next ones she chokes on.

I'm pretty much the only man now not involved in some way. I'm just stood watching as they descend on her like a pack of animals. Someone grabs her nipple, twisting it around, another starts sucking at her toes and I guess he must have a foot fetish or something because why the fuck would you go for her feet when she's laid out here in all her delicious beauty?

I can feel my own cock stirring. Just looking at her, truly looking at her. She is breathtaking, her fear, her shame, the way she's being forced to take one man's cock and then as he comes down her throat, she doesn't get the chance to even swallow it properly before another quickly replaces him.

I've seen enough gang rapes in my time. I've spent many hours enjoying the debauchery of Oblivion, but this girl, she beats all the slaves I've fucked, she beats every single one.

I don't know if it's the way she cries.

I don't know if it's the way the fear shows in her every petrified face but it's addictive. Just watching her feels like the greatest high I've known.

Malik says something, his arm slows, and he calls her a useless slut for not coming already. She can't exactly respond while Curtis has his dick down her throat but as he climbs off her, I see my moment, my opportunity.

I step forward, undoing my belt and I push the other man out of the way who obviously thinks he can touch her next. He tries to fight me, tries to shove me back, but one punch floors him and I glare at the others, daring them to get in my way.

Of course they don't bother fighting me. No one does.

So, I get up, taking my time to move over her, the way a devil does an angel. The way a predator does the prey he's about to devour.

She doesn't notice me at first. Her face is pulled up, her head is twisted as she's forced to take Curtis's cock.

But when she does see me from the corner of her eye, she freaks out more. A hand gets loose, she manages to slap me, and I take that sting, I fucking delight in it.

Yeah, you can hurt me, bitch, you can fight. In fact, I want you to fight. I want you to do everything you can to try to stop me.

I grab her thighs, pulling them apart. She's got a sweet little pussy. It's bruised right now, bloodied too from what Malik has already done, and I'd give anything to lower my mouth and kiss it better. To lick up every last trace of her blood. But I won't do that here. I sure as hell will not do anything to touch her while we have so many onlookers.

I grab my cock, giving it a good hard tug and her eyes latch onto it. Does she think I'm going to disobey her husband? Does she think her cunt is so tempting that I'll ignore orders and fuck her anyway?

I glance across at him, at Gunther. He's stood, his own dick in his hand, masturbating as he's watching this thing play out. He's a fucking fool to have brought her here, to have put her in this position. There's twenty of us. Twenty grown men, fuelled by alcohol and testosterone. Most of us haven't had a good fuck in weeks. It wouldn't take much for us to flip the scales. To turn this into something far more entertaining.

His little wife would become a fine plaything for us.

A nice little treat for us all the enjoy and ruin.

And the way the other men feel, the mood of this room, I wonder if a few of them are contemplating it. We could screw his rules, could easily overpower him and then this sweet little cunt would be ours to play with until she was all used up and nothing but a broken toy by the time the sun rises.

I groan, pumping my cock, imagining it. Imagining pushing into her, forcing my way in past those tight muscles. She'd really scream then,

wouldn't she? She'd learn the true meaning of fear. She cries enough when her husband fucks her, and his cock is tiny compared to the brute size of mine. Add the fact I got a few enhancements, a nice little set of metal spikes, and yeah, I think I could make this little bitch cry more than ever.

"No..." She sobs as if she can hear my thoughts.

I look at her, holding her gaze. She really does have such pretty little eyes. Like sparkling blue diamonds. One day I'm gonna make those eyes cry so much and it'll all be for me.

I grin at her, I pump away, watching as she lays there, terrified but not daring to move.

Little whore. Whatever her husband thinks of her, whatever this game is, I'll have my fun now, terrorising her just enough to make her shit herself every time she lays eyes on me from now on. Every time she walks down a hallway, every time she spies my shadow in the distance, she'll remember this. She'll remember the power I had over her in this moment.

My cock feels so good. I shudder as I thrust into my hand.

Her cunt is still weeping with blood because I doubt any of this is arousing her and as I bring myself to climax, I aim for that sweet spot right above her labia. I pour myself all over her. She flinches. She screws her face up in disgust and I let out a cruel laugh. It's so tempting to lean down, to smear myself all over her, to cover her in my come.

But I don't want to touch her, not here, not in front of everyone. Something tells me that soon enough, I'll have my moment. Soon enough I'll be able to touch and hurt as much as I please.

I don't know why the other men have stopped. I don't know why they're all stood watching me.

I let out a growl as I realise it and the few that are stood beside me seem to come to life. They grab the bitch, grab at her body and they're jerking away, masturbating over what bits of flesh they have access too.

The sound of slapping fills the air. Men's groans accompany it. And all too soon my come isn't the only thing covering her. The others have joined in, they've poured themselves out onto her body, have smeared the mess across her perfect, soft skin. She's covered in them. Covered in all of them.

I scowl looking at her, looking at the mess of it. She looks what she is now. She looks exactly what her husband wants her to be.

A perfect little cumslut. A dirty little whore.

When the last of the men are finished, her husband strolls up. He looks so proud, so damned satisfied. We part almost reluctantly to let him through and if that isn't a measure of how close to losing control he was, then I don't know what is.

He clammers onto that same table we've all been abusing her on. His trousers are down by his knees, and we can all see his flat, hairy arse poking out.

"Good." He says as he appraises her. "Very good."

She sobs, trying to cover her face and he slaps her hard to stop her from doing it.

"Pride is a sin, wife, just as disobedience is."

She nods, biting her lip that's split and is bleeding from all the cocks that have been shoved past them.

"Have you learned your lesson?"

She nods again, trembling more.

He smirks, pumping more, jerking his hips as he does. "One more to learn, I'd say."

Watching a man jerk off has never bothered me. We all have needs, after all. But watching him, watching his little dick growing redder and redder, and hearing the way he grunts just a little as he does it... I keep my face neutral but as I scan the others, I can tell they feel the same as I do; it's not respect we have for our leader right now, it's disgust.

He picks up speed, he gasps, muttering so low no one can catch what he's saying.

When he comes, he stoops over, like he's too weak to hold himself up. His cock spits out the most pitiful amount of semen and it lands on her perfect tits, sullying them more.

She shuts her eyes briefly. She does her best to not react.

Gunther stares down at her, a look of utter contempt on his face.

And then he walks out, leaving her here. Leaving her completely alone and at the mercy of us jackals.

It would only take one, one flick of a match and this entire thing would go up in flames.

No one moves. No one speaks.

The girl is stupid enough to make a sound and that seems to break the ice. It shatters it.

Soren pounces, grabbing at her. Curtis drags him back.

Malik and I move to block the other men while Mace hollers for someone to get this bitch out of here.

It feels like a standoff as we wait, and thankfully two maids come rushing in. From the way the girl clings to them, I'd say they've found her in a similar situation more than once before. They help her to stand, wrapping their arms around her like she's not covered in all our come.

She wobbles as she walks but they're quick to get her out of here as if they too recognise the danger we are.

As the door shuts, the room seems to erupt into laughter. Beers are passed out, but it doesn't feel quite like a celebration, it feels like a relief. Like we're all grateful we're still alive.

"Still a wet fish." Someone comments and he gets a rowdy response.

I let out a low breath, grabbing a drink, needing it now. I need to get the image of her out of my head. I need to forget how delicious her cunt looked, how damned tempting it was.

"He's mad." Lyndon whispers beside me. I glance at him, knowing exactly who he's referring to.

Gunther is mad. And I don't know what that means for us, for the Brethren, or for his pretty little wife either.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



Pailtyn

Freezing cold water is thrown over me.

I'm shaking, trembling, fighting the very real need to just curl up and die already.

The maids wash me, they scrub at me while a priest of all things barks instructions, stating that I'm unclean. Unworthy. That I'm tainted and disgusting and full of sin.

But I didn't do anything. I didn't do a thing.

Those men did that to me. My husband gave me to them, he stood by and watched as they abused and degraded me. How now am I the one held responsible?

"Just as Jesus purged us of our sins, you too shall be purged." The priest says, striking me back with something that makes me hiss.

It's thorns. A whole damned whip made of them.

He strikes me again, calling me a lustful whore, only this time he doesn't hit my back, he hits my breasts. He clearly takes great delight in hurting them, he twists the thing, turning it as it makes contact, so those nasty little fangs cut into my nipples, and I cry out.

My tears stream down my face.

I just want this to end. I just want all of it to end.

I can't do this. I can't. I don't understand why my husband is the way he is. I don't understand why he keeps hurting me. I haven't done anything to deserve this treatment.

The Priest makes me get to my knees, has me clasp my hands together in prayer and he continues to beat me while he has me recite the Lord's prayer over and over.

The floor is so hard. My body aches from what those men did to me and my knees are begging me to get up. I have shooting pains up my legs. I think I've run out of tears to cry but still, this isn't enough.

More water covers me. Holy water this time.

"We purify your flesh. We purify your mind. You will be purged of your sins and accept your place as an obedient and compliant wife."

I'm trembling so violently now my teeth smash together. Even my bones feel frozen.

When my body collapses, I don't even bother to fight it. My face slams into the wet floor and I barely whimper at the new blow to my cheekbone.

And as I lay there with my eyes shut, feeling completely broken, the Priest stands over me, checking to see if I'm really done in or simply faking it.

He prods me with his staff. I don't react.

Then he clicks his fingers for the maids to do something.

I don't know what it is. What this new form of torture is but as they kneel beside me, I mentally prepare myself for more pain. I can see from their faces that they don't want to be here. I know they don't want to have any part in this, and I don't doubt come morning, they'll be begging my forgiveness.

The Priest lays a golden bowl down. I can see it's filled with something. The maids, dip their hands in and pull out what look like small sponges. As they wipe them over me, I realise it's oil. I'm being cleaned up then.

They're meticulous about it under the Priest's stern gaze. When they get to all the cuts I hiss, feeling that nasty sharp sting like a thousand tiny

blades all cutting into me, but they continue on, acting as if they didn't notice.

All I can think about is how it feels a repeat of my wedding day. Of how I was prepped for that.

When they're done, I'm given a white silk slip to put on and then I'm escorted back through to the Palace, back along those same hallways I was dragged through, only this time, I'm not taken up my usual staircase. No, this time I'm taken up one that is far fancier, far bigger, far more sweeping. As we make it to the landing, I'm led into a room that has sliding double doors. Gilded doors. Inside is a bed, a massive bed that dwarfs the one I've been sleeping in before.

I can see someone in it. For a second my fear multiplies as I think he's having me brought to another man.

But it isn't a stranger waiting for me. It's my husband.

He's sat up, tucked up under the covers, with his eyes fixed on my person.

"Come." He beckons.

I don't understand why I've been brought here. What the fuck is wrong with this man? What more could he possibly want from me? The maid gives me a nudge in my back, and I take one reluctant step after another.

As I reach the bed, he holds the covers up for me to get in.

He's naked. I don't know why that should surprise me, but it does.

I clamber in, hating still that I don't have all that much of a choice in returning to my abuser and he drops the duvet before wrapping his body around mine, curling into me in a way that feels almost loving.

"Sleep, wife." He says so contentedly. "Sleep now."

Only, I can't sleep.

I don't dare shut my eyes. He may be gentle in this moment but what if I shut my eyes and then he decides to turn back into a monster again?

I lay still, frozen, my mind whirling and, once more, I swear I have whiplash from the way his mood keeps flitting. His breath seems to slow. His body slumps more into me as he relaxes and only when I hear the soft sound of him snoring do I accept that he really is asleep. That this isn't a trick.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



Devin

ye're up at first light. It may have been a heavy night of drinking but none of it shows in our faces as we practice our drills and then take up our designated positions for the day.

The Chapter Lord is still in bed when we enter. The maids are quick to flit around, opening the curtains, ensuring there is coffee ready to pass to him because they don't want a beating for being too slow.

As we stand by the sliding doors, I see something that makes me pause. In the bed beside him is a person, a figure.

Up to now, every morning we've found him alone. His wife is kept in a separate room, kept more like a sex slave than an actual spouse.

So who the fuck is this? I glance at Lyndon, he gives me a slight nod to acknowledge that he too has spotted the stranger.

Gunther sits up, pulling the covers and props himself against the pillows as he takes his coffee. The movement pulls the duvet away from the other persons legs and as I study them it takes me a second to realise who it is.

I'd recognise her anywhere. I'd recognise that skin, those freckles, even the curl of those toes – I stop myself. Stop that thought. What the fuck is wrong with me?

Gunther looks across at Lyndon and I and his lips curl into a smile that is almost pleasant. "My wife will be sleeping in my bed from now on." He states. His eyes look fuzzy, his gaze is slightly off, like both his eyeballs are looking at slightly different things.

We both give a curt nod. We'll have to pass that information on, ensure the rest of his personal guards are aware of the change in routine.

He plants a soft hand on her head, on where it's half covered by the fabric. "She's going to be a good little bitch for me now. She's going to ride my cock and love every minute of it."

We don't respond to that. What does it matter what she does? She's his wife. He can fuck her, beat her, share her about like he did last night, none of it really is our concern beyond ensuring they both are kept safe. At least, he is safe. She is only as safe as he decides she deserves to be.

He drinks his coffee, puts it on the side, then gets out, taking his usual walk of unashamed nakedness to the bathroom where he takes a shower before letting the maids dry him off and dress him.

The girl doesn't move. I can't tell if she's asleep or simply too petrified but a part of me would love to walk over and pull that duvet back to see. Is she naked beneath it? Did he fuck her when we were done with her? Did he have her carried here, still covered in all our semen and then fucked her while she still stank of us?

My nostrils flare, my lips curl just enough.

I can't even hear her breathing, and I have excellent hearing.

What I can hear is our dear Chapter Lord muttering. He's doing it more and more. It's nonsensical. It isn't even English that he's speaking.

Every so often he breaks out into a shout and everyone else can hear what I do.

The religious call it 'speaking in tongues'. They call it speaking the language of the angels. But I know the words, even if the sentences make no sense. It's Aramaic. The language Jesus himself spoke when he was made into man.

It's a dead language or as good as. The only reason I know it is because some old fuck in Oblivion taught me. He was locked away, a political prisoner who still held enough sway to bribe my father to keep him in solitary.

Gunther continues on, rambling in half-sentences until he starts repeating the same words again and again.

“B’shem Alāhā. B’shem Alāhā. B’shem Alāhā.”

I tense, more at the tone than the words.

He falls silent, jerking his head and then looks at Lyndon and me. “Let’s go.” He says with his eyes looking suddenly so focused it’s unnerving.

We follow him out, taking position with me to the right and Lyndon to the left.

This part of the Palace is usually deserted. Beyond the maids and cleaners there’s no real reason for anyone to be here. Gunther likes to receive his guests either in the Senate Chamber or the Great Hall which he prefers when he wants to particularly impress.

Our feet move silently despite the heavy boots we have on. Both of us are as stealthy as a fox. But Gunther slaps each foot down, and his leather soles make enough noise to wake the dead.

As we turn the corner into an inner courtyard Gunther practically hits the ceiling. We both react, grabbing our guns but there’s nothing there.

“Look.” He hisses pointing ahead.

I narrow my eyes but before I can take a step forward Gunther is running, sprinting, as if he’s on the attack.

“Fuck.” Lyndon mutters as we sprint to catch up.

For a fat man in his late fifties the fucker sure can move when he wants to.

His robes flap behind him, his feet slap on the floor. He shouting more nonsense and it’s like the man is possessed.

At the last minute he turns to the left and I know it leads to a dead end. If there is someone there, there’s a good chance they might just attack him.

I storm after him, pulling my gun, ready to take whatever action is necessary.

Only, I find him stood, staring at the wall, completely still, frozen like a statue. He’s not even panting but I know the fucker must be out of breath. No way can he run like that and not be.

Lyndon comes up behind me and we both stand motionless, watching as Gunther shakes his head as if he's got something stuck to it and he wants to get it off.

"The fuck is he doing?" Lyndon murmurs.

I don't know. I don't have a clue.

Gunther lifts his arm, slapping himself hard across the face and then he turns looking at us both. There's a livid mark across his cheek. You can actually make out all the individual fingers imprinted on his skin.

"Well?" He says looking between us. "Let's get on with it. I don't have all day to be messing around." He struts to us, pushes between us and walks on as if he wasn't the one leading us on a merry little dance this entire time.

Lyndon frowns looking at me like I might have some clue as to what's going on. When he goes to follow, I hold back, trying to silence the voices in my head. Needing a moment of calm. Of silence.

And as I step after them, I hear it. A click. A noise.

I turn, staring back at that same supposedly blank wall. Only, it doesn't look so solid now. It looks like one tiny bit of it has moved. There's a centimetre gap right at the bottom, as if the thing didn't align properly, as if the entire wall was fake.

I step up, tapping it with my knuckle and hear the tell-tale sign that it's hollow behind. Lyndon calls after me, reminding me of what my duty is. I look back, wanting to investigate more but Gunther is now ranting, I know there isn't time.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE



Pailtyn

TIt's been a week. A week since that awful night. He's kept me in his bed ever since. I don't know whether to be relieved about it or appalled.

Kora has been slipping the medicine into his food, ensuring he gets enough to be satisfied and right now, he's clearly enjoying his newfound virility, not that I am.

But I'll take his fucking.

I'll take his grunting too.

I'll take all of it if it means it's contained to this room, these four walls. Just me and him.

As he leaves for another day of work, he informs me that he's having a party tonight. A banquet. I don't know what exactly that entails but I've heard rumours about them. We all have. They say the revelry is enough to

rival the kinds of parties Nero held. To say I'm nervous is an understatement.

I stay in bed long after he's gone. I hide under the covers, hating the way the guards are always there, always watching, while he gets dressed. Thankfully they stay outside the room once Gunther is gone. I guess he doesn't want anyone but the maids to see me naked, unless he's choosing to degrade me, that is.

Thank God for small mercies I guess because if I had to dress in front of them, especially the tall one, the monster one, - no, I shake my head, trying to bury my fear.

I need to be smart.

I need to be savvy.

What I'm doing now is working. I know it won't last, that the man is like a volcano and any second he could erupt, but if I can limit the fallout, if I can manage it, then at least it will spare me some pain, if not all of it.

When the maids come to get me, I clamber out of the bed but gasp as I see the blood.

Oh shit. Oh shit. Oh shit.

I hadn't thought of that. Of the fact I was due on. Will Gunther be mad? Will he be angry that I'm not pregnant? I'm so stupid because I should have seen this coming. I should have realised. It's been long enough since our wedding day, and the priest did say I was ovulating.

My hands wrap around my stomach as I feel that pang of cramping. I'm lucky that my periods aren't that bad. Maybe it's because I'm young but they're usually light, usually done within a few days.

"Paitlyn?" Kora says as she spots it.

My face drops more. "I, we, we have to hide this." I gasp.

She frowns, glancing at Ada, the other maid.

"Please. He'll be angry, furious. I know he will." I stammer. "We have to hide it."

"You can't hide the fact you're bleeding." Ada states.

She's right. On some level she is right. But what if I can get Gunther drunk enough, what if I can pleasure him with my mouth? What if...I have to try. I have to. I don't want to be beaten for this.

"Get rid of the sheets." I order. "Burn them if you have to. And I need tampons."

They both nod and I watch as they frantically pull off the bedspread and the sheets.

“Get in the shower.” Kora instructs. “I’m assuming you can dress yourself?”

“Don’t worry about me.” I say before rushing to the bathroom.

If this works, if I can do this, it’ll be a miracle. I say a silent prayer as I turn the water on.

Come on God, be on my side for a change.

When I get out, the soiled sheets are nowhere to be seen. The bed has been remade and Ada mutters about telling the cleaning crew that Gunther soiled them, so they don’t ask questions.

I shrug back, not giving a shit. It wouldn’t be a stretch to for him to actually defecate all over the bed considering he pissed on me only a few weeks ago.

“Here,” Kora says, passing me a box of tampons. As I take them, she grabs my hand, “These are technically forbidden.” She states. “Make sure they’re well-hidden because if he finds them...”

I nod, hearing the warning. “I’ll hide them as best I can.” I reassure her.

She gives me a tight smile back, one that does not fill me with much confidence, and I make a mental note not to reveal where the hell I got them from if they are found.

I don’t want her, or Kora beaten simply for helping me.



MY STOMACH IS IN KNOTS AND IT HAS NOTHING TO DO WITH MY PERIOD.

I’m dressed in a silky dress. An almost sheer dress. A *white* dress.

I’m petrified that any minute I’m going to leak out, but I have no way of preventing it. I couldn’t even sneak another tampon for later and it feels like there’s a ticking clock above my head, an alarm ready to go off at any minute.

I’m stood beside Gunther as he sits in what can only be described as the most ridiculously tacky looking throne you could imagine. It’s gold. Real gold. I don’t want to think how many millions of pounds the thing costs. It’s got fancy embellishment around the back and arms to make it look like it’s

Greek or Roman or from some equally ancient empire. I doubt it's real, though it could be. It just looks too polished, to damned gauche to be the genuine article.

Twenty of Gunther's closest friends and allies lounge about while music plays one jolly tune after another. I don't know any of them. Not one. My mother was not invited and when I think of my wedding night, I'm pleased that she isn't here.

All of them are wearing tunics. All of them look like this is some sort of fancy dress party.

In front of us is a long glass table. It's covered in fruit, and meat, and lobster and every imaginable delicacy. My mouth waters as I look at it all and then I remind myself of what Gunther did, what I saw him do before the guests arrived, before anyone but me and the guards were here to witness it.

The table is low, low enough that people can stretch out on the couches and gorge to their hearts content. Not that they do, there are servants here, all dressed up in tiny little tunics and they're the ones feeding them, they're the ones raising their goblets, allowing them to drink and feast.

It feels like an orgy, an orgy for the sense, and a voice in my head is already whispering that soon enough Gunther will turn it into one of the flesh too.

As if on cue, the solid gold doors open. A man comes walking in. His face is hard despite his relatively young age. As he gets closer, I can see the savagery in his eyes. He looks like the sort of man you would not want to meet on a cold night, all alone.

I shudder, dropping my gaze as it feels like literal ice slips through my veins.

"Magnus." My husband says, holding his arms almost as a mockery.

I bite my lip, bite back the gasp. That is Magnus Blake? Oh, I know of him, I know of his family. His father too and the horrific death his mother endured at her husbands' hands. My eyes run over him before I can stop myself and I realise I've seen that look before, I've seen those features before.

No. Surely not.

I scan the room, staring at the guards and as they land on him, on that giant of a man, it feels like an entire bucket worth of ice falls on me. He

looks back. That fucking monster stares right back at me and I swear his lip curls just a tiny bit.

It's him. Isn't it? He's his brother. His younger brother. He's a Blake. A fucking Blake.

I let out a whimper and Gunther reaches out, grabbing my hand.

"Now, now." He murmurs. "You have nothing to fear from such a man as this." He says almost reassuringly. As if my fear is that he's been summoned to take me away, to lock me away, to turn me into one of his slaves in that cursed prison his family have built and managed since before any of us were even born.

I blink back, staring again at the floor, trying to compose myself when I'm already so far beyond breaking point.

That monster is a Blake.

"You're scaring my wife, Magnus." Gunther says, like he gives a shit when I'm afraid or not. Like he hasn't terrorised me more than any other person in this room.

Magnus inclines his head the tiniest of bits, the least he can get away with. "Apologies, Chapter Lord, Chapter Lady."

I give a weak smile, but I swear my knees are shaking so much you can hear them rattling against one another.

Gunther waves his hand again, dismissively. "You are not here to make niceties." He states. "Did you bring what I requested?"

Something flickers across Magnus's face. Something I can't read.

"I have." He says, forcing his features into something that should be neutral, should be impassive, only, on him it looks even worse. He raises his hands, giving a quick clap and behind him, a rattling begins.

I can't be the only one who gasps as a dozen shackled men and women are marched into the space.

Gunther places his pudgy hands on either side of his throne, and he raises himself up so that he's half stood, half hunched over. His eyes snap to every single slave as they hang their heads and come to a stop before us.

"Twelv, twelve?" He says as if he's only just learnt to count.

"You requested twelve." Magnus replies.

"I did. I did. But I wanted more." Gunther states. "I expected you to surprise me with more. I expected at least two dozen."

"Two dozen?" Magnus repeats, with more than an edge to his voice. "Chapter Lord, we are all here to follow your instructions to the letter. I

cannot be expected to guess the whims of a man as esteemed as you are when I, myself, am so lowly. If you wanted more, then should have clearly stated it.”

Gunther stares at him, clearly trying to work out if there was an insult in all that or not.

“I am as always, your humble servant.” Magnus says, giving a low bow before he turns and heads back to the open doorway.

As the brothers pass, I note the exchange, the glance, the silent unspoken words between them but whatever it is they’re communicating, I don’t get a chance to work it out.

“Slaves.” Gunther says, clapping his hands in glee, bringing my attention right back to him. “Now we can really indulge ourselves.”

I don’t know how it didn’t sink in before where these people came from. That they’re from Oblivion. I stare at them, knowing that at some point every single one of them was a sanctified member of the Brethren. They were righteous. Until they did something that got them banished.

Some servants moves to unchain them all from one another and then they’re separated out, made to kneel, made to take various positions around the room.

I can’t help but feel sorry for them despite the fact that I know they must have committed some awful crime to be where they are. They all look toned, muscular, but not overly so. All the women have firm bodies except for a couple who have huge breasts and rounder stomachs and wide, curvaceous hips. When I look at them, I wonder if that’s what people really mean when they describe women as voluptuous and hourglass. Not my cosmetically altered appearance.

I glance down at myself, comparing my body with theirs. I’m not skinny. The fact I have less ribs makes it appear so but my hips are wide enough and my breasts are big enough to prove that if I could eat what I wanted and leave my body be, I’d probably look more like them than I do.

Most of the women are wearing revealing enough outfits. But the men are completely naked. One of the men has something around him that I don’t even want to look at, so I ensure my eyes never reach him.

Gunther barks for the music to change and, as something new starts to play, he gets up and pads over to where one of the curvier slaves is being made to stay on all fours like she’s some sort of table.

I stay where I am, hoping to fade into the background.

He squats down, grabbing hold of one of her breasts that's dangling free of the silly string dress they put her in. As he fondles her, she doesn't react. She stays perfectly still. Two of his friends get up, grinning from ear to ear as they too squat beside her and start feeling parts of her.

"Great tits." Gunther says. "Fine fucking tits."

The woman keeps her face still. Keeps her expression locked down and I wonder if that will make him move on or make him want to do more to get a reaction.

He gives her breast a squeeze, a hard nasty one and he digs his nails right into her flesh.

She whimpers just enough to show he hurt her and he laughs before giving her a hard slap on her arse.

"There you go, bitch." He says.

His friend looks at him for the permission, then slides his tunic aside and pushes himself into her. She shuts her eyes, wincing as he starts fucking her and Gunther gives her another slap on her arse as if in encouragement.

My heart seems to skip a beat. My adrenaline feels like it's spiking.

This is happening, isn't it. This night is turning into exactly what I imagined it would be. I look around, hearing the sound of more moans and I realise more of his friends are enjoying themselves now, are enjoying the slaves.

Most of them are simply playing, fondling. A few are being fucked. It all feels tame enough but that won't sate my husband's desires. I know any minute he's going to sink into more barbarism. He's going to need to.

"Wife." Gunther bellows.

I jolt, snapping my head in his direction.

He's still there, still with that same woman. His other mate is fucking her now. I guess the first had his fun and finished.

"Get over here." Gunther orders.

I don't want to do it. I want to run. I want to hide but I bury those thoughts and grab Gunther's goblet that he left on the side.

"You look thirsty, husband." I say, handing it to him.

He looks up at me in confusion before taking it and gulping down enough that it trickles either side of his mouth. He then shoves it back at me before grabbing my dress right around my neckline and pulling me to my knees.

I don't know how I don't spill the drink. Somehow, I manage to keep the contents inside.

"Her tits are better." Gunther states.

"Nah, this woman has great fucking breasts." His buddy laughs and I realise then how drunk he is.

Gunther shakes his head. "Show them." He orders to me.

I balk, staring at him. He cannot be serious.

He grabs my dress, yanking the fabric enough that it rips and then he pulls it wide open, revealing my chest to everyone in the room.

"See." He says, slapping my right breast to make it jolt. "Great breasts. Better breasts."

His mate grins, before pulling the slave back. "Can your bitch do this?" He asks, squeezing the nipple and I cry out in shock as the poor woman squirts literal milk at us.

She's lactating? That poor woman has a baby?

Gunther groans, shaking his head, sticking his tongue out as the man squirts more and more into his mouth.

I turn my face away, feeling like I'm going to puke.

"What you looking at?" My husband snarls into my ear. "Tell me what has gotten your attention so much you dare to look at anything beyond your husband?"

I blanche, quickly turning back to him. "I'm sorry, I..."

He grabs my face, grabs my cheeks pulling me forward. "Suck."

He pushes my face against the woman, against her poor bruised breast.

"Suck. Suck from the source."

I don't want to. I can't imagine anything more fucking disgusting, but his friend grabs her, moves her, shoves her nipples into my face and squeezes again.

It's warm. Slightly sweet. I hate that I know that. Hate that that is now something I'll never forget. It trickles over my lips, down my chin, down further onto my own exposed breasts and Gunther sees it, he grins more and then he starts lapping away, licking it off me now.

He drags his lips up, grabs my mouth and shoves his tongue inside. I almost choke as he does it.

A noise behind us makes him stop. A cry makes everyone turn.

One of the slave men is curled up, is huddled up. A man stands over him, kicking, yelling, clearly losing his temper. We can all see his cock out,

see it bouncing, half erect and he lashes out at the slave.

It's the priest. The same priest who lashed me, who 'purified me' after my husband gave me to the guards.

I screw my face up, feeling a wave of hate before I collect myself, before I somehow manage to return my face to something akin to neutral.

"What is this?" Gunther asks, sounding more bored than concerned.

"Stupid fuck bit me." The priest replies. "He should learn to keep his teeth in and his tongue out."

"You want his teeth?" Gunther asks.

The priest opens his mouth to reply but Gunther has already raised his hand, summoning a guard.

To my horror, I realise it's him, Magnus' brother. He strolls over, towering over us all. How is it possible for a man to grow so big? How is that natural?

"My Lord?" The guard says, and his voice is so deep, so devoid of emotion I swear I whimper.

"You grew up in Oblivion didn't you, tell me, Blake, what punishment is there for a slave that bites?"

The guard doesn't react, those harsh, demon like features just stare down at the chained man. "That would depend upon his status..." He begins.

Gunther waves his hand dismissively like he doesn't really care what anyone has to say.

"His teeth." He spits. "I want his teeth. I want every single one. I'll make a necklace of them. A pretty ivory necklace for my pretty little wife."

Sweet lord. I couldn't imagine anything worse than to be forced to wear such a thing.

No, I can. Having *my* teeth pulled, having them ripped from my mouth... I stumble back in horror, but Gunther grabs me, pinning my body against his as the guard begins to work away.

"Watch, wife." He says. "Watch closely."

I can't help but feel like those words are a threat. That he's planning to do this to me too if I ever bite him. Hell, he doesn't even need to excuse, he'd probably do it just because he can.

The man screams, he bucks and her jerks, but the guard holds him in an iron-like grip, with just his left hand. And in his right, he's twisting a

dagger, cutting out every single molar, every canine, every tooth, letting them drop to the floor in a bloodied mess.

It doesn't take long before all thirty-two are laying on the marble, leaving the man to practically choke on his own blood. His gums are a mangled mess. I can see the hollow gaps where his teeth were only moments ago. He gasps, spitting more and more blood as he rolls around in agony.

Gunther pushes me aside, drops to his knees and picks one tooth up and then another, studying them. "Such roots." He whispers. "Such long, long roots, like a tree."

I can't tell if the room is enraptured by him or horrified. Everyone is staring, everyone is captivated.

He bites into one, frowning as if he expected his teeth to be strong enough to break it. Then he tosses the molar like it's a piece of trash.

"Why is the music not playing?" He asks, looking around. "Why has it stopped?"

God, he really thought we'd all still be partying after witnessing such a spectacle?

The band springs into action, and the sound of something jovial, something so contrary to the scene before us, fills the air.

He looks from one person to another. We're all just stood here, staring. Unsure what will amuse him and what will piss him off further.

"Dance." He orders, like it's obvious and he claps his hands jovially. "Dance."

A few move instantly, swaying their bodies, obeying him, placating him. He folds his arms, grinning as they do, before he joins in, jumping, leaping like a man possessed.

I gulp, stepping back, stepping away, wondering if I could disappear now and if anyone would truly notice. They all seem so fixated on my dear husband. Right now, he's like the belle of the ball.

He grabs a slave, flinging the man around, before a few of the guests follow after.

I take a small backwards step, one that feels testing.

I could do it. I could just slip out. If he's drunk enough, if he's focused on other amusements, then surely, he'll forget me?

I'm not nearly far enough away to rouse any suspicion but as my husband comes to a stop, as he stares at me, I feel like everyone here can

tell what I was thinking, what I was planning.

“Wife?” He says, in such a tone.

I gulp, freezing.

“Are you not entertained?” He asks.

“I am.” I say quickly. “I was watching you, enjoying your happiness.”

He tilts his head like he knows how much of a lie that statement is.

“I brought all these slaves here, all these guests for you.” He states.

Yeah, who’s the one lying now, huh? We all know none of this is for me. That it’s about his ego, his pleasure, his need to degrade and belittle and prove what power he has over us all.

He narrows his eyes, strutting over to where one of the slaves is stood. It’s the one with that gold monstrosity around his hooha.

I ready myself for another round of abuse, another instance of violence, another moment that will no doubt be forever etched into my retinas and will haunt me when I shut my eyes and try to sleep.

Gunther runs his hand down the man’s chest, touching him in a way that is far more possessive than sensual. When he reaches his gold encrusted penis, he grabs hold of it hard enough that the man winces.

“Such a pretty jewelled cock, wouldn’t you say, wife?” He asks.

I blink back, my mind telling me that this is a trap. It has to be.

“Not as good as yours.” I say.

He smiles, rubbing himself with his spare hand. “My wife loves my cock.” He announces loudly. “She can’t get enough of it.” He states.

The whole room seems to react to that, as if it’s the funniest thing in the world.

Gunther grins, he grins and he grins, and then yanks on the slave’s cock again. “Suck his. Go on, have a taste. How do you know mine is as good as you say if you’ve nothing to compare it to?”

I want to snap back that he forced enough men’s cocks into my mouth the other week, but I don’t. I just shake my head slightly, knowing exactly where this is headed but doing everything I can think of to avoid it anyway.

“I only want yours.” I reply. “I only need yours.”

He narrows his eyes while one of the other wives says how sweet I am.

“She’s not sweet.” Gunther suddenly yells, pushing the slave so that he stumbles back. “She’s a fucking whore.”

The hate in his voice, the anger, it tells me I’m fucked. It tells me that this night is going to get so much worse.

“Get over there and suck his cock.” He orders.

I drop my head, hating the way everyone is watching me now as I make my way to where this slave is stood, with his gold-encrusted dick.

“On your knees, wife.” Gunther all but spits.

I sink down, wondering if it was really worth fighting. Maybe I should have just done this to begin with because I doubt this slave’s dick will be worse than my husband’s.

I can’t look him in the face as I take hold of it. Shame heats my cheeks. The gold is cool, smooth. It’s wrapped around, locked in place and I can’t for the life of me fathom what its purpose is for.

I run my tongue along it, still so reluctant to follow through.

From behind me, I hear footsteps. A hand grabs my hair, twists it, and I know it’s my husband.

“Take it. Take it all.” He says, shoving my mouth down, shoving his dick as far into my throat as it can go.

The metal makes it so much worse. It makes it so much bigger. There’s no flex, no give. I choke but Gunther doesn’t give a shit as he pulls me off then pushes me back down again.

I don’t understand what the point is. What he’s trying to achieve? Is this simply to humiliate me? Is this simply to prove that he has all the power? It’s not like I’ve questioned that. It’s not like I’ve challenged him.

He pulls me off, wrenches my head around and then spits into my mouth.

I gag. I don’t mean to but it’s so disgusting, I can’t help myself.

He kicks my legs out, letting me slam onto the marbled floor on my face. As I try to get up, he slams a foot into my back to hold me in place.

“What the fuck is that?” He snarls.

“She’s bleeding.” Someone in the crowd says, though I don’t know who.

Oh shit. Oh shit. Oh shit.

I know what it is. I know what’s happened. I grab the fabric, staring at the tiny bit of stain and it feels like my entire world collapses.

Gunther drags me back up. I don’t know how the man has the strength to do it, but he hauls me to my feet and squeezes my neck as he gets right into my face.

“You’re bleeding?” He says. “You’re fucking bleeding?”

“I got my period.” I whisper, feeling like it’s pointless to deny it now.

“When were you going to tell me? When were you going to admit it?”
He snarls.

I bite my tongue, afraid to answer and he throws me back to the floor.

“You were meant to be pregnant.” He hollers. “You were meant to prove a point. To prove that my actions are holy, that I am holy. That God loves me more than them.” He points to everyone else in the room as he unleashes a tirade of abuse. “You’ve ruined this. You’ve ruined everything.”

He slams a fist into my side, then lands a second. He wrenches my skirt up and stares at where I know I’m dirty.

“The fuck is this?” He spits, reaching down, pulling the string, pulling the tampon out before I can stop him. It leaves a tiny trail of blood that drips down, shaming me more.

“You used this? You fucked yourself with this?” The disgust in his voice makes me pause.

I screw my face up as I stare back at him. Fucked myself with what, a tampon?

“You were meant to be pure. To be untouched. Your mother told me you were a virgin and yet you’ve been fucking yourself with these?” His face is growing redder and redder.

What on earth is he talking about? What has my virginity got to do with how I manage a period?

He smacks me, smacks me so hard. Stars explode behind my eyes for a moment and it feels like something in me snaps.

It’s stupid to do it, so damned stupid but I’m not thinking straight anymore. I spring up and I’m running, I’m running so fast.

I have to get out of here. I have to get away from him.

I glance over my shoulder, expecting him to be right on my heels but he’s just stood there staring at me.

And then I slam into something hard. Something solid. Something so damned impossibly big.

No. No. Noooo.

It’s him. The Blake guard. He grabs my arms, grabs me and he’s walking me backwards, forcing me into the room.

“Please.” I beg. “Please let me go.”

He doesn’t even react. It’s like he’s made of stone. Like he doesn’t feel any emotions. Doesn’t know what things like empathy and mercy even are.

I’m dumped back. Dropped at my husband’s feet.

He's still holding that tampon up as if it's a sign of the devil.

"You lied to me." He spits. "You fucking lied."

He rams the tampon into my mouth. It's disgusting. I can taste it, I can feel it, my blood, the weird sodden cotton pad as it clings to my tongue. I don't get time to spit it out before he starts landing blows. Kicking. Punching, biting me too.

I curl up. I try to protect my face, but the blows keep coming. They just keep coming until everything, all the pain, all the fury, all the shame too disappears into darkness. Into nothing.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR



Devin

I carry her out.

The girl's face is so swollen, her pretty features are barely recognisable. There's a trail of blood from her mouth that I know has nothing to do with the damned thing he rammed into it.

She's lighter than I imagined. She feels different too. Not weaker, not stronger... just different.

Gunther is still raging, he's still having his tantrum and unfortunately for the slaves, there's still eleven of the fuckers still in there for him to sate his anger out on. I doubt my brother will be getting any of them returned when this party is over.

The girl whimpers in my arms. It's a pathetic noise.

I glance down at her and I wonder if she's done it on purpose, if she thinks it'll make me feel guilt or some such nonsense for dragging her back

in there. As if that wasn't my job. As if I would risk my life and my family's reputation for her.

The priest is behind us. I'm too big a man for him fit beside me and anyway, I know where I'm going despite his attempts to tell me otherwise.

We walk out across a courtyard, out past the pretty formal gardens and the fancy smelling roses that have all started to turn brown.

A guard is stood in front of a wooden gate and as I approach, he unlocks it without a word.

I walk through, taking note of the sentries all along the fortifications. They call this place a Palace, but this part is far older, and it resembles more of a medieval military compound than a place of luxury.

Ahead, I can see the shack. It's small. Weatherbeaten.

Another guard opens it for me, and I carry the girl in before placing her down for a moment. There's a set of chains attached to the trestle in the roof. It takes me a moment to pull the thing loose and then I'm picking her up, placing her wrists in the shackles. Locking them in place.

I know the priest is watching. I know Gunther sent him here to ensure I see her suitably punished but for a second I don't give a fuck about him. About the Chapter Lord either. About any of it.

She's hanging there, her knees just touching the dirty floor, her arms above her head and her breasts are poking through the great tear in her dress. She's bloodied. Bruised. Between her thighs I can see the smear of her period – the so-called reason for this punishment.

She looks beautiful.

She looks magnificent. Her chest is rising and falling and with the chill in the air, her nipples look so delightfully hard.

I bite my lip, resisting the urge to bite them, to fall on my knees and make it hurt more for her.

God, she's a whore, isn't she? She's a fucking bitch to make me feel these things.

I shake my head, clenching my fists, reminding myself that all women are the same. They all have mouths and cunts and when you're the one fucking them it doesn't matter what they look like, how they feel.

But that's not true. Not really. I know this bitch's cunt would feel good. I know this bitch here would feel incredible as I made her weep and beg and cry so prettily for me to hurt her more.

"Blake."

Someone calls my name, bringing my out of my traitorous thoughts.

As they do it, the girl wakes up, she lifts her head, and she looks at me. Her left eye is so swollen she can't see out of it. Her lip is bleeding again and there's such a bruise across her cheek from where a boot made contact.

She was so beautiful. So, so beautiful.

And then her husband ruined it.

I turn, walking out, leaving her whimpering as those metal chains rattle.

"She stays here." The priest orders. "While she is dirty, while she bleeds, she will remain here."

I don't look back. I don't react to it. My job is done. My shift is over.

I'm out of here. I'm fucking done.

I need to get that bitch out of my head. I need to get her pleas and her eyes, and the sound of her crying, I need it gone. I need her gone.

Maybe I'm a monster. Maybe I'm as fucked in the head as my brothers think but perhaps it would be a good thing if she just died. If she shut her eyes and never opened them again.

It would certainly make my life easier.

Would make everything better.

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CHAPTER

TWENTY-FIVE



Devin

I shouldn't have come here. I should have just stayed in my dorm, but it felt like the walls were caving in and I needed to do something. Had to do something. Had to shut up the voices. Had to shut up the screams. Had to silence that need in me.

And in truth, this is the only way I know how. The only way that has ever worked.

I stand in the back, my eyes scanning the room as the crowd seems to get rowdier and rowdier. We're all on benches, staring down into a pit below that's illuminated so we can see every single bit of it.

A young woman is forced into the ring, her eyes wide with terror. She fights, just as they always do, but her struggle is short-lived.

She's strung up, suspended on a giant wheel and potential buyers are allowed to come down and inspect her.

I watch as she whimpers and jerks while they sniff her hair, and they stare at various parts of her. They're not allowed to touch her cunt. That's the only part of her that's off limits. Afterall, no one wants damaged goods, and what would be the point in auctioning off virgins if you spoiled their value right at the last moment?

The bids come in swiftly, she's pretty enough for two men to get into a little fight over it, and when the gavel comes down, she's taken down, dragged away, and prepared for what's to come next.

Another follows after her, and then another. The result is the same. Pitiful screams, pitiful attempts to fight the inevitable. I've witnessed these auctions so many times I can play them out, scene by scene.

My attention drifts until the fourth girl is pushed into the circle.

Her blonde hair catches the light. There's a fragility that reminds me of a porcelain doll, easily shattered, yet captivating in her delicacy.

Without fully comprehending my actions, I find myself raising my hand, entering a bid. She's no one of consequence, and the price reflects that, yet I can't pull away. No one bothers to fight me. I can even see a few men muttering, wondering why I of all people would be interested in this whore, especially considering I haven't even inspected her before trying to make the purchase.

The gavel strikes, and she's mine. A guard drags her out of the ring, and I make my way down, meeting him by the backdoor. I don't need to hand him the money now, he knows exactly who I am, that we, the Blake's own this place, own his arse too.

I grasp her arm tightly, ignoring her gasp of pain as I pull her towards one of the private playrooms.

Poor little bitch doesn't have a clue what's in store for her now.

She's staring at me, pleading with her eyes. Does she think I'm her saviour? Does she fool herself into believing this is some rescue mission? Can the woman not see what I am, what my soul is?

The door closes behind us, and the lock clicks into place. She can't escape here, but me, I can walk out anytime I want, my fingerprint is the key.

I draw in a deep breath, steeling myself, calming that roaring in my chest and then I remember that I don't have to. This one is mine. Mine to use. Mine to break. I paid good money for her; I can do whatever I want.

And what I want right now, what I desperately need is pain.

I grab her arms, looping them together with a strip of leather. She cries out, begging, as if she's not been paying attention to where we are. Does she think Oblivion is some sort of daycare?

I hook the strap up to a link in the ceiling and I pull it hard enough, tight enough that her entire body is hauled right up into the air.

She screams out, kicking, and I give her arse a good slap.

She's pretty enough. Her breasts are smaller than they looked from where I was, her face is a little too pointed, but her hair, her hair is near perfect.

"Stupid little whore." I snarl, slapping her again.

She starts to sob, shaking her head, mimicking the woman I imagine to perfection. I stalk over to the wall, to where all the best instruments are waiting. I pull off a horse whip, and with a turn, I strike at her flesh.

She screams more then.

She sings so fucking beautifully.

I lash her, I whip her, I tear the skin off her back. She's screaming the entire time, kicking out, doing everything she can to get free.

Each sob, each bit of agony that pours from her, feeds the beast within me, a creature starved for the catharsis of punishment. I am both judge and executioner, doling out a sentence that satisfies my thirst for pain.

Eventually she falls silent, hanging so limply from her wrists, and I toss the whip, hearing it clatter across the floor.

I grab her legs, pull her body back, and free my cock.

As I push into her, she comes to life once more. She snarls and she struggles, and her inner walls tear so deliciously as I force my way in.

Virgin fucking cunt. Virgin pussy.

That's what Gunther wanted, what he got. And right now, I'm enjoying that very same meal.

It doesn't matter that she's not a Founder, it doesn't matter that this bitch here is the lowest of the low, her cunt will take me just the same.

I groan, shutting my eyes, feeling as those nasty barbs catch on her inner flesh. I can see it, I can see *her* splayed before me. I can see the way her blue eyes are so wide with tears.

And I can see all my come as I covered her.

I pull the girl's body back at a greater angle, fucking her mercilessly, using her like the whore she now is. My dick slams into her cervix and it

hurts so good. Even now, her muscles are refusing to fully submit, refusing to give way.

One day soon, I'm going to do that to *her*.

I know it.

I can feel it.

Gunther will have another of his ‘episodes’ and he’ll change his mind about who can and can’t stick their cocks into his precious little wife.

And I’ll be first in line. First up. I’ll hold her down, I’ll break her if that’s what it takes, but that bitch will take me, she’ll take all of me, and she’ll be crying for every second of it.

“Whore,” I spit. “Fucking whore.”

I don’t know what this is, this obsession that seems to have worked its way into my head. What do I care what her cunt does and doesn’t do? What do I care about any of it?

She’s nothing to me. I have my orders, I have my family, they’re all that matter, not some pathetic little bitch who can’t even beg properly.

My hands wrap tighter around the girl’s throat, I don’t even know when I put them there, but as I thrust into her, I’m squeezing harder and harder.

Her jerks become more frantic. Her screams turn to mush. I can feel the rapid beat of her heart pumping blood through, trying to stop this, trying to ensure her survival.

I need her dead. I need her gone. That fucking woman, that fucking bitch.

I think I’m chanting it, shouting it, bellowing it, as I force the oxygen, force the life from this woman’s lungs.

I need that girl dead. I need Paitlyn gone.

I come with a roar, I come pushing my cock once more as deeply as I can bury it inside her.

She’s still. Silent.

I don’t know how long she’s been dead, how long I’ve been fucking a corpse, but I don’t care. She was a means to an ends. A type of medicine, necessary to keep the wolves from pounding at my door, from tearing at my insides.

I wince, shaking that thought away. *I am not like her. I am nothing like her.*

My mother was sick. My mother had reasons.

But she also had voices, the same voices, the same clawing ghosts that reside inside me.

I stare at my hands, wondering what she would say if she could see me now. What she would do. She always hated this place, she hated this legacy, our legacy. The Blake's. This was our inheritance, our prize, our chattel and our purpose.

She hated it all, almost as much as she hated our father in the end.

I take a deep breath, and that stench of fear and decay fills my nostrils. My heart feels almost calm now, my head feels normal, *I feel normal*.

I don't bother to untie the girl; I leave her hanging there. Leave her like a tombstone.

The guards can find her later, they can deal with her. Her skin can be boiled, her skull can be extracted, and she'll go up on display, be another corner piece along with the thousands of other skulls.

As I emerge from the room, I find Magnus leaning against the opposite wall, his arms are crossed over his chest, and I can tell he's not here for his own amusement.

He looks at me with that infuriating smirk, as if he can peer into the depths of my soul and pluck out my darkest secrets. Like he doesn't know every single one of them already.

"Brother," he greets me. "I trust the evening's entertainment was to your satisfaction?"

I glare at him, my hand still tingling from the whip's bite. "What do you want, Magnus?" I growl, eager to be rid of his presence.

He pushes off the wall, glancing in to where the body is still hanging. For a second, he frowns, as it hits him what went on inside those four walls. "You know you're not meant to kill them." He says.

I shrug. Like I give a fuck in this moment what I am and am not meant to do.

He narrows his eyes, grabbing the scruff of my shirt like he can intimidate me. "The price is for their virginity, not their life." He states like I don't know that fact.

I brush him off, brush him aside. Did he really come here to talk about money of all things? "So, charge me." I mutter.

He waves his hand, proving what we both know, that he doesn't actually give a fuck about the girl. "We need to talk. There are rumours, murmurings about Gunther..." he says, his tone turning serious, his voice low enough

that only I can hear him. Not that anyone is nearby, but with Oblivion, you can't trust the walls, you can't trust anything.

"I don't give a damn about Gunther or your petty politics." I interrupt, my anger simmering just below the surface once more.

He grabs me again, pulling me closer. "It's not petty when our very existence is tied up in it." He states.

He's right. On some level, the bastard is right.

But tonight is not the night. Tonight was meant to be about clearing my head, sating my anger. Not unravelling more.

"Fuck off." I mutter as I push past him.

He can think what he wants, it doesn't bother me. I need to get back anyway. It's a two-hour journey between here and the Palace. If I'm quick, I might be able to get a half-hours shut eye before my shift starts.

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CHAPTER

TWENTY-SIX



Pailtyn

S ix days.

Six days I'm locked in there.

I'm left hanging for the first three, then they undo the shackles, but they keep me there anyway. Locked up in nothing but a shed. And wearing nothing but the torn pitiful remnants of my dress.

I free bleed. I have no choice. I also piss and shit myself because I have no other way of dealing with it. By the time I'm let out, I'm as disgusting as they want me to feel.

I'm smeared in dried blood; I stink of sweat and shit and fear too. My hair is a mess of knots, and I have no idea how many hours it would take of it being yanked and combed through to get it back to anything like what it was before.

I'm hosed down, just like before, then dumped back in my room. My old room.

I've realised that this space is meant to be a punishment too, only, I'm grateful for this. Does my husband really think that I'd miss being beside him? Miss listening to his snores, and his farts as he sleeps? Miss being woken up to him grunting and hurting me as he fucks me?

No, this solitude is a reprieve. This space is a sanctuary compared to that.

Kora brings me food. I can't even lift my head to look at any of it. I don't want to eat. Or drink. Or even breathe.

I want to die.

I want to lie here and waste away and maybe once I become a corpse, my husband will finally be happy with me.

A tear slips down my cheek at the thought and I'm too broken, too exhausted, too I don't even know what, to bother to wipe it away.

I just lay here, staring at my hand, staring at the blackened flesh where my husband stamped on my fingers. How he didn't break the bones I don't know. I guess I should feel grateful for that. Should thank God for that small, little mercy.

Footsteps reach my ears. I tense, wondering if this is my husband come to delve out a new punishment or does he simply want a hole to fuck today?

"Look at her." He growls. Not speaking to me, speaking to whoever is beside him. "I know you brought her up to be better than this. She's an insult to your name, to her father's name, to his bloodline."

"Let me deal with it." A woman says quietly.

He mutters back. Says something no doubt meant to shame me more, but I don't hear the words. I only hear the sound of his feet, the way he stomps out.

And I hear the silence afterwards. I hear the sound of someone else breathing, someone else stood so close to me.

"Paitlyn?"

I don't look up. I don't move.

My head recognises the sound of *her* voice but it can't be her. It can't be. Maybe I'm insane now, maybe I really have lost my marbles.

"Paitlyn, sweetheart?" My mother crouches down, lifting my face enough to look at her.

I stare. I blink in disbelief and then all that emotion, all the shame, all of it explodes inside me.

My eyes fill with tears. I'm sobbing, heaving as she pulls me into her arms and gives me a hug that I need so desperately.

"I can't do this." I wail. "Please, you have to help me, you have to get out of here."

She shakes her head gently, brushing my hair back from my face. "Come on, now. You're stronger than this. You know you are..."

"You don't understand..." I continue but she cuts across me.

"No, Paitlyn, you don't. He is your husband. You need to be good. You need to obey him you need to..."

"He lets other men touch me." I gasp. "He, he, he let another man fuck me. And the other day, when I wasn't being sexy enough or whatever the fuck he wanted, he took me down to the guard house and he..." I freeze as I see who is standing there. Who is on the threshold and way to fucking close.

How much as he heard? How much will he report back?

She turns her head, studying the guard for a second too.

"He touched me." I whisper as quietly as I can. "My husband watched while they all used me."

She draws in a slow breath but beyond that she doesn't react. There's no shock to her face, no surprise. And it hits me then that she knew. She fucking knew.

I jerk back, pushing her away as my anger flares more, as all that pain twists inside me and itmingles with such a sense of betrayal.

"You, you sold me to him. You let me marry him when you knew what he was, when you knew he was a monster, a degenerate."

Her hand slaps my face. I jolt, feeling that old bruise my husband gave me throbbing once more.

"You're being hysterical, Paitlyn." She says. "You need to calm down."

"Calm down?" I hiss. Calm down? She fucking knew. She knew what he was and yet she led me like a pig to slaughter and for what? "He has parties." I state. "Sex parties. He has Magnus Blake bring him slaves and they all fuck them and beat them and kill them too."

Again, no shock. No reaction.

"He made me suck one of them off." I state. "He had some gold thing on his cock and he made me take it into my mouth and..."

“Enough.” My mother says folding her arms.

“Why? Are the details too sordid for you? You’d prefer not to know all the twisted things I’m forced to do because you thought he could be managed?”

“He can be managed.” My mother says.

I scoff, scrambling from the bed. She doesn’t have a clue, does she? She doesn’t realise what is really happening here.

“The man is mad.” I half-scream. “He’s mad or he’s possessed by the devil.”

“Paitlyn.” My mother says in such a shocked voice. She grabs my arm, yanking me over to sit on the bed and then she walks to the door, as if she wants to shut the guard out. Only, as she goes to do it, he blocks her.

She bristles, telling him he has no right, and he stares her down, before giving her a firm push back with just one well-placed finger.

“We have our orders.” He states. “Just as she apparently has hers.”

My mother screws her face up and, in a flash, she slaps him so hard across the face. I gasp in shock, wondering if that’s it, that’s the catalyst. He’s always felt like a bomb about to go off. I don’t doubt he’d happily put her in her place if he thinks he can get away with it.

Only, he just grins. He takes a step, then another. My mother moves backwards, further into the room as he crowds her with his massive body.

He’s taunting her, I realise, proving what power he has, just by his physical presence.

“Do that again, woman.” He says. “I like it when you bitches fight back.”

She puffs her chest, opening her mouth to retort only I get there first.

“He’s a Blake.” I tell her. “He’s Magnus’s brother.”

Her face reacts, I can see the contempt on it as she looks at him. “A Blake?” She repeats. “You think you have the right to speak to me like that? Do you even know who I am, boy?”

He doesn’t look like a boy. He doesn’t even look like a man. He looks more monstrous than ever as he comes further into this space, my space.

“You’re not so far above me you can’t be torn down from your ivory tower.” He sneers. “And the day that happens, I’ll be sure to see you in Oblivion. Bet your cunt bleeds just the same as any slave there does.”

It’s the most I’ve heard him speak. The most I’ve heard any guard speak. They don’t talk to me. They practically ignore me.

I stare up at him and he turns his gaze from her to me. “Malktā.” He says so quietly, as if I’m meant to know what the hell that means.

My mother’s eyes widen, she grabs my arm, pulling me further from him. “Why the fuck did he just call you that?” She asks.

I blanche, shaking my head. “I don’t know what it means, is it an insult?”

She purses her lips as if she knows far more than she wants to divulge. “It doesn’t matter.” She says dismissively. “*He* doesn’t matter.”

I watch him as he stalks back out, as he takes his position once more by the door. What the fuck is his problem? What the fuck does he want?

“Paitlyn.” My mother says in a hushed voice. “This is part of the plan. You may not realise it, you may not like it, but it will all work out. It will all make sense. You just have to play along until everything is in place.”

“What do you mean ‘everything is in place?’” I whisper back. It sounds like she’s planning a coup.

“Do you trust me?” She asks.

I don’t know if I do. Not anymore. Not after this.

She cups my cheek, seeing the reticence in my face. “Paitlyn, you’re my child. I will do everything I can to protect you. Everything I can to ensure you have the future you deserve, the life you deserve.”

Like she has so far. Like she’s done anything close to that.

“I want out.” I repeat. “I want to get away from him, from them...” She places a finger over my lips, her eyes darting to that monster guarding my door, that monster that feels right now is the only thing preventing me from getting my freedom.

“Trust me, Paitlyn. Trust me.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN



Devin

“T rust me, Paitlyn, trust me.”

I hear the words and it's all I can do not to sneer. Does the girl really believe that woman gives a fuck about her? Sure, she may have birthed her but what sort of mother hands their child over to a man like Gunther?

I roll my eyes, adjusting my feet, making myself more comfortable as I block the doorway.

“...you have to seduce him. You have to make him want you.”

“But he hurts me.”

I try not to listen. I try to zone out, even though the Chapter Lord gave me specific instructions to ensure the two of them weren't conspiring.

I don't know what the mother means by ‘a plan’, but I sure as hell will not be reporting that back. Not because I'm siding with them, not because I

want to help them, but the man is already paranoid and comments like that will only make him worse.

He's had the whole Palace searched three times this week alone. I don't know what he thinks there could be, but it's clear he thinks there is something. I know he's paranoid. I know the man is verging on the edge of insanity and if he succumbs to it, then God only knows what that means for the rest of us.

The mother is rattling on, giving suggestions, ways her daughter can appease Gunther and spare herself a beating. It's bullshit. All of it is. Either the mother knows it, or she doesn't care enough about her child's life to admit it.

I glance at her again. At the girl.

I was a fool to call her malktā. A fool to speak the word out loud. It's a measure of how little control I have, how much she's already wormed her way into my head.

Malktā. Queen.

She is a queen. A queen of curses. A queen of damnation. A queen of whores.

But I want her all the same. I'm a fucking fool to feel it, a greater fool to acknowledge it. My hands shake, my entire body is itching to cross that room, to take a knife, to pin the little bitch down and have my way with her until she's a quivering, bleeding mess that she'll never recover from.

But I can't do that.

I can't fucking touch her.

I SHUT MY EYES, IMAGINING I'M DOING IT, THAT I'M HOLDING HER DOWN, slitting her throat, fixing the problem for all of us.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT



Pailtyn

When night comes, my husband comes with it.
I can barely bring myself to turn and face him, but I know the man will happily beat me for my insolence if I don't.
He looks like shit. He looks like his conscience might actually be catching up with him. His face is puffy, wrinkled, like he's been faceplanting the pillow for hours and his eyes are slightly bloodshot as if he hasn't been sleeping properly.

He tilts his head, twitching it slightly at an angle like it's a tic he's developed, but I don't recall him behaving like that before.

"Wife." He says, in a voice that is neutral, emotionless.

I don't reply. I just drop my gaze, playing that submissive creature, he wants me to be.

He crosses the room, taking my hands as if I'm the most delicate thing in the world, as if I'm made of glass and he's worried he'll break me.

He raises them up, kisses them softly but I'm trembling all the same. Trembling almost violently.

I can feel his eyes on me. Not my husband. But him. The guard.

He doesn't usually watch me. He doesn't usually look at me. None of them do. It's like they're afraid to look in case my husband gouges their eyes out.

But they weren't afraid that night, were they? My stomach twists as I remember it, remember him, on top of me, over me, how he jerked off, how he masturbated, how he clearly enjoyed my fear and my pain and all of it.

"Paitlyn." My husband says, bringing my attention back to him.

"What do you want?" I ask. Maybe it's stupid, maybe I should keep my mouth shut but playing nice hasn't spared me anything so far?

"I was cruel. Unnecessarily so. I wish to apologise. I wish to show you how much you mean to me."

I swear my jaw drops. This is a joke. It has to be. I mean nothing to him. I am nothing to him. I'm not stupid enough to believe otherwise.

He hooks his hand under the crook of my arm, leading me out. The maids gave me a nighty to wear so at least I'm not naked as he walks me down the hallway, down through this ridiculous building and to where his bed is.

I don't want to go. I don't want to be there. I don't want to smell his smell or know that he is beside me, that he is close to me.

I whimper as we cross the threshold. My feet stick to the floor, and I feel like a horse suddenly refusing to go into their stable.

"Paitlyn." My husband admonishes me. "I'm not going to hurt you."

"But you did." I blurt out. "You did hurt me. You beat me and you abused me, and you let them do it too." I throw a look over my shoulder, glaring at that same arsehole who even now is caging me in, ensuring I have no place to escape to.

Gunther shakes his head. "It's over. It's in the past."

"Not for me."

He snarls, throwing me to the floor, proving everything that I've been saying is right. He plants his hands on his hips scowling at me.

"Look what you made me do." He spits. "Get up, get in that bed and stop being difficult."

“No.”

I should do it. I should give in. I should just shut my mouth, but I can’t, not this time.

He smacks me. Not all that hard, certainly not as hard as he’s hit me before. I wonder if he thinks it’ll be enough, if he thinks that a small hit of pain now is enough to make me compliant.

When he sees I’m not moving, he goes for the backup plan.

“Devin.” He bellows.

That man, that fucking guard looks at me and I realise that’s his name. Devin Blake. Magnus’s little brother. Though he’s not so damned little, is he?

He comes striding in, grabbing me by the throat and lifting me up like I weigh absolutely nothing at all. He’s so strong. So horrifically strong. I kick out, I scream as he tightens his grip cutting off my airway before he dumps me onto the bed.

My head smashes into the solid wood of the frame. I cry out but it doesn’t stop me from springing back up.

“Hold her down.” Gunther orders.

“No.” I scream. My mother was bad enough. I won’t have this man, this monster touching me, witnessing this, being part of whatever this is.

Gunther tilts his head, his mouth turning into that awful grin I’m hating more than anything else.

“You’ll stop being a bitch?”

I nod. I nod so quickly.

“You’ll stop being an ungrateful little whore?”

“Yes.” The words are barely out of my mouth before Gunther is laughing. I can hear the cruelty in it. I can hear the amusement too.

“Apparently we’ve found your weakness.” He taunts. “Does the big bad guard scare you so much?”

My shoulders hunch at his words. I hate the fact that he knows it, that they both know it. I know I’ve been a fool to reveal that secret. A stupid, stupid fool.

“I’ll be sure to keep him around more.” My husband states as he starts unbuttoning his shirt. “Every time you cause me issues from now on, I’ll know what to do.”

I don’t know what that means. Will he give me to him to use? Will he let that monster hurt me? Or will he simply let him beat me? I gulp back the

bile that's rising so rapidly in my throat. Having Devin here, having him witness this, makes it so much worse.

He's watching me. His dark, devillike eyes are fixed on me.

I'm stupid enough to look back, to meet his gaze, and when I see the hint of a smirk, it's all I can do not to shatter entirely.

"Get over here." Gunther snaps. "Put those pretty little lips around my cock."

I jump at the tone, moving quickly to obey him.

He's hard, just as I knew he would be, because Kora is still drugging him, not that it's working all that well anymore. He taps my mouth expectantly as I kneel before him and I open up, glaring all the same.

He grins, pushing deeper into my mouth, groaning as he slides over my tongue.

"Touch yourself." He orders.

I balk. My eyes widening as I stare up at him.

That's forbidden. It's one of the first rules my mother taught me. That self-pleasure is not permitted. Sure, she didn't actually believe it, neither of us did. And she was kind enough to provide me with toys, clit ones only. No way was I going to lose my virginity that way, but she ensured I knew what it felt like to feel good. After all, how could a good wife fake pleasure if she hadn't experienced pleasure?

Gunther grabs my hair from behind, yanking my head back. With his other hand, he rips the nighty from my body, exposing me entirely.

"Touch yourself. I want to watch you play as you choke on me."

I shut my eyes, I force back the tears, sliding my hand down between my thighs. I'm not wet. I'm not aroused and most of all, I'm more than aware of the fact that *he* is still there, still in the room, still watching this.

"That's it." Gunther encourages. "Stick your fingers in, I want to hear how turned on you are."

I do as I'm told, feeling the way my muscles give way, as I slide my own fingers in. it's curious that even this hurts a little, even as I'm trying to do everything I can to ensure it doesn't.

His dick is so far down my throat, I have to concentrate on breathing solely through my nose but the stench is enough to make me almost gaga. I can't decide if this degradation is better or worse than him fucking me. At least this pain is manageable.

He thrusts away into me, and though he's grunting and groaning, it doesn't feel right.

He pulls out, shaking his cock and he frowns.

I don't want to look at him, I don't want to see his manky old dick.

He's staring at it like it's about to fall off.

And then his lips twist.

He tilts his head, and I swear I see it, the moment his eyes change, the moment he goes manic.

"Come here." He says, not to me, to the guard.

I stiffen, shaking my head as my tears threaten to erupt.

"Please." I gasp. I haven't even done anything wrong. I did what he wanted, I did what he asked.

He grins more at me, that awful twisted fucking grin he has that I hate so much.

"Take her, hold her for me..."

I cry out, trying to move, trying to stop this but that monster is so damned quick. Too quick. He must have the devil in his pocket to be the size he is and yet be so bloody agile.

He grabs my neck, grabs my body, holding me down.

Gunther mutters something but I don't catch what it is. He's shaking his dick like he's trying to wake it up. But he's hard. I can see it. I could damned well feel it too when he was halfway down my throat.

He starts gurgling, saying words that make no sense, before his eyes snap to us. To me and how I'm being held.

"Not like that." He snaps, pushing me, forcing me backwards, forcing my body to twist over so that my entire spine is stretched out. I'm on my knees. My legs are splayed but my back is now pulled up and over with my arms holding me down, pined by one of his hands. Devin keeps his other around my throat, and he has my head right in his groin.

"Better." My husband says, dragging his fingers all the way down from my cleavage to where my pussy is exposed and waiting for him. "Much better."

He grabs his cock again, lines himself up and pushes into me.

I can't keep the cries in. I can't keep those pitiful sounds to myself.

Can Devin hear it? Can he see?

I shudder as a wave of revulsion creeps right up my spine.

Why does it hurt so much more than when my fingers were inside? Why does it always hurt this much? Surely, I should be used to it by now, my insides should be used to it.

My body is jerking, my tits are bouncing back and forth, as Gunther fucks me and yet, that doesn't feel the most degrading part. That doesn't feel the most shameful.

I look up, staring at that beast and he's looking right back at me, holding my gaze, not even blinking.

I think he really is the devil. I think all of them are, all the Blake's.

Gunther grunts and fucks a little more and then he comes, panting before he slumps right over, and collapses face first into the duvet.

I don't move.

Devin doesn't move.

We're both here, with him holding me, pressing me into him.

I can hear my husband's breathing; I can hear the soft sounds that tell me he's asleep. Is his guard planning on holding me like this, keeping me in this position until he wakes? I can't stay like it, I can't, it's hurting my back too much, it's killing me.

And worse, so much worse, I can feel his semen, I can feel the remnants of my husband trickling out, working its way down my inner thigh. The very thought of it makes me want to puke, but if I puke in this position, I'll definitely choke.

"Let me go." I say, as forcefully as I can.

His lips curl the tiniest of bits. "You don't give the orders around here." He says quietly, quieter than I could ever have imagined he could speak.

"Let me go." I repeat slower, more forcefully.

Only, instead he just tightens his grip around my throat. My eyes widen, I don't want to react the way I do, but he's cutting off my airway, suffocating me.

"Gonna stop being a whiney bitch and behave?" He taunts.

I spit at him. Yes, it's stupid, reckless, but right now I want him to feel my anger, to feel my hate. I want him to realise what a piece of shit he is.

He wipes it off with his shoulder and then opens his mouth to clearly put me in my place except, Gunther grunts, making this weird little squeaking noise as he wakes himself up.

He narrows his eyes, looking from me to the guard.

"You, get the fuck out." He orders.

I'm dropped instantly. My body slumps into the relative comfort of the bed. Devin's great mass makes the entire thing dip as he moves to get off it.

My breath feels like it's rattling in my chest, like I'm so close to imploding now. Gunther grabs my waist, hauling me around and he's curling up into me, holding me as he pulls the covers over us both.

I shouldn't do it. I know I shouldn't, but I steal a glance at him, at Devin as he's leaving. He's by the sliding doors. His massive frame engulfing even that. As he crosses the threshold, I swear he pauses and turns to look at me.

And I swear I see it in his eyes. The threat. The warning.

That he will make me pay for that insult. That soon, very soon, he's going to ensure I do.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE



Pailtyn

It's dark. The only light comes through a gap in the curtains.

Gunther isn't here. I don't know where he is, where he's gone, but I'm certain no one is in the bed beside me.

I don't know what woke me, but I lay there, thinking about him, my husband, about this life, about how many months of this, how many years I will have to endure.

Will he grow angry enough one time to do serious damage? I'm certain he'll break my bones eventually. Will he kill me? Will he lose what little grasp he has on reality and in one act of barbarity, will he butcher me?

I shudder, already knowing the answer to that question. Knowing it in my heart.

This man will kill me.

It's inevitable. It's as certain as the sun shining in the day and the moon shining at night.

I don't want to die. I don't want to let that happen, but I have no way of preventing it. I can't try to escape because the few times I'm allowed out of my room, I'm followed everywhere.

I've done my best to appease him, I've done everything my mother has suggested. Nothing works. Nothing helps.

I feel so helpless and trapped, and I know there's a tiny part of me that already recognises that death might not be the bad option in all of this.

I let out a sob. A sound so pitiful, I hate myself more for making it.

"Ssssh." Someone says, stroking my cheek.

I cry out, jerking back at the stranger's gruff voice, at their unfamiliar touch.

Who the hell is in here? How did they get past the guards? Did my husband do this, did he decide to let another person use me? I'm in his bed, normally he has me taken somewhere else when he wants to whore me out.

"Guthrie?" My husband half-growls from the doorway.

The fear I feel at the sound of that name is indescribable. I know who he is, everyone knows who he is. The man is infamous. Notorious. The only reason he's not in Oblivion is because of who his brother is, that Gunther being Chapter Lord has allowed Guthrie to get away with things that would have better men executed.

But why is he here? Why is he in the country, in my room? My panic escalates as I start thinking of all the reasons, all those nasty little reasons that could answer it.

The light comes on, covering me in brightness, blinding me with it.

I cover my face, cover myself, only this man's hand grabs at the fabric to try to stop it.

"What are you doing here?" Gunther asks.

"Such a pretty thing." Guthrie replies, trying to expose more of me.
"You didn't tell me she was so nice to look at."

Gunther grunts, running his eyes over me as if I'm a harlot. A temptress. The very spawn of Satan.

"Come, we have things to discuss." Gunther states.

The man shakes his head slightly, but he gets to his feet. "Why don't you have your pretty wife come sit with us?" He murmurs as he walks up to him. "She can entertain us while we work."

Gunther narrows his eyes like he's offended. Like he suddenly gives a shit about me. "She's off-limits to you." He snaps, pointing his fat little finger at him.

"Brother?"

"You heard me. You don't lay a hand on her."

The man bristle more, before casting me one last, almost lecherous look.

As they slide the panel doors together, I try to calm myself, taking slow deliberate breaths, as if that's every worked before.

I can hear them talking. I can hear the anger, the tone, all of it.

"You didn't even tell me you were back." Gunther hisses loud enough for almost the entire Palace to hear.

"How could I? The phones are tapped. Anyone could have heard and who knows what they would have done with that information." Guthrie replies.

I creep out of the bed, creep to where the gap in the panels is, and I peer through, watching them both. He has the same podgy nose, the same beady eyes, only, while my husband seems able to hide the mania, this man seems to have it written all over him, like it's etched into the very fabric of his skin.

"They've been here again." Gunther says, running his hands down his face. "I see them. I see their shadows. I see them creeping about, scuttling about when they think I'm not looking."

Guthrie nods so sombrely.

"Have the guards found anything, any evidence?" He asks

"Nothing." Gunther replies, half-snarling. "But it's not like I expect them too. They're tricksy, clever, they know how to hide themselves."

"And the girl?" Guthrie says, jerking his head towards the door I'm half-hidden behind.

"What about her?" Gunther says, narrowing his eyes, sounding suddenly jealous, suddenly possessive, as if he has forcibly shared me with enough men to start a circus.

"She's not said anything? Not seen anything? What if she's a part of it too?"

"She's a stupid little whore." Gunther states dismissively. "The only good part about her is her cunt. I doubt there's anything beyond air between those ears. No, the girl knows nothing. And she's definitely not clever

enough to be tied into this, because there's no way she'd have the brains to hide it from me."

Guthrie nods, glancing over his brother's shoulder as he now paces back and forth.

I don't know if he can see me, if he can tell that I'm stood here but it's enough to make me nervous.

I try to walk back but I'm so fearful of making a move, of catching the light, of doing something to give myself away.

"They can't do anything." Guthrie says suddenly. "You have the power. We have the power. Let them try to take us on because we will crush them."

"What 'we' is this?" Gunther snarls. "I am Chapter Lord, me..." He thumps his chest with his fists like he's trying to be Tarzan.

"I meant, brother, that we will fight them together." Guthrie replies, clearly trying to calm him. "That you can depend upon me. Can trust me."

Gunther stares at him like he doesn't quite understand the words coming out of his mouth. He starts murmuring, twitching just a little.

"Brother?" Guthrie says, cautiously.

Gunther blinks rapidly, like he's just come out of a deep sleep and needs a moment to figure out where he is. "Guthrie?" He says before his face darkens. "No one can know. Do you understand me? No one."

Guthrie nods, moving to stand in front of him, placing his hands on his shoulders.

"No one." Gunther repeats again.

"It's our secret. Ours."

What the fuck are they talking about? What secret is this? A voice in my head tells me that if I can find this out, then I can use this as leverage, hell, this might even be the very thing I need to escape this place.

"Sleep, brother." Guthrie says quietly. "You look worn out. You look tired. No doubt you've been up most nights fucking that young wife of yours."

Gunther nods, and a great big, ridiculous grin spreads across his face. "Her cunt is divine." He states.

Guthrie laughs, slapping him on the back. "Then I suggest you go and reacquaint yourself with it. Leave this to me." He gestures to what I realise are papers strewn about on the table, though neither of them have so much as looked at them until now.

Maybe tomorrow, maybe once Gunther has left, I might be able to sneak a peek, might be able to see what the fuck they're talking about.

That hope instantly dies as Guthrie scoops them all up in his beady little hands.

“Sleep, brother.” He repeats and I’m quick to tiptoe back to the bed, quick to get in and lie there, before I hear those doors sliding open again.

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CHAPTER THIRTY



Devin

I shouldn't be here. I shouldn't have come.

And yet, I needed to get out of that damned place.

I know I'll regret this tomorrow morning; I know another night of no sleep will only fuck me over more but I need to purge myself. Purge *her* from my system.

The slave whimpers as I slam my cock down her throat while I shut my eyes and imagine it's someone else entirely.

Someone with bright blue, devastating eyes.

Someone with stupidly gold hair.

Someone who can't fight back, who won't fight back, who has the lie there and take it, take it all.

How prettily she'd cry.

How prettily she'd moan too.

The little bitch.

I'd keep her on her knees for hours. I'd draw it out. I'd ensure she was begging me to come down her throat by the time I was done.

And I'd have her fucking herself the whole time too, have her fingers so deep in her cunt she'd be gasping for mercy while her arousal dripped down her thighs.

Little whore.

Little fucking whore.

I snarl again, twisting my cock, making sure the barbs do their job and slice up the slave's mouth good and proper.

My hands twist in her hair, my nails claw at her skin. It's not enough. It will never be enough.

That Paitlyn bitch has ruined me, she's got into my head, she's colluded with them, with the whispers, with the darkness. She's become part of it, part of the place I'm not allowed to go, the part of myself that I'm not allowed to explore. She's the ultimate forbidden fruit, only she's not so forbidden, is she? Her husband is happy enough to share her around and I figure that that's why she's done it, why she's manipulated me.

I bet she's done that with all the guards, turned her pretty little eyes onto them, cried those pretty little tears and all of us are now under her spell.

My jealousy spikes with the notion that it's not just me she wants, that I'm not enough for her. She thinks she can get better than me, she thinks she can do better, stupid little whore, I'll show her, I'll make her understand. Sooner or later, I will have her and when I do, she'll realise what the consequences are for playing such silly little mind games. I'll hurt her, I'll fuck her too, I'll leave my mark on her permanently, in a way she can't wash off or remove. I'll ensure every time she looks in the mirror, every time she catches a glimpse of herself, she sees me, she sees my claim on her, she sees who owns her, she'll see it all.

I throw my head back as a wave of euphoria hits me. My body physically shakes, pleasure explodes in my head, and all I can think about is her, how good it's going to feel when I finally get my hands on her.

The slave screams out, slapping her hands against my thighs, trying to get loose and as I pull my cock out, I can see her face is almost purple. Stupid bitch, did she not learn to breathe through her nose when she's sucking a man off?

She falls to the floor, gasping out both blood and come. I don't bother to check if she's okay. There are minders enough for that. No doubt they'll come across her soon enough and if no one's around, I'm sure they'll have a little fun too.

I do my trousers back up, fix my belt, and let out a low, rattling breathe.

It feels good to purge, it feels good to let the demons out. I know I could have done this back at the Palace, that enough of the maids are fair game, but being here, embracing my true self has always allowed me to feel freer, to be freer.

I glance at my watch, seeing how little time I have left and head for the exit. If I ride fast, I might just manage an hour's shuteye.

As I make it up to the final gate I spot him, lurking. Of course the fucker knows I'm here. Bet he was watching on the surveillance, counting down the minutes.

"You're here again." Magnus says with such a tone.

I don't reply. What can I say?

I've been coming here too much. Too many times. I know that. I'm more than aware of that. But what else can I do when those voices are growing louder. When her voice is almost constantly screaming, constantly begging.

I shut my eyes, and she's there, lying on Gunther's bed. Only, he's not in the room. It's just us. Just me and her. I can see the fear in her pretty eyes. I can see how much she's trembling.

But she's doing it all the same. She's moaning my name as she fucks herself. She's pleading, begging, desperate for me. Me.

And she wants me to hurt her. I know that. I can see it. She likes my kind of pain, not her husband's. She wants to spread her legs and let me break her, let me ruin her, let me make her bleed.

"Devin." Magnus snaps.

I blink, pulling myself out of my head.

"You're taking your meds, right?"

That question alone pisses me off more than anything. Does he still see me as that, as some stupid little boy he can control? I clench my fists, itching to slam them into his self-satisfied face.

"You know you..."

"I know how to manage myself." I snarl.

I know I don't need his bullshit, I don't need pills either. I'm fine. I'm fucking fine. I'm not fucking psychotic no matter what he or some jumped up little doctor says. I'm not fucked in the head, at least, no more than Magnus or Conrad is.

Only, no one forces shit down their throats. No one tries to put labels on them. Just because I let the demons out, just because I make friends with them, that apparently makes me the problem? My brother wishes he was like me, he wishes he could be as free, as liberated, deep down we both know it. It's why he has such a need for control.

I can't tell if he's afraid to continue the conversation further or whether he's just decided it's easier to let it go. But mercifully, he starts talking about our dear leader. About how he's demanding more slaves, like we have an endless supply in Oblivion.

"He's started ex-communicating people." Magnus states. "Significant people. Names that are getting noticed."

"Like who?" I reply. We both know the man he's referring to. Our dear Chapter Lord.

"The Ramseys, the Todds." He shrugs.

"Sounds like he's planning on restocking Oblivion with anyone who disagrees with him." I reply. Richard Todd is on the Senate, at least, he was. But there's also been no trial. No official verdicts. Apparently, the man has just been removed and dealt with as though Gunther has the power of a dictator. But then, he's been disregarding the rules long enough, hasn't he?

"She's a Founder." I say quietly as my mind flickers to the bane of my life.

Magnus shows his surprise in the tiniest of movements. "The wife?"

As if she can be defined simply by that title. She's so much more than that, she's... I stop myself, stop those thoughts.

Who the fuck am I right now? How the fuck did that bitch get into my head?

"So," Magnus half-seethes, "He's breaking more rules. If he keeps going, we'll have our Grand Master himself breathing down our necks."

"Concerned for your own skin?" I sneer. Oh, I know he has skeletons, and big fucking closets too. I know his wife isn't as dead as everyone thinks because I found her on one of my little adventures. She's probably one of the many voices we can hear at this moment, screaming away, emptying their lungs, praying someone might come and rescue them.

He gives me a look I know so well. One that tells me he's in charge, that he could break me if he wanted – only, that's not so true anymore. This man may have raised me after our parents' death but I'm not a little kid anymore. I'm a grown man and I'm over twice his size, twice Conrad's size too.

"He wants to reopen the Ark." Magnus says.

"What?" I cut across him. He can't be serious.

But Magnus doesn't joke. I doubt the man even knows how to laugh. "He's been pushing for a while."

"But our Grand Master would never allow it. The Lords wouldn't either." I state.

The Ark has been closed since way before my father's time. It's the part of Oblivion that now lays empty. Disused, and for good fucking reason. It's where we used to hold children, babies too. Where people could use them, buy them, do whatever the fuck they wanted to them.

They weren't Brethren children. They were undesirables. Children taken from the streets, from orphanages, from anywhere that wouldn't be noticed. No, we'd never let our Brethren offspring end up in such a place, our bloodlines are too holy, too precious to ever allow such a thing.

"Gunther is trying to separate himself, establish his own powerbase, maybe his own faction." Magnus states.

"He'd never be able to." I reply. He thinks he can go up against the might of the Brethren?

"He will start a war; he will happily sacrifice enough people though. The man isn't sane."

I wince, knowing that statement couldn't be any truer.

"There is something though." I reply. "I've seen it with my own eyes. Something is going on. It's not just in his head; it's not just a conspiracy."

Magnus shakes his head. "Then you need to be extra vigilant. Extra careful. Whatever the fuck it is, you need to make sure you don't get caught in it. Because when this goes down, heads will roll and it won't just be Gunther's."

CHAPTER

THIRTY-ONE



Pailtyn

I choke on the cock in my mouth, my eyes watering as it hits the back of my throat. I try to pull away, but Gunther's grip on my hair is ironclad.

He forces me down further, grinding his hips against my face and I can smell that he hasn't washed, hasn't cleaned himself in quite a while.

"Take it, whore," he growls. "You take this cock, take what your husband is offering. Swallow every drop."

I gag again, my stomach heaving. It's impossible to breathe, let alone speak. I try to plead with my eyes, but Gunther just laughs back cruelly.

His hands dig into my hair, snapping off strand after strand.

He's merciless with each thrust and as he comes, he almost shatters my teeth with the way he forces himself as far into my mouth as he possibly can.

I double over, I collapse, and in my stupidity, I spit out the contents.

I know I've made a mistake; I know it the minute that disgusting liquid leaves my lips.

Gunther's foot slams into my ribs. He kicks me over, onto my back.

"You little bitch." He spits. "You think you're too good for my come, is that it? You think you're so much better than me, huh?"

I shake my head, my body trembling uncontrollably. What do I do? How do I placate him? My eyes dart to the mess, the pool of it, barely a metre from my face. Should I lick it up? Should I stick my tongue out and lap at it, pretending that it's the most delicious thing I've ever tasted?

My stomach turns at the thought, at yet, if it'll spare me a beating, if it'll spare me further degradation, I'd gladly do it. Only, I don't get a chance.

His hand twists into my hair, and I'm screaming, twisting, snatching at the air as he drags me out, drags me through the Palace.

"You're going to learn." He hollers, his voice echoing off the hard, polished walls. "You're going to have so much come down your throat, you won't be able to taste anything else for a week..."

When we get to the guardhouse, the men are already waiting. No doubt they've heard every word my dear husband has said to me.

I'm tossed into the room, tossed into the middle of them. He kicks me in the ribs. "Get on all fours, whore. Show these men what a real cumslut looks like."

I try to crawl away, but it's no use. Gunther grabs me by the ankle and drags me back to the centre of the room. His hand grabs my arm, bending it to an angle where it almost breaks and I scream out, submitting under the pain.

He makes me bend over, exposing my arse to the crowd of guards.

"Look at this perfect little asshole," he says, running his fingers over my sensitive flesh. "So tight and eager for a good fucking. I bet you'd love to have a whole line of cocks pounding into you, wouldn't you?"

I whimper in fear and humiliation, my body trembling with dread.

I've never even been taken there before. All the times Gunther has abused me before have been solely focused on my mouth and pussy. I know such play needs preparation, my mother explained that. She also explained how dirty it is, how men who partake in it are beasts but as a wife, I'd have to smile and offer that part of me if it was required.

I don't want this. I don't want any of this.

Gunther spits on my asshole and shoves his cock inside me without warning. I cry out in pain and it feels like they all get off on it, get off on my screams. He starts to fuck me hard, his hips slamming into my arse with brutal force.

"That's it, whore," he pants. "Take it like the filthy slut you are. Squeeze my cock with your tight little hole."

The guards watch every move, their dicks more than obviously straining in their pants. Clearly, they can't wait to get their turn, and I can feel their eyes on me, on my most intimate parts as they hunger for my body.

Gunther fucks me harder, his cock ploughing into my arse like a jackhammer. Just as I think I can't take any more, he pulls out with a groan, and he sprays himself all over my back as if marking me as his property.

"There, that's better," he says, wiping his cock clean with my hair. "Now, it's time for the real fun to begin."

Words fail me.

My strength fails me too as I try to crawl away from him, from them, from all of it.

He drags me back to the centre of the room and forces me to my knees again. The guards surround me, their cocks now out and throbbing with need.

"Who's first?" Gunther asks with a cruel smile. "Our little whore is eager to swallow you all down. Aren't you, wife?"

I nod weakly, my eyes filled with tears, and it's clear, I have no choice. I have to take every last drop, or he'll hurt me more. Surely, it's better they use my mouth, than they take the other parts of me?

Gunther grins, grabbing my lips, forcing something past it.

It's leather. Solid.

I try to shut my mouth and to my horror, I realise it's some sort of gag.

Only, this one won't keep my cries in, this one keeps my mouth wide open, ensuring I'm ready to receive every one of the men already lining up to use me.

CHAPTER

THIRTY-TWO



Devin

I stand back, watching as the other guards take their turns with his wife.

She's a poisoned chalice. I know that. She's a temptress, the very devil come to damn us, but I won't refuse this opportunity now that it's so perfectly presented.

God, the timing is so perfect, isn't this what I wanted, what I asked for? Her on her knees, and desperate for it?

My cock throbs in my pants as I watch her being violated, as I hear her muffled cries of pain as she takes one cock after another. As she's used over and over.

"That's it," Gunther shouts above the jeering and the grunts. He's clapping his hands like this is a party. "Ensure she swallows it all. Ensure she drinks you all down. This bitch will learn what a whore she is. She'll remember it well after today."

Lyndon grins as he grips her mouth and forces his dick past the gag. He's got a stubby fat cock, and it takes some effort to work it past the leather band.

Drool trickles down her chin, tears spill so prettily down her flushed face. She's the very picture of debauchery right now. The very picture of sin.

Part of me can't wait to sink my cock into her tight little holes, to make her scream and beg for mercy. And part of me wants to drag her away from this place, to a dark corner where I can take my time with her, where I can break her completely without anyone else watching or witnessing.

I shake my head, trying to clear the twisted fantasies from my mind.

She's just a toy, a means to an end.

I can't let myself get attached, can't let her get under my skin, because that's what she wants, that's what all these bitches want, they try to worm their way in, try to pretend that you mean something, but deep down, it doesn't mean shit. They're conniving, manipulative, scheming whores. That's what they are. They're good for one thing and one thing only.

I watch as Lyndon, finishes in her mouth, pulling out with a groan as he splatters his come on her face. She gasps, choking on his load, before looking up at me with those big, pleading eyes.

I grin down at her, tapping my cock against her lips. "Open up, bitch," I command, my voice rough. "Time for your next round."

She whimpers, her beautiful eyes widening to an impossible size when she sees who has her now, but with the gag in place, she can't do anything but obey.

I love the way she always reacts to me; I love the way I put the fear of God into her. It feels like she truly sees me, like she truly understands me and what I'm capable of. That I will devour her, that I'll chew her up and spit her out and leave her as nothing but a used up, discarded piece of meat.

The gag is too tight for me to get past so I yank it out before pushing myself into her mouth, feeling the barbs catch on her tongue as I force myself down her throat.

She gags and chokes around me, but I don't care.

I thrust into her over and over again, using her like the little fucktoy she is.

Her eyes stream with tears as I grip her face, forcing her to deep throat me. I'm not a small man, and to say my dick is comparative, is an

understatement, so I'm not surprised she's struggling. She can barely take her husband's five inches, compared to that, I'm a monster.

I grunt, losing myself in the feeling of her hot, wet mouth. It's just as good as I imagined, just as sweet, just as fucking perfect. The slave in Oblivion has nothing on the real thing.

"Swallow him down," Gunther shouts. "For the next week you're going to taste nothing but their come."

Nothing but mine, if I have anything to do with it.

I grip her head, grip her hair, forcing those desperate eyes to look at me. She keeps trying to shut them, to shut this out, and I won't fucking let her. I pin the lids back by her lashes, seeing how her eyeballs seem to bulge now.

I want this to hurt. I want this memory to stay with her, to fucking haunt her. I want this bitch to crawl away from me and never be able to get this vision out of her pretty, pathetic head.

Blood and salvia dribbles down her chin, it splatters onto those pretty breasts of hers. With one hand I smear it, smear the concoction all over her nipples.

She whimpers more, turning her face into one of disgust but that only turns me on more.

I come with a groan, my cock pulsing as I shoot my load down her throat.

I pull out, looking down at her with a sneer because I need her to know that she's nothing, just another whore to fuck, another thing to use.

As I tuck myself back into my pants, I watch the next guard taking his turn.

And I'll admit I feel a pang of disappointment, I was hoping for more of a challenge, for a fight. But she just laid there and took it, like the pathetic bitch she is.

CHAPTER

THIRTY-THREE



Pailtyn

I'm curled up in bed, my body aching, my mouth swollen and bruised from the brutal treatment I received. Every cut from those barb stings is a constant reminder of the torture I've endured.

The maids bring me soup, knowing I can't eat solids yet, their gentleness is a stark contrast to the violence I've faced under my husband's watchful gaze. As I sip down the warm broth, I can't help but flinch because even liquids hurt.

I feel like I've been beaten, flogged.

I feel so much worse than I did after that awful party.

I don't even remember how I got back here, who carried me, if I even was carried. From the bruising on my back, I suspect I was dragged the entire way back.

I feel weak, weak and pathetic. And the thing I hate most is that there's no end to this. No light at the end of the tunnel. The only thing I can pray for is for Gunther's demise. For him to go so absolutely insane, the Brethren are forced to step in and remove him, or perhaps, perhaps it might be as my mother suggests. That he might be sick, that he might just die.

I gasp as I contemplate that because the feelings I have, the desire inside of me, no good person thinks that way, no good person wishes for such a thing.

Maybe that's what this is, maybe that's the answer here, that I'm not a good person, not a good soul. That God knows what a piece of shit I really am in my heart, and all of this, all this pain and suffering is my punishment, my rightful karma.

But what could I possibly have done; how bad could I possibly be to deserve this? *This?*

When I've managed all the soup I can, Ada takes the bowl and puts it on the side. Kora helps me to sit up and I stare aimlessly at the wall.

"Why don't we go for a walk?" Ada says quietly. "Get out of this room for a bit."

I don't want to. I don't want to leave the safety of this space – only, it's not safe, is it? Every night Gunther comes back here. He sleeps beside me. He fucks me as if he doesn't even see all the damage he's already inflicted on my flesh.

Even now, he could walk right in and do whatever he pleased and none of us can stop him.

So how is this room safe? How is any of this Palace safe?

I tremble, realising the enormity of my situation, how truly fucked I really am.

He's going to kill me. That man, one day, he is going to murder me.

"Let's go to the gardens." Kora suggests. "A bit of sunshine and fresh air might make you feel better."

My eyes widen as I look at her. Fresh air? It sounds tempting, but my head says this too is a trap. I'm not allowed out of this room, not allowed anywhere by myself technically. Will he be waiting the other side of the door? Will his guards be there, ready to beat me again?

When I voice that, they tell me that my dear husband has seen fit to relax the rules a little, that he's decided to ease the bars around my cage just a smidgeon.

“Come on.” Ada says, taking my arm as gently as she can.

Kora goes to grab the robe from the bathroom, and she holds it out expectantly. I don’t doubt neither of them have ever dared be so presumptuous with a mistress before but a part of me is so grateful. I don’t need maids right now, I don’t need faceless, sycophant slaves. I need friends. I need allies. And I feel like we really are friends. That we’re all in this hellhole together.

I stand shakily. Kora eases the robe around my fragile body, and she ties the thing up in a way that makes me feel more secure than Fort Knox.

“We’ll go slow.” She says kindly.

My feet stumble on the first few steps. It feels like I have to fight my own body.

When we make it to the threshold, I still, looking around. My limbs freeze, expecting the blows, expecting the violence.

Nothing but silence greets us. Yes, there’s a guard on the door, one of the skinnier ones. I can’t look at him, can’t meet his gaze. I know he was one of them, we all do. But to see, to stare into those eyes and relive that moment – no. I can’t. I can’t.

I clench my fists, swallowing down the wail before it becomes anything recognisable and I straighten my spine, straighten my body.

They have not beaten me yet. They have not beaten me.

“That’s it.” Ada says, as if she can read my mind, as if she understands the whirl of thoughts already tormenting me.

We make it out to the great winding staircase, and I feel more exposed than ever. My arms huddle about my body, all that confidence I had seems to whittle away as it feels like a dozen guards clock sight of me.

A vision, an awful flashback hits me, and I can see it, I can feel like, I can smell it, all of them around me, hurting me, abusing me, using me.

I tremble, I whimper, and I have no idea how on earth I’m still standing.

Kora pushes me on, pushes me past. “We’ll take the side entrance.” She says quietly, leading me on, forcing me to move.

The courtyard garden is small, with a quaint bench and a few trees that provide a canopy of leaves overhead, casting dappled shadows on the ground.

As we take a place on the stone bench, none of us talk. I can hear birds, far off in the distance and it feels like they’re calling to me, whispering,

telling me that there is still a world out there, a place that is far from here, a place where Gunther can't reach.

I smile with the notion of it, even though I know that's a fallacy. The Brethren are everywhere. They control everything. They don't forgive and they don't forget.

Even if I were to somehow escape, even if I could magic myself out from these high stone walls, there is nowhere I can go, nowhere I can escape to.

My only hope is death. That's the sinking conclusion that I'm coming to. Either mine or Gunther's, I guess it doesn't really matter which, but one of us has to die.

I glance down at my hands, wondering if I have the balls to do it. To take a life is a sin. But then, everything else I've done since I've entered this place has been a sin too, so what's one more to the list?

I shut my eyes, silently praying that there's another answer but I know that this is it. This is the choice. Kill or be killed. Continue to be a victim or finally be brave enough to fight back.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR



Pailtyn

Kora was right, being in the sunshine helps. The warmth soothes and, if I close my eyes and pretend hard enough, I can imagine what it will be like when I am a widow. When Gunther is dead, and I am free.

God, please let that be the outcome, let that be my fate. I'll retire from the world, I'll become a hermit, a recluse, and I'll never have to smile and pretend and do anything I don't want to ever again.

I've been coming here every day for the last week. It's not like I have anything else to do. Gunther has ignored me this entire time, he hasn't touched me once. Maybe he's just waiting until I'm fully recovered before he brutalises me again, but the waiting is killing me. It's like a new form of torture when all I want to do is welcome the brittle peace while I have it.

My maids give me a little space when we're here, walking the perimeter, allowing me to disappear into my own head with no pressure to

engage them in conversation. It's a tiny bit of something that I treasure so much.

But as I turn to pick up the book Ada leant me, I see Guthrie standing in the gateway. My heart races, and I glance around nervously, expecting Gunther to appear at any moment.

Only, he's not there.

I haven't seen Guthrie since the night he woke me up, and I'm certain Gunther has kept him busy on that mysterious task.

In the daylight, I can make out his features better. He really does look like Gunther, but he's more grotesque, more disgusting. It's as if he's a twisted caricature of his brother.

He saunters over like he's some sort of Casanova and he plonks himself right beside me. My nerves spike, my heart starts to beat faster.

"What, what do you want?" I stammer.

Kora and Ada are nearby, so I'm technically not alone, but they're out of earshot, and besides, they don't hold any power here.

He runs his eyes over me in such a predatory way, and it turns my stomach.

"I missed your pretty face." He says, like he's known me for years.

I blink back, unsure how to reply. We both know what my husband said all those nights ago. But right now, Guthrie feels like a cannon about to go off.

He places his hand on my thigh, high on my thigh, and that makes me jolt.

"No." I state. "My husband said you were off limits." I don't know if that's actually true or not, Gunther may have said that once but the way his behaviour waxes and wanes, he could well have changed his mind.

Guthrie grins at me. "He's preoccupied right now." He murmurs. "And from what I've heard, everyone in the Palace has had a good go at you, already. What's one more cock when you've already entertained hundreds?"

I jump up, swallowing down the bile. "I'm not, I'm..." My thoughts spiral as the insult lands. "I'm a dutiful wife. I do as my husband bids." I say, wondering if this is a new trap. Is he here, is Gunther hiding behind a bush, watching this all play out?

Guthrie sneers, getting to his feet, with one hand he starts undoing his belt, and with the other he reaches for me. "Suck my cock, bitch, suck it, or

I'll tell my brother how I found you on the grass, with your legs spread, begging the guards to all come and fuck you."

I can see it, I can see exactly how that would play out. Gunther wouldn't need telling twice, he'd be all over it, he'd no doubt be delighted to have an excuse to punish me again.

For a second, I consider just suffering this latest bit of degradation but then a voice in my head screams at me to run and I'm picking up my feet, sprinting away, running as fast as I can. Praying that for once, just one time, I might be spared a beating.

Guthrie follows after me. He's hot on my tails, and I can hear his feet thundering behind as I race from room to room.

In my panic, I run straight into something hard. Something solid. I step back, bile twisting inside me as I realise it's the Commander of the Guards.

His expression is one of fury as he grabs hold of me and demands to know what the hell I'm doing in this part of the Palace?

I blink, looking around and realise I have no idea where I am. I was so busy trying to get away I didn't register where my feet were actually taking me.

He tightens his grip, shaking me for good measure. "Talk bitch." He says.

"I, I... he was chasing me." I stammer. "The Chapter Lord's brother, he was..."

"Which guard was on duty?" The Commander says, dismissing my words as if I'm talking nonsense. "Who was meant to be watching you?"

I don't think, I don't register what I'm saying until the words are out of my mouth. "The tall one, the big one, the monster guard." It's a desperate attempt to protect myself, to shift the blame onto someone else. I know it's reckless, but in this moment, it's either him or me.

He escorts me back to my room, his grip around my arm the entire time like he thinks I'll turn and run at the first chance. Every step I take feels like I'm walking to my doom, that at any moment, Guthrie will step out, will appear and the Commander will just hand me over and leave me to my fate.

As I'm shoved inside, I see Ada and Kora waiting for me. They're silent until we're alone and then they start apologising, insisting that they didn't know Guthrie would be there, that we can be more careful in future. But I know that's a lie. I know now that the gardens too are off-limits. I can't go

anywhere, I can't risk anything beyond hiding in these walls, and even that doesn't ensure my safety.

I sink onto the couch, wondering what consequences Devin will face.

It's going to make it worse, make him worse. I know that. I'm aware of that. Is it wrong to hope he might be kicked out? Do I dare hope that that is the outcome?

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CHAPTER

THIRTY-FIVE



Devin

T s this a joke? Is this a fucking piss take?

I wasn't even watching over the bitch. I wasn't even on duty. I should have gone out, should have left the facility, then they couldn't have pinned this shit on me.

I narrow my eyes, listening to Commander Malik as he drones on about following orders, about the repercussions of fucking up. Like he's one to talk, we both know he's been sneaking off after hours, shacking up with one of the kitchen maids.

“Who says it was me?” I snarl. Whoever it was, I’ll be sure to make them understand the consequences of such lies.

“She did.” Malik replies. “Called you the monster guard.”

I pause, choosing not to react to the name. But that little bitch has clearly pointed her finger at me. Does she think she can outsmart me? Does

she think that, what, I'll be got rid of? I clench my fists, fighting the urge to lash out.

No, there are better ways to deal with this. To deal with her.

"I requested to serve the Chapter Lord." I grit out. "Not play babysitter to some cheap whore."

A few of the other officers nod, understanding obvious in their eyes. None of us want to be stuck in this stuffy old Palace all day.

"Gunther will have an absolute fit if he finds out his wife has been free to wander as she likes," another officer chimes in. "He'll punish all of us for such a fuck up."

The others nod in agreement again, like they're all little dogs incapable of thinking by themselves.

Malik shakes his head slightly. "None of us need that." He mutters. "You'll be docked a week's pay, Blake. If you keep your head down and your sheet clean for the rest of the quarter, we'll strike the reprimand from your record."

I grunt back, like I give a fuck about the money. Money means nothing to me; I'm not some low level nobody who needs to scrimp and save. I was born wealthier than most of these people's fortunes combined. No, I'm not here for the money, I'm here for the honour, the prestige – at least, I was, because it turns out the reality of this duty does not come even close to what I imagined in my head. Oh, I knew there'd be shit days, boring days, days where we had to wipe people's arses, but I expected some drama, some excitement.

The only drama here is when that bitch does something to aggravate our great leader, and he then drags her down to us for a punishment. I smirk at the thought, at the knowledge that next time she fucks up, I'll be waiting. Next time she pisses him off, I'll be the one ready to make her cry.

I'll make her sorry. I'll make her rue the day she decided to fuck with me. Stupid little whore, she clearly has nothing better going on in her life, but I'll give her the drama she so clearly craves, I'll give her pain too. I'll have her twisted up so badly she'll be a bleeding mess by the end of it.

And then she'll learn her place.

Then she'll realise not to pick fights with someone who could snap her like a twig.

CHAPTER

THIRTY-SIX



Pailtyn

I know I shouldn't have drunk as much as I have, but I want to numb the pain, numb whatever the hell is coming next. Because there is always a next at these parties. And they always involve me.

The servant's screams make my ears hurt, make my skin erupt into goosebumps.

I'm stood beside Gunther's ridiculous throne., wearing a red lingerie set that he specifically chose, and I'm watching, just as everyone else in this room is watching, as my husband is torturing the man unfortunate enough to have gotten his attention.

The whip slices through the air, practically singing as it comes down on his flesh. And as it makes contact, we all see the way his skin splits, the way blood immediately starts pouring out.

"Pretty like a river." Gunther laughs, shoving the leather into it, smearing the man's blood further.

"Please." He sobs. "Please, I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry, Chapter Lord, I won't do it again. I won't."

Gunther grabs a handful of the broken glass, and he rams it into the man's mouth. "Shut up." He says. "Shut up."

I don't want to think what would happen to the man if he swallows it. Will it slice his insides? Will it rip up his stomach? His intestines?

I shudder at the thought.

Gunther's meaty fist connecting with the servant's jaw. The sound is sickening, creating a dull thud that seems to reverberate through the room.

The servant stumbles back, but Gunther grabs him by the collar, pulling him upright before delivering another punch.

I look around the room, desperate for someone to intervene, but all I see are faces twisted in either cruel delight or turned away in cowardly avoidance.

Gunther's breath comes in ragged gasps as he continues his assault, each blow more vicious than the last. The servant is barely conscious, his body limp and battered, but Gunther shows no signs of stopping.

He's grinning, laughing, enjoying every moment of his barbarity.

A sickening sense of dread washes over me as I realize what he wants, what he's been building towards this entire time.

I can't look. I can't watch. But I also can't shut it out.

We all hear the snap, the crunch of bone, and then the sound of a body hitting the floor with such finality it feels like a crescendo. The servant lays now with one leg kicking out to the right, his arms splayed, and his head stuck at an impossible angle for anyone living to make.

It feels like everything stills, like the room collectively holds its breath. Are they enthralled by this or as horrified as I am?

"Paitlyn." Gunther barks, his voice cutting through the air like a whip. "Get over here."

My feet feel like lead as I make my way towards him, each step an effort of will I can barely muster. I can feel the weight of everyone's gaze on me, their eyes like physical touches, some leering, some pitying, but all of it unwanted.

I stop a few feet away from Gunther, close enough to see the flecks of blood on his knuckles, the wild gleam still in his eyes.

“Kneel.” he commands, gesturing to the floor where the spilled drink has pooled.

I hesitate, a small act of defiance that I know will cost me later.

Gunther’s eyes narrow, his lips curling into a snarl. “I said, kneel.” he growls.

I lower myself to the floor. The smell of alcohol is overpowering, mixing with the coppery tang of blood in the air. I can feel the heat of Gunther’s gaze on the back of my neck, the weight of his expectation pressing down on me like a physical force.

“Lick it up,” he orders, his voice laced with cruel amusement.

A wave of humiliation crashes over me, threatening to drown me in its intensity. I can feel the eyes of the guests on me, their gazes burning into my skin like brands. I can hear their laughter, their jeers, their whispered comments.

But worst of all, I can feel Devin’s gaze, steady and unyielding as he witnesses my degradation. I don’t know why but that fact shames me more.

I lean forward, my tongue touching the cold amber liquid. The taste is bitter, burning my throat as I swallow. I try to block out the sounds around me, the laughter, the jeers, the cruel comments that are steadily rising. I try to pretend that I’m somewhere else, anywhere but here, but the reality of my situation is inescapable.

Gunther’s laughter rings out above the noise, a harsh, mocking sound that grates against my fragile nerves. “That’s it, pet,” he says, his voice now dripping with malice. “Lick it all up like the good little bitch you are.”

Tears sting my eyes, blurring my vision, but I blink them back, refusing to let them fall. I won’t give him the satisfaction of seeing me cry. I won’t give any of them the satisfaction.

Finally, the last of the liquid is gone. I sit back on my heels, my head bowed, my breath coming in ragged, nasty little gasps. I can feel the weight of Gunther’s gaze on me, the smug satisfaction radiating off him like a physical force.

“Good girl,” he says, his voice dripping with condescension. He turns to his friends with that cruel smile still playing on his lips. “Isn’t she a good little pet?”

His friends laugh, their eyes gleaming with amusement as they look down at me. I can feel the heat of their gazes, the weight of their mockery,

and it takes every ounce of willpower I possess not to flinch away from them.

Gunther grabs my arm, his fingers digging into my flesh as he pulls me to my feet. I stumble, my legs weak and unsteady, but he holds me upright, his grip like a vice. “Time for the main event.” He says, his voice laced with anticipation.

A shiver runs down my spine as I realize what he means. The beating and murder were just the warm-up, the appetizer before the main course.

Now comes the real entertainment, the part where I’m always the star attraction.

Gunther leads me to the centre of the room, his grip never wavering. The guests part before us, forming a circle around us. I can feel the weight of their gazes, the intensity of their expectation of what’s to come.

But I know better than to try and run. I know that there’s no escape, no reprieve from the nightmare that’s about to unfold. I know that I’m trapped, that I’m nothing but a plaything for my husband’s amusement.

And so I stand there, my heart pounding in my chest, my breath coming in ragged gasps, as Gunther begins sliding the bra straps off my shoulders, down my body, exposing me to all those nasty eager eyes.

In my mind, I try to slip away, to disappear, but I can’t do it.

He slaps my breasts, one after another, hitting them enough to make me hiss.

“Founder.” He mutters, like it’s an insult.

I don’t say anything back.

I don’t do anything but take his abuse.

He takes his belt off, forcing me to my knees and wraps it around my throat, like I’m a dog. With one hand he tears the thong from me then he slaps my arse cheek so hard I hiss.

“Crawl.” He orders as his friends all start to laugh.

I know doing it will expose more of me, will expose all of my most intimate parts but I don’t have a choice, do I? I drop my gaze, staring at the polished tiles, focusing on the pattern of them as my face burns with the humiliation.

He makes me do three rounds, three nice big loops of the room. I’m cheered on, jeered at, my arse is slapped by various different hands, and I’m called a ‘good bitch’ over and over and over.

I'm so close to tears, so close to collapsing, but I don't want to give my husband the satisfaction.

"What do you say?" Gunther says, "Doesn't she make a fine wife?"

Enough of the men seem to agree with him. Even a few of the women join in. I wonder if they only do it to make themselves more amenable, so they'll be spared some torture.

He yanks the belt hard enough that I slam into his side. "What do you think, Pearce?" He says and that name makes my blood run cold.

No. Please no. Please let me be mistaken, let this be a coincidence or...

My heart slams into my chest as I see him stood, staring at me. He doesn't look shocked, but he doesn't look proud either. My anger rages as I stare back at him because he's the one who put me here, he's the one who did this, who ensured this.

Does it not give him pride to see his handiwork, is that it?

Does it not make him happy to see the reality of what my life is because of his machinations?

He's wearing his usual suit, and yet, something about his attire, about his hair, looks off. He's not his usual immaculate self. He looks unkempt. He looks like he's been dragged here, rather than invited.

"Well?" Gunther asks. "Do you not think your niece makes a fine wife?"

Pearce narrows his eyes slightly and shrugs as if I'm no consequence to him, as if I mean nothing. "She's good breeding stock." He replies. "As long as she's satisfying you..."

"Satisfying?" Gunther spits. "What would be satisfying is when I receive the money owed to me as the bride-price."

Pearce frowns. All the men around us do. What the fuck is he talking about? A bride price is paid by the groom to the bride's family, not the other way around. It's a way lesser Lords can buy their way into a more prestigious standing.

"Chapter Lord..." Pearce begins but the look on Gunther's face seems to silence him.

"You Heseltine's owe me." Gunther snaps. "You owe me big time and I want my money."

I note that no one points out that Pearce is not technically a Heseltine. That he's my mother's brother and therefore, he doesn't have an ounce of Founder blood in his shitty veins.

Pearce squirms, stupidly muttering something under his breath, and though none of us can hear the words, Gunther doesn't miss it.

He lashes out, sending a load of glasses smashing to the floor. I hiss as tiny little shards cut into my skin, as they bury themselves into so much of my exposed flesh.

Gunther pushes me aside, pushes me hard, and I land in a pile of nasty little fragments.

His fingers snatch at something beside me and he's too quick for me to see, too quick for anyone to react.

Pearce howls, covering his face as Gunther slices through the air.

"Give me my money." My husband spits. "Give me what I am owed."

Blood streams out through Pearce's fingers, it pours down, onto that crisp silk shirt. He stumbles back, falls down onto his arse.

"I'll, I'll sort it." He stammers, for once losing that overconfident, arrogant drawl.

"You better." Gunther replies, before he sinks back into his throne and takes a long, languid sip of his drink.

I don't move. I don't breathe. I stay where I am, watching my uncle scramble for the door, There's a deep wound now splitting his face in two, and I'll admit, there is a sense of satisfaction in seeing him hurt, in seeing him cut up, and maimed.

It's not nearly enough to feel close to revenge but this moment here is a start.

CHAPTER

THIRTY-SEVEN



Pailtyn

“It is late.” Gunther says. “My wife and I will retire.”

It's all I can do not to let my jaw drop in shock. Yes, he's humiliated me, yes, he's abused and shamed me, but I can't help but feel like I've gotten off lightly.

Am I tempting fate by thinking that?

I let him lead me out. The only sound is all the footsteps, his, mine, and the dozen guards that follow.

When Gunther pulls me down a corridor instead of up the stairs all the fear turns to something uncontrollable.

“Where, where are we going?” I stammer.

His look silences me. His hands tighten, and he's no longer leading me, now he's dragging me.

My bare feet scrape against the tiles, my cries ring out as I'm pulled along.

The guards ahead open a door and a freezing cold winter breeze hits my naked skin. They're taking me outside.

Where the fuck are we going?

We're in a courtyard, not one I've been in before. It's far larger than the garden I used to hide in. Every side is surrounded by high sweeping walls, and I can see movement, sentries, guards stood along, watching whatever this is.

A voice screams out. It's a desperate, strangled sound and it puts the fear of God into me. I squint, seeing the figure, seeing the person kicking, fighting, doing everything they can to escape the clutches of the two guards holding them.

"Kor, Kora?" I stammer. What the fuck is this?

"You thought you could hide it from me, didn't you?" Gunther says snatching at my hair now, using that to drag me closer. "You thought I wouldn't notice."

I shake my head so quickly, and the movement sends a sharp, stabbing pain through my scalp. "Notice what? What are you talking about?"

"The little herbs you've been having the maid slip into my food."

My eyes widen. I've been careful, so careful, but not careful enough apparently.

Gunther's grip tightens, his fingers digging into my flesh as he pulls me closer. "Did you think I was stupid, Paitlyn? That I wouldn't notice?" His voice is a harsh whisper, laced with anger but also something more, a twisted amusement that sends a chill down my spine.

Before I can respond, he shoves me to the ground, the force of the impact jars my bones.

I land on my hands and knees in the dirt. I open my mouth to argue, to defend myself, but Gunther's hand lashes out, striking me across the face. Pain explodes across my cheek, with the force of the blow snapping my head to the side. The metallic tang of my blood fills my mouth as I fight back tears.

"You dare defy me?" Gunther growls, his eyes wild and dangerous. "You dare try to manipulate me?"

"Please." I sob. "Please, I didn't mean anything by it." I say. "You wanted a child. I thought this would help, I thought..."

Another blow shuts up the last of my words.

“Put her on the pyre.” Gunther shouts.

“No,” I scream out, scrambling, crawling in the dirt.

He can’t be serious. He can’t be.

“That witch tried to drug me.” Gunther spits, aiming a boot at my side.

“You’re lucky you’re not up there with her.”

I grab at his trousers, grab at his legs, pleading. “Please, please don’t do this. I’ll do anything. I’ll do whatever you want. Whatever you ask. Just please don’t hurt her. Please...”

Gunther leans down, grabbing my face, pinching my cheeks. “You’ll do that anyway, whore. I control you, remember? You don’t get autonomy. You don’t get shit unless I say so.”

I lose it then, I lash out, land a punch, then another, becoming just as mad, just as irrational as this husband of mine clearly is.

Gunther shoves me back and the guards are quick to immobilise me. *He* is quick to immobilise me.

His massive arms wrap around my body, and he presses me against him, using all the brutal strength he has to overcome me.

“Make her watch.” Gunther orders. “Ensure she sees every moment.”

I hold my breath, hating that I can’t do a damned thing as Kora is dragged up, as she’s tied to a pole right in the middle of the pyre, as they set fire to it.

The flames catch. They spark so quickly. And all the while Kora is screaming, screaming for me to save her, for me to do something.

I can smell the stench of her flesh burning, I can smell the stench of it cooking. The heat hits me, even from this distance and I can’t keep the vomit in. It erupts out of me, covering my chin, my chest.

Devin doesn’t react; doesn’t even act like he notices.

Her screams turn higher and high pitched as those flames cover, as they torch more of her.

Her beautiful skin turns to blisters, it literally roasts up and simmers as it boils under the immense heat. Her eyes explode with the pressure, and so much blood streams down her now twisted and mutilated face.

And when she falls silent, all we hear then is the sound of crackling wood, only now it sounds like bones snapping.

She’s dead. Kora is dead.

And it’s all my fault.

“I hate you.” I spit out. I don’t even know if it’s for him or for my husband. In truth, I hate them both.

Devin draws in a long deep breath, something that feels far too intimate for such an occasion. “Hate me all you want, Paitlyn, it makes no difference to me.”

I don’t understand what those words even mean. I don’t understand what he’s trying to say.

Gunther strides over to where the flames are now raging. His grotesque features are illuminated by the flickering, and it only makes him look more dangerous.

“Thou shall not suffer a witch to live.” He says.

Those words bore into me. They echo off the walls, the repeat over and over.

Only, Kora wasn’t a witch, she was my friend. One of my only friends in this cursed place.

I hang my head, letting my tears stream down. She’s dead. Dead because of me.

“Keep her there.” Gunther orders, pointing that finger at me, at my face. “Let her watch until the fire burns out. Then take her to the chapel. She needs to repent.”

Repent. Like I have any sins to repent. Like I have anything that even matches the evil of this man.

Devin inclines his head, tightening his grip just enough to prove a point.

But the point was already made, the point was made the moment Gunther put his hands around my throat the first time, in the Cathedral all those months ago.

He killed me then. He choked the last bit of life out of me. I’ve been existing since then as nothing more than a ghost. A thing.

CHAPTER

THIRTY-EIGHT



Pailtyn

Apparently, the usual kneeling and flogging isn't enough this time. Apparently, my sins are so great, that harsher measures are necessary.

I don't bother to speak, to plead, to do anything.

I feel numb. Utterly numb.

And completely broken.

Devin hands me over to the waiting Priest who looks like he can't wait to get started with whatever this punishment is. He yanks me into the Chapel, and slams my body as hard as he can against those marble slabs.

I scream out, curl up, afraid that he's about to do something unforgiveable, that he's about to hurt me the way Gunther allows his friends to do.

The Priest sneers, staring at my breasts, at my thighs, at my exposed pussy too.

“Dirty, filthy little whore.” He says, grabbing what looks like a load of dried-up brambles. They’re a metre long in length, one end bound together with some rope that provides a handle.

He raises his arm, bringing it down on my side, and all those thorns catch as they tear into my skin.

I scream more, I sob, as he beats me. It feels like he’s torn all the skin off my back.

He sneers, taunting me, then hauls me up, drags me by my hair and forces me into what looks like a sarcophagus.

It’s made of metal. It’s big, but not big enough for me to stand in. On the bottom are spikes and as my feet scramble to get some footing, I realise any false move will result in impaling myself on them.

I hunch over, trying to use my hands to create some leverage.

He stares at me, laughs at my pathetic attempt to try to help myself and then he slowly starts to shut the front.

“No.” I scream, realising that he’s locking me in.

The metal slams with shut finality.

The sides of my new cage are bitterly cold, and it feels like I’m entombed. It feels like I’ll never get out of this hell.

It’s pitch black. There isn’t even a seam of light where the front meets the sides.

“You will stay in here.” The Priest says loud enough for me to hear his nasty little voice. “Jesus was entombed before he rose from the dead...”

It’s bullshit. I know it is. He’s twisting the words, twisting scripture to fit his needs.

“In three days’ time, we’ll see if you’re fit for decent society again.”

Three days? Three fucking days? I can barely take any more of this, and I’ve not even done ten minutes. How on earth am I going to manage three days?

I bite my tongue so hard. I chew the very end to keep the whimper in.

He wants to break me. Gunther wants to break me.

I know this will undoubtedly be the worst test of my strength to date but I will not give in. I will not. I’m a damn Founder. I’m better than him, better than all of them.

I clench my fists, burying my nails into my palms. I don't care how much it hurts. I don't care if I do go batshit crazy. I will not submit, I will not become the broken shell they want me to be.

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CHAPTER

THIRTY-NINE



Pailtyn

I t hurts.

It hurts so much.

My legs shake with the effort of keeping my up. My feet keep slicing themselves open on those awful little spikes.

I slump against the sides as best I can, but I can feel the constant pang in my joints where I'm throwing my back out.

My skin is covered in both grime and sweat. All the little nicks where the Priest whipped me have now dried into tiny little scabs that I'm dying to scratch at.

I don't know how long I've been in here. I don't know if its hours, days, hell they could have locked me in for a year – only, I realise that can't be the case because if I'd been there that long, I'd be dead, wouldn't I? I'd need water, food.

I'd also be up to my knees in shit.

I snort, breathing in the stench of ammonia from where I pissed myself because I couldn't hold it any longer. I doubt the Priest thought about that, did he? He was too busy being a sanctimonious piece of shit to think about basic human functions.

My stomach churns again, reminding me of the other thing I desperately need.

I don't want to do it, but I also know that I won't be able to hold out. Sweat is starting to collect along my forehead, my body feels like it's heating up from the pressure.

I need to go. I need to relieve myself.

I shut my eyes, trying to imagine if it could get any worse than this, if my husband could do worse than this. I thought handing me around to all his guards would be it, and yet, here we are.

I wince, letting a laugh that feels so out of place.

Those fuckers. Those absolute bastards. I'm going to show them. I don't know how. I don't know when, but I swear on my very soul that I will get my revenge.

My stomach churns violently, it feels like my entire bowels shift and then, with horror, I realise what is happening, what I cannot stop.

"No," I whisper, as the stench hits me, as the feel of it pouring down my thighs, as it slithers between my toes.

Bile rises up so fast, I can't keep it in, and I wretch, choking up more bodily fluids, turning this tomb into a soup of literal human waste.

It's disgusting. It's more than disgusting.

But in my mind, I can imagine what will happen when they open that door.

They think this will humiliate me. They think that this will shame me.

But all of this, all this muck is gonna bubble right out, it's going to be like tsunami.

I let out a cackle, imagining the disgust on their faces as it covers their shiny floor, as it covers their shoes too.



I'M A MESS BY THE TIME THAT DOOR OPENS.

More than a mess.

I can't string a sentence together. I can barely stand, let alone walk.

The Priest drags me out, cursing about the disgusting state of me – as if he expected any different outcome.

I'm thrown outside, thrown onto the hard, dirty ground.

The impact jars my back further. I land funny on my wrists and though I know they're not broken, they absolutely kill.

I force myself up, force myself to my knees and just as I look up, I realise what he's pointing at me, what he's aiming right at my face.

Freezing cold water hits me at full pressure. I collapse again from the impact of it but that doesn't make him stop. He continues to cover me, he continues to all but drown me.

I'm shivering, shaking so violently my teeth are chattering hard enough that I think my jaw might shatter.

When the tsunami finally stops, the silence that follows is deafening.

The Priest doesn't even bother to dry me, he just hauls me up, dragging me by my sopping wet hair and parades me naked through the Palace, through all those halls and staircases, past every watchful, every leering guard, and back to Gunther's suite.

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CHAPTER

FORTY



Devin

The Cathedral is filled with the sweet sickly scent of incense. It mingles with the soft rustling of silk and the murmur of hushed voices. My eyes dart around the room, taking in the masked faces of the Lords and Ladies before us.

Gunther looks almost resplendent in his golden robes. He stands at the altar beside his wife as if they're the very image of what a perfect marriage should look like.

It's been two weeks since he burnt her maid alive. She's been kept in her room since. Locked in.

We've all heard her screams, heard her attempts to get out.

Silly bitch just doesn't learn her lesson, does she?

Today, she looks regal, royal even, her posture is perfect, her eyes fixed on her husband as if she has unwavering loyalty for him. The mask she

wears, is an exquisite piece of craftsmanship, hiding her bruised and battered face while the mouthpiece ensures her silence.

I can't help but wonder what thoughts are swirling behind those beautiful eyes.

As Gunther begins his speech, his voice resonates through the Cathedral, deep and commanding. It's so unlike the man I've come to know, all his mania, all his erratic movements are gone, right now he's clearly mastered whatever it is that plagues him. He speaks of servitude, devotion, and the rewards that come to those who know their place. I listen carefully, trying to decipher if his words are meant for Paitlyn or for the audience. Perhaps, I think, they are meant for both.

The ceremony progresses, and Gunther begins to bless each Lord and Lady. They kneel before him, their masks removed, revealing faces painted with piety and reverence. I grimace; my mind filled with the knowledge of what Gunther has done to the communion wafers.

I watch as he places the tainted wafer into each recipient's mouth, his words, "the seeds of life," ringing hollow in my ears, and the irony of it doesn't escape me.

Each Lord and Lady accepts the blessing graciously. Some seem to hesitate for a moment before consuming it, their expressions betraying a flicker of doubt or discomfort. But they all comply, swallowing the tainted offering without protest.

Gunther then raises a golden chalice, filled with holy wine. He takes a sip, his face a picture of piety, before offering it to the kneeling nobles. He allows the wine to overpour, letting it spill down the front of some of the women's dresses, soaking into their cleavages. I watch, noting, as he targets the young, pretty ones, his actions a blatant display of power and dominance.

When it's all over, the happy couple step down and are ushered out. Gunther has his hand on the small of Paitlyn's back and he's all but shoving her along, like he thinks that in this moment she might do something, say something, create a scene that he can't control.

I wonder what would happen if she did. What would he do? Sure, he would punish her, but such a display would have ramifications, big ones. It feels like we're all on a precipice, like the entire elite are aware of what Gunther is becoming, what he's devolving into. We're a box of tinder, waiting for that one spark to catch.

As soon as we reach the back corridors, Gunther fully flings his wife out the way. She cries out, slamming into a pillar and nobody moves to catch her as she slides down to the floor.

“What did I do?” She whispers, that solid mask now off her face, lying beside her, as useless as her words are.

No one replies. Gunther just barks for someone to get the whore out of his sight.

Mace and Lyndon are the ones to do it, they scoop her up, half-carry her off to where the cars are waiting. It’s notable that Gunther ordered a whole fleet to transport them. It’s like he expected trouble, like he knew he wouldn’t be travelling back with her.

I catch a glimpse of her face as she disappears around the corner, and the look she gives me, it’s one of pure hate. Pure malice.

I can’t help but smirk. I can’t help but feel something in my cock too.

Little bitch, I’ll have my moment soon enough. I’ll show you what true hate is, I’ll carve it out into every part of you.

“She’s a sweet thing.” Someone mutters beside me, and I frown, realising that it’s Gunther’s brother.

He’s not meant to be here. Not meant to be out. The man is all but excommunicated from good society. He and a few others got caught running an underage breeding programme years ago. Hundreds of girls were involved. Hundreds of babies too. Not that anyone has done a thing to trace them. The girls were dealt with the only way possible. The few babies that were in the facility were distributed to worthy families and the rest was sorted out in a manner that kept everyone happy enough to not make a fuss.

But Guthrie has no business being back. Ever being back. The only thing that stopped him being executed was the fact that Gunther is his brother.

I glance at the Chapter Lord as he yanks off one layer of his robes and then another, tossing them for the Priests to pick up. I wonder if the mania that haunts Gunther is also in Guthrie. If that’s the problem. Things run in the blood; I know that more than most. My mother’s blood runs through my veins, just as it does Magnus’ and Conrad’s, they’re just too scared by what it is to embrace it.

I choose not to reply to his words. I know better than to be so stupid.

Gunther spots his brother and narrows his eyes. “The fuck are you doing here?” He asks.

“Watching your back, just as always.” Guthrie replies.

A few of the guards react to that, to the insult, does he think we’re not up to the job?

“Someone might see...” Gunther begins but Guthrie wraps his arm around his shoulder, and he falls silent.

“Nonsense. No one will see. No one will look. You’re the Chapter Lord, you’re in charge. You make the rules, remember? And so what if they do see, so what if they know? No one can stop you. You’re too powerful, too big. You’re a God, brother. And what God answers to mortals?”

“None,” Gunther says, though he sounds unsure.

“None. That’s right.” Guthrie repeats, slapping him on the back for good measure.

I can’t tell if Guthrie is full of shit or as mad as Gunther is. Perhaps he’s the reason our dear Chapter Lord is so close to completely and utterly losing it.

I glance across at Commander Malik and he looks absolutely furious to see Guthrie is there.

“We had an agreement, Chapter Lord.” Malik says quietly.

Gunther draws in a breath, shaking his head. “He’s my brother. I don’t have to explain myself...”

“And we don’t have to put ourselves at risk for the likes of him.” Malik states.

Gunther blinks, like it’s the first time he’s ever been told no in his life. “What did you say?” He splutters.

“You heard.” Malik replies. “That man is excommunicated. We all know what that means, what the consequences are. If you’re willingly to turn a blind eye, that’s your prerogative, but we have rules, as Chapter Guards, we have clear, defined instructions.”

Gunther launches himself at Malik. The movement clearly catches the Commander off guard, and he stumbles back. Gunther manages to get one good blow in before Lyle and Curtis are pulling him off.

It’s a shit show. Guthrie pulls himself into the mix, kicking, snarling, punching whoever he can get hold of.

Those of us watching are torn between our loyalty to Gunther and our need to follow the rules that have been beaten and instilled into us for the last god knows how long. But the longer this goes on, the longer this is turning to anarchy.

“Car’s ready.” I bark, choosing an option that might defuse, or that might do fuck all.

I grab hold of Lyle, shoving him out the way, and with one hand, I create a scruff of fabric at the back of Gunther’s neck. I pull him free, pushing him past the chaos and as the other guards see, the fight fizzles out to nothing.

We get outside while Gunther is still shouting about insubordination and treason, and I wonder if this is all going to get far worse once we reach the Palace.

Guthrie is hot on our heels, jeering him on, shouting that every treacherous one of us should be strung up by our balls.

I don’t react; I just keep moving Gunther onwards.

Suddenly, a flicker of movement catches my eye where there should be none. Instinct takes over as I recognise the threat, the flash of metal; it’s a gun barrel emerging from the shadows.

I don’t think twice, I don’t hesitate for a second. I throw myself on top of Gunther, my body shielding his as a bullet whizzes past.

The sound echoes off the high stone walls, and it’s followed by the chaotic clamour of all the guards rushing to find the attacker. Rushing to secure the scene.

In the heart of this pandemonium, Gunther starts shouting, screaming, fighting too. Does he think I’m the one trying to kill him? Does he think that all of this is a set up? I hold him down, struggle with the mass of his body, despite my own size, and it takes almost all my strength to keep the bastard out of harms way.

Another bullet streaks past us. It cuts so close I can hear the sound of it screeching in my ears.

Gunther starts sobbing, pleading, saying that he doesn’t want to die, but if the bastard simply shut the fuck up and did as he was told then I’d ensure that didn’t happen.

Ahead, one of our men fall, it’s Lyle. A bullet lodges in his chest, and his eyes stare out in shock and surprise as he hits the floor like a dead lump.

Curtis takes another, stumbles and falls, clutching his leg where blood is now pouring out. It’s a flesh wound, at least it should be.

I spot the armoured car, spot my moment, and I toss Gunther over my shoulder like he’s a baby. I sprint as fast as I can go, wrench the door open, and shove his mass inside.

“Go.” I order.

“Wait...” Guthrie’s voice carries behind us.

The driver looks to Gunther, and he shakes his head, “Fuck him.” Gunther says, like he didn’t just start an entire fucking brawl over his damned brother.

“Go.” I repeat, slamming the door, watching as it speeds off.

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CHAPTER

FORTY-ONE



Devin

“**Y**ou’re wanted.”

I don’t react beyond an internal sigh. I knew this was coming. Knew there’d be recompense. I all but kidnapped the bastard, didn’t I? Although he got back safe, he got back unharmed despite himself.

I put the pistol down, place the oil beside it and get to my feet. Cleaning my gun has always given me a sense of calm. It’s methodical. Logical. I don’t need to think, I don’t need to organise myself. I just move on automatic. It’s grounding, I guess. And it silences the whispers, silences the noise. Silences everything.

As I get up, I note Malik is stood by the door, his right eye swollen from where Gunther punches him. I see a few others sat around nursing bruises, nursing other injuries from the fight. No one has spoken about it, no one has said a word, and yet, we’re all more than aware that we crossed a line today.

That Gunther was the one goading, and yet, when push came to shove, we didn't follow 'our duty', we did the exact opposite.

What will happen next time? What will happen when Gunther decides to turn his mania on us? There's no way we'll be ignored, no way we'll be spared. He's hurt enough slaves, enough servants, he's tortured his bitch of a wife to the point that she's practically catatonic.

He's going to grow bored of it, of them. He's going to want a better victim, a higher prize.

And what better than beating a man who can actually fight back?

I shake my head, burying those thoughts. It's not for me to care. It's not for me to dwell on right now. I need to control the controllables, take each day as it comes. From what I've seen, Gunther will not be Chapter Lord for much longer, the Brethren will not allow it, our Grand Master will not allow it. And I know I'm strong enough to face whatever shit is coming.

When we get to his office, Gunther is sat behind his ridiculously sized desk, as if he's been hard at work for hours.

He keeps me stood there for a few moments and then he looks up, all surprised as if I wasn't summoned and announced at the door.

"Blake," He says, "You did me a great service today."

I open my mouth to argue, then realise what he said. Service. Not disservice.

"Just part of my duty." I reply.

He scoffs, waving his pudgy hand. "Not every guard would have acted as you did. Not every guard would have risked their life for mine."

We both know how true those words are, despite the training we received. Afterall, didn't that little scuffle in the Cathedral prove it?

"As a reward, I am giving you a night with my wife."

"Excuse me?"

He smiles, pushing off the desk, using his fisted hands to get his fat body up onto his feet. "I'd say you earnt it. You saved my life, what greater reward is there a man can offer after such a feat?"

This is a trick. It has to be. He's willingly giving her to me? Oh, I know he's shared her a few times, I know he's had a few friends over, that he's taken to drugging her too, ensuring her compliance when he thinks she'll be difficult about it.

The other guards have spoken of her laid out, practically dead to the world while he's stood there and watched as another man has fucked her

lifeless body. I can't say I see the appeal, where's the fun in fucking someone if you can't see their reaction to it?

Gunther glances at his watch, then at my face. "She's being prepared now..." He begins but I cut across him.

"What are the rules?" I ask.

Gunther frowns. "Rules?" He repeats.

"Boundaries, anything off limits?" If I get to fuck her, I get to play with her for a few hours, then I want to ensure I can do as I wish, I'm not going to fall into his trap, I'm not going to give him ammunition to use against me.

He stares at me harder, stares at me like he's trying to see the trick. Only, it's too clever for him to work out. I've seen the way my brother manages him, I've seen the way Magnus speaks to him. I need him to tell me I've got free rein because his limited imagination will never believe all the things I plan to do to her, all the ways in which I'm going to hurt his precious little wife.

He twitches his head, just a little, like there's something inside, trying to get out. "She sees too much." He whispers, before fixing his beady little gaze on me, "You can do what you like, you can use her however you see fit, but I want that sorted. I want that fixed, do you understand?"

I pause, staring back at him. Surely, he's not saying what I think he is?

"They are watching." Gunther whispers. "Everyone is watching. How do I know she's not a part of it too?"

"Your wife?" I reply. The woman is locked up in her room all day. She wouldn't have the means or opportunity to be part of anything.

He glances around, stares into the corners and then runs his hands through his hair. "Fix it, Blake. Fix it. That's my rule, that's my requirement for allowing you to fuck my wife."

The way he says it makes it sound like I came to him begging, not the other way around.

I grit my teeth, turning to leave, and as I do, I see her eyes, her beautiful iridescent blue eyes.

He wants them gone. He wants them erased.

I won't let him do it, at least, not the way he plans. They're too pretty to simply destroy. Too pretty to simply put out forever. Such a jewel should be treasured, should be kept safe. Immortalised almost.

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CHAPTER FORTY-TWO



Pailtyn

My heart sinks more with every step I take. Ada was told to prepare me, and I know exactly what that means. What the next few hours will entail.

As we approach my old room, I stumble and Gunther looks at me, raising an eyebrow questioningly. Like he can't tell I'm literally falling apart inside.

I don't bother to plea. I don't bother to say a word. I know it won't make any difference. I guess I'm learning now, I guess he's finally breaking me down.

As I walk in, I can see there's a bunch of toys on the side. Lube too. Everything a person could possibly need for a night of debauchery. My stomach twists and I don't want to contemplate in this moment who it might be using them.

Gunther tells me to wait so I stand with my back to the door and I stare off at the wall ahead of me, wishing my mind would break, wishing I could be as crazy as he is. Would that make everything better? Would that mean I'd at least enjoy the carnage?

When I hear footsteps again, a wave of bile rises so suddenly it's all I can do not to throw up.

"Wife." Gunther calls.

I don't look. I don't even bother to turn. Whoever the fuck it is will be more than happy to strip me here, where I stand.

I know it pisses him off but whoever is here clearly doesn't react enough for my husband to care, so he steps back, leaving us alone and I hear the door click shut.

Silence. Awful, excruciating silence follows.

Is this man doing it to torture me further? Does he delight in my misery?

He takes a step and it's so quiet, I nearly miss it.

As he gets closer, I shut my eyes tight. I don't want to see his face. Perhaps, if he remains faceless, then this will be more bearable a memory to have.

His fingers brush my hair back. I can feel the texture of his skin, the roughness as he traces the silent tear that's somehow escaped.

"You're so pretty when you cry." He says.

Fear. Utter fear explodes in my chest. I stumble back, my eyes open wide as I see him. As I see *that* man, that guard.

"No," I gasp. "No."

He grins back at me, his entire body dwarfing mine, engulfing mine from just his size alone. "I saved your husband's life today, malktā." He states. "Guess what he granted me in return?"

I shake my head. My eyes dart to the door and before I can stop myself, I'm running, sprinting, trying to get the damned thing open. Only, it's locked. It won't budge an inch.

My husband locked me in with a monster.

"No." I scream, slamming my fists into the wood. "No."

"I get to fuck you." Devin states, as he stalks towards me. "I get to play with you, hurt you, do whatever the fuck I want."

I scream. I pound my fists harder.

He grabs me by my hair, dragging me back. I land a punch, a good punch, getting his jaw enough to make him register it but it doesn't make him stop.

He hauls me over to the bed, dumps me on it and then he's stripping me, stripping what little I have covering my body.

"No." I scream, slapping, kicking, fighting harder, fighting for my very life.

He pins me down, using his knees to hold my arms in place as he straddles me.

"Is all this fighting for me? You're normally so docile, so boring." He says, cupping my cheek. "You're making my cock hard just watching you."

"Fuck you." I spit.

He grins more, lowering his mouth to my ear. His hot breath sends a shiver through me as he speaks.

"Do you realise how much your resistance turns me on?"

He's a bastard. An absolute bastard. I buck my head back, slamming it into his face and he groans as if he enjoys the pain.

He hauls my hands up, tying them together with a chunk of rope that he fixes to the bedframe. And I'm rendered immobile, defenceless, completely fucking useless.

He pulls my legs, straightening my body as I try to curl up.

"Don't fucking move." He says, before standing at the end of the bed, staring at me.

I can't look at him. I can't bear the thought that I'm here, trapped, imprisoned with this monster and for the next I don't know how many hours, he's free to do what he likes.

I can feel his eyes on me. I can hear his breathing, he feels like beast about to pounce, a devil about to devour me whole.

"Don't do this." I gasp. I know it's pointless. I know the man has no conscience. No shame. He's as bad as my husband, no, in so many ways, I think he's worse. Far fucking worse.

He tilts his head; something flashes in those deadly eyes of his. He turns, stalking to where the sideboard is, to where those toys are.

When he comes back, I can see the thing in his hand, and it makes me whimper more.

"Don't." I plead again. "Please, don't..."

He clammers onto the bed, yanking my legs apart so forcefully it hurts. As he settles himself between them, my face radiates with the shame. He can see me. He can see all of me. I know he's seen me naked before, I know he's seen that part of me, but this feels so much worse.

He drags the toy between my labia. It's made of some plastic or other. He hasn't lubricated it at all and I don't know whether to feel relieved or not that he's left the bottle where it is, that it's untouched.

"I'm going to fuck you." He says, meeting my eyes. "Why wouldn't I, when your husband has laid you out so nicely for me?"

He drags the toy up, making slow deliberate circles that, to my horror, doesn't even feel that bad.

"I'm going to fuck you, Malktā. And because you've been such a little bitch, I'm going to make sure it hurts."

I scream as he plunges that toy into me, as it gets stuck on something inside me and he uses all his strength to force it past, to bury it as far as he can.

My legs kick out. My body physically locks up with the most excruciating pain.

He drags the toy out, stares at it as if he's trying to see whether he's made me bleed already.

"You know what I have noticed." He says as he focuses once more on that awful pressure point. Circling. Tormenting me. "You don't come. All the times he fucks you, all the times anyone of us has touched you, not once have you come for us."

I grit my teeth. Like a woman would ever come when she's being held down and forced to do things she doesn't want.

"Is your cunt broken, is that it?" He asks, staring between my legs. "Are you so damned frigid you don't even know how to get off?"

I clench my teeth together so hard, refusing to reply, refusing to give him anything.

He throws his head back and laughs and it feels like I've waved a red rag at a bull.

"I'm going to make you come, bitch. I'm going to make you come so many times it's going to hurt. I'm going to hold you down and force you for hours. I'm going to bend your body, bend your mind, I'm going to have you weeping, crying, begging me to stop and you want to know the best bit..."

He reaches up, grabs my throat, and squeezes just enough to make my heart stop.

“When I finally break you, you’re going to scream my name like I’m your god.”

“Like fuck I will.” I hiss.

He smirks more, laughs at my response, and then turns the damned toy on.

I can feel the vibration, I can hear that buzzing sound, and I swear that noise will follow me, will haunt me, will be playing in my head while I’m trapped in the very pits of hell.

I jolt as he puts it up against me, as he holds it right where he knows it will ruin me.

“No,” I scream. “No.”

He shoves his face right into mine, scrutinizes every minute second of my shame.

My thighs shake, my body revolts. I do everything I can to stop this, to fight this. But it’s too much, it’s too good, too... I arch my back, crying as something inside me takes over, some feeling I don’t want override all the hate and disgust I have in this moment.

My legs kick out, my body jerks and I know exactly what’s happened as the scream leaves my lips.

Devin stares at me, smirking, like he’s proven some point. Only, he hasn’t. Not really. Anyone can get another to come in such conditions, at least that’s what I tell myself. That’s how I rationalise this. It’s not my body, it’s not him winning something over me. It’s just biology. Nothing more. Nothing complex about it.

He moves the thing, circling my most sensitive part and a shake my head without thinking. He got what he wanted, why the fuck is he doing more?

‘I’m going to make you come so many times it’s going to hurt.’ His words ring out in my head. They condemn me.

He puts that thing on my clit again, he tortures me more.

My tears stream down my face, my body is lost in both the shame and humiliation that I’m doing this, I’m giving him exactly what he wants and, on some level, I’m desperate for it.

“Slut.” Devin says. “Dirty little slut.”

I am a slut. A slut and a whore and a disgusting piece of shit but I can't stop the way my hips jerk, the way my pussy throbs. The way I come so many times I do lose count.

And then he's lining his cock up, sliding himself into me, no, not sliding, forcing, demanding. Those awful metal spikes push up against my insides, they tear into my flesh and every thrust he makes cuts me more.

I arch my back, I kick out, I try to get the bastard off me but he's too strong, too powerful.

He starts pounding into me, fucking me so roughly, he has to grab my body to hold me in place despite the rope.

I cry out. I beg him to stop. I beg over and over and all he does is tell me how good I feel, how much I deserve this. How I've somehow been tempting him for so long now and this is my comeuppance, this is the consequence. I don't understand what he means, I don't understand what the fuck he's talking about but as finally comes in me, I'm so mentally broken I don't even feel relief that it's over.

He pulls himself out, then stares at where I know he's leaking out of me.

"Wouldn't it be funny if I got you pregnant." He says. "What would you husband do as you grew fat with my child and not his?"

My stomach churns at the thought. I know that won't happen. I know Gunther will never let such a pregnancy get to that point. He's already told me numerous times that if I dare to insult him by carrying another man's child, he'll rip the infant from my womb with his bare hands.

Devin watches me like he knows it too, like he's heard all those nasty things my husband has said to me while he's beating me, while he's raping me.

I let out a ragged breath, turning my face as far from view as I can. It's done now. This is done. Devin got his moment of fun. I got another awful memory to try to reconcile myself with.

"Get out." I whisper.

"What did you say?" He snarls back.

I shut my eyes, clenching my fists. "Get out." I say more forcefully. "You got what you wanted; you took what my husband permitted. The deed is done. You can fuck off back to your mates in that shitty barracks."

He lets out a laugh, a cruel, nasty laugh that makes me feel even more defeated.

“Did he not tell you?” He says. “I don’t just get to fuck you once, Paitlyn, I get to fuck you all night.”

“What?” That can’t be true. That can’t be possible.

Only, the look on his face tells me it is.

Gunther has never granted anyone a whole night before. All his other nasty friends fuck and then leave. What possible reason does he have to allow Devin such access?

“I saved your husbands life.” Devin states, dropping to his knees, dropping right between my thighs. “The least you can do is show me your gratitude.”

He yanks my thighs, yanks my body up and to my horror, he drops his mouth right to the centre of it. I don’t know what to think, what to feel, how to even tolerate the abuse he’s delving out because in this moment, it doesn’t feel like abuse, it feels incredible. It feels too good.

I hate it. I hate that he’s doing this, touching me like this, making me feel *this*.

The swipes of his tongue makes me feel giddy, make me feel like I’m hallucinating, that I’ve somehow drifted off into an alternate universe where people are good and kind, and things such as pain don’t exist.

He pushes it deep into me and I swear my eyes roll back in my head.

I can’t do this. I can’t. I need him to stop. I need this all to stop. I think I’d rather take the pain, take his brutality than have to face the knowledge that he’s making me feel this, making me do this, making my body betray me in the worst possible of ways.

He pulls off, staring up at me with that devilish grin that tells me he knows exactly what he’s up to.

“Bastard.” I spit, hoping he hears all the venom in my voice right now.

He doesn’t say anything back, he just moves his fingers to start finger fucking me before he returns his lips to devouring my clit.

With horror, I realise I’m grinding against him. Encouraging him.

Another orgasm is peaking and this one feels so much more than the previous. It feels more weighted, more intense and far more fucking shameful. I whimper, shaking my head, trying to tell myself that this is wrong, that all of this is wrong but it’s too late, far too fucking late.

I topple over, I combust, I let out a wail that feels far more agony than it does pleasure, and just as I do, Devin’s teeth snap around my clit, they

clamp down on it, twisting, biting, and the brief moment of pleasure turns to the most excruciating agony.

He drops my legs, drops my body like I'm a piece of trash and then he gets up, stalks over to grab something else before returning.

I'm exhausted, drained, both emotionally and physically. I half wish I could just pass out, that he could just knock me unconscious, beat me hard around the head and spare me the rest of whatever he has planned.

"Five." He states. "Five orgasms. You've come tonight more times than I bet you have the entire time you've been married."

"Fuck you."

I slam a foot into his face, at least I try to. He's quick to react, quick to grab my ankle and twist my leg until I think he might make my bone snap, and I cry out, screaming my submission.

"That's not how a lady behaves." He states, like he has any idea about it. Like he's ever been around decent human beings. He's probably spent his entire life holed up in Oblivion, with the worst dredges of society.

He leans down over me, sweeping my hair from my face. "Such a pretty whore." He murmurs.

He grabs my left ankle, yanking it as wide as he can before he ties it off. I jerk out, trying to get myself free, but he's quick to grab my right and repeat the same so that I'm completely spreadeagled now. Completely helpless.

"Nice and tight." He says, checking it like there's any way I could get myself free.

"Please..." I gasp. I just want this to end. I need this to end. I physically can't take anymore of this.

He tutts, as though my words are an annoyance but when he produces the knife my please turn to something far louder, far more panicked.

"Please," I scream out, "Please, don't, don't..."

He backhands me hard enough that he knocks me out for a few seconds. When I come back round, he's on me, straddling me, and that knife is far too fucking close.

I feel dazed, I feel lightheaded. My breath hitches, my heart thumps louder and louder as he drags the flat side over my skin. I don't dare move, and I know it's the reaction he wants, and yet, what else can I do?

As he twists the thing, I can feel it literally slicing me up, slicing me open.

I scream, trying to move away, but the restraints hold firm and there's nothing I can do but simply lay here and take it.

He watches me as if he's almost bored by this and I want to kick him so hard in the face.

He then lowers his mouth, tracing the stream of blood, smearing it with his tongue.

"Fucking delicious." He mutters.

"You're a psycho." I spit back. "And absolute psycho."

His lip curls, he casts his eyes over me and then draws the blade further across my flesh.

It hurts. Every cut, every inch, every bit of me that he slices into.

I throw my head back, I shut my eyes, I hiss and bite my tongue so hard because I don't want him to know that he's winning. But he is, isn't he? He and Gunther too. Both of them, all of them, every guard in this Palace, every man my husband gifts me to. Every single one of them has beaten me.

"You bleed so prettily." He says, sounding like he's actually high. Like seeing all of this, all my blood is physically affecting his brainwaves.

My tears start falling heavier. I can't seem to stop them, and they slide down my cheeks, down onto my chest, mixing with the blood, watering it down.

"So fucking beautiful." Devin says, staring at me. "You look angelic, like you've just fallen from the heights of heaven, and I'm the devil come to claim you."

I gulp. I can well believe that. He is a devil. He's a lunatic too. He's sick and twisted, and just as fucked up as my husband – no, he's even worse. Because my husband's barbarity doesn't feel like this, doesn't hurt like this.

Gunther is a brute, but Devin, Devin's madness is calculated, it's precise.

Devin forces another shameful orgasm from me before he undoes the bindings, and I dare to hope that this is it. That he's done with me. Afterall, he's humiliated me, fucked me, cut me up, what more could there be left?

He carries my body because I'm too weak, too limp to stand, and he lets me flop against him.

A vision seems to appear before me. At first, I think it's Christ himself, that he's there, carrying me, fresh from his crucifixion, that he's granting me mercy, granting me my salvation.

Only, with horror, I realise that I'm in front of a mirror, that I'm staring at myself.

It's not a vision at all. It's me. I'm the one that is bleeding.

I choke on my breath, my heart feels like it actually stops beating. What has he done to me? What the fuck is it?

He raises a finger tracing the swirls and I hiss at the sharp pain.

"I made you prettier." He whispers into my ear. "I turned you into a real masterpiece."

A masterpiece? I stare at myself, at my flesh. He's carved into it all, he's cut some sort of pattern, something that streaks across my entirety.

I whimper, realising that this, this is permanent. What he's done will always be here.

"Now, every time someone looks at you, every time you look at yourself too, you'll see me, you'll see my claim. My ownership."

What the fuck? My legs give way, they buckle beneath me and his arms quickly catch my weight.

"I'm not yours." I spit. "I never have been. And I never want to be. You bastards might take my body but none of you have a claim on my soul."

His hand wraps around my throat, he tightens it just enough that my eyes bulge.

"Don't kid yourself, Paitlyn. Your soul was mine from the moment you first saw me. That's why you follow me around, that's why your eyes always find mine, why you search me out, why you hunger for me, hunger for my pain, my torment."

"Like fuck I do." I snarl.

What madness is he saying? What lies has he convinced himself of? I don't want him. I don't want any of them. "You can burn in hell, all of you." I half-scream.

He groans as if I've said something sexy, something tempting. "Hell is where I belong." He agrees. "And you will be there beside me, burning in our damnation."

CHAPTER

FORTY-THREE



Devin

She's a vision. A masterpiece I can't tear my eyes from. I hold her bleeding body against mine and I carry her back to the bed. She's lost her fight now, lost all that angry defiance. I can't tell if I prefer her like this, broken and exhausted because of the hurt I've caused, or when she's flinging insults, when she's trying to beat me. As if she could.

Little whore. Scheming temptress.

I know what she's done. I know. It's too late to deny it now, too late to pretend otherwise. My heart is beating rapidly at the mere contact of her skin against mine. My eyes can't stop devouring every inch of her bleeding flesh.

She is mine.

She is.

God may condemn us. The Brethren certainly will, but this woman, this creature, she is mine, all fucking mine.

The sheets soak up her blood, they slowly turn a pretty red as she lays there, with her eyes so tightly shut.

I thought being here, doing this would sate the anger in me, the hate too. I thought that finally being granted alone time would purge whatever this demon is inside me. But instead, it's grown, it's slithered into every piece of me, it's overtaken everything.

Hurting her should have been enough. It's always worked before. It's always purged the voices, purged the need, kept that part of me in check.

So why the fuck isn't it enough this time?

My fists clench into tight little balls. Where my hand is entwined with her hair, I realise I'm yanking it. For a second a voice in my head says to let it go, to drop the strands, that continuing to do so will hurt her.

As if I haven't hurt her enough. I sneer at myself. Who the fuck am I? What the fuck is this?

But my hand drops anyway, my fingers relax, and those tresses that feel more like silk than hair slip through, catching the low lamplight, glinting gold as if they're mocking me.

A tiny noise catches my attention. I know it's coming from her, but when I turn my gaze up to her face, I can see she's still unconscious.

She whimpers again, louder. Her face scrunches up, her eyes seem to flit so fast behind those delicate lids.

Is she dreaming? Is she having a nightmare?

My lips quirk, wondering what could possibly be haunting her. Is it me? Is it her husband? For some reason, that thought pisses me off. I want it to be me, I want to be the one that haunts her days and well as her nights. I want to be the one she's petrified of. Not her husband. Not that pathetic excuse for a man.

I want her to fear me more than anything else, more than anyone else.

I draw a deep breath; one filled with the scent of jasmine and rose.

She should fear me. She *will* fear me. I'll make sure of it. I want her to be haunted by me, to be convinced I'm hiding in every shadow, behind every corner.

I want her to shut her eyes and I'm there, in her head, in her mind. Possessing every tiny piece of her.

"She sees too much."

Gunther's words ring in my head and I know then what I have to do. That it has to be me. That this here is the only way to save them, to keep them.

Besides, if I don't do it, someone else will. And I can't have that. I can't.

I don't realise I'm moving until I'm on top of her, until the knife is back in my hand and I'm pinning her eyelid open, forcing the skin back on itself.

She's awake now. She's screaming, only the noise doesn't sound unpleasant, it sounds like a lullaby, it sounds like a song she's singing for my ears only.

My skin erupts into goosebumps, my body feels electric, alive.

I pop one eyeball out as carefully as I can. I don't want to pierce it. I don't want to damage it. And I need to leave the tear duct in place too, because she cries too prettily to take that delicacy away.

The eyeball flops down her cheek, leaving a little trail of blood. With my hand, I cup it, pulling it taut enough that I can slice through the string of muscle, through all the connecting tissue, freeing it from its captivity.

She fights me more with the second, bucking her body, playing a dangerous game that could result in my blade ending up in her skull.

She screams louder too. She sings so prettily.

Such pretty eyes. Such beautiful, beautiful eyes.

They say eyes are the window to a person's soul. Well, now, I own that part of her. I've claimed it, stolen it. No other man will ever be able to look at her from now on and see what I have.

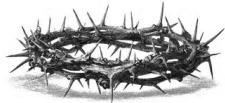
As I hold them both in my hand, they feel so delicate, so fragile. The most precious jewels on earth.

I clamber off the bed, leaving her there, writhing, whimpering, clawing at her face. I know she's not going anywhere now, that when I return, she'll be here still. Maybe I'll fuck her one last time. Give her one final hit before I return her to her husband's wrinkled old grasp.

I slip from room, knowing that if I don't do this now, then they'll spoil. I've spent enough time in Oblivion to know how to preserve body parts.

I find a jar, it's not ideal but I can transfer them to something more suitable in time. I plop them both in and fill the void with alcohol.

These are mine now. All mine.



WHEN I RETURN TO THE SUITE, SHE'S LAYING THERE, HOWLING, ON THE floor. She must have rolled off the bed, must have become disorientated without me there.

I pick her up, place her back on those bloodstained sheets, brushing the hair from her face.

There's two hollow bleeding holes where her eyes were.

They stare back at me and I can't help but smile at the knowledge that no one will ever lay their own eyes on them again.

It's a piece of her I'm keeping.

A piece of her I'll have for the rest of my days.

And for Paitlyn, the very last thing she remembers, the last thing she ever saw was me.

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CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR



Pailtyn

He took my eyes. He took my eyes.
I wake alone. In darkness.
Every breath I take, every move, feels like my skin is ripping open.

He cut me. He carved me up.
But worse than all of that, he stole my eyes. He gouged them right out of my skull.

I scream out, I scream, and I scream, and I can't stop it. I can't.
It doesn't matter what I do, it doesn't matter if Gunther dies, if I somehow, miraculously, escape this hellscape, I'll never rid myself of it. Of him.

My eyelids are swollen shut but that doesn't stop the pain and, in my head, all I can see is that vision of him, the way he smiled, the way he savoured every horrific moment as he butchered me.

I know it's the last thing I will ever see, the last thing I will remember. And I also know that that too is what he wanted.

When I hear footsteps, I freeze, but the scream of horror tells me that it's Ada.

What will Gunther do? What will he say? Am I naïve to think that he might punish Devin for this insult? Afterall, I'm his wife. I'm his property, not Devin's.

Gunther may like to share me, may like to abuse me in all the worst ways imaginable but I wonder how he will feel when every time he looks at me from now on, my skin will scream the fact that another man has touched me, has hurt me, has owned me.

And the fact that he took my sight...

No, Devin hasn't owned me. None of them have. None of those bastards will ever get to make that claim about me, no matter what they do to my body.

"Jesus Christ." Ada says, rushing to me.

I tremble, flinching at her touch, even though I know she's trying to help.

She pulls the covers off, and as I try to sit up, a wave of dizziness hits me so hard.

It feels disorientating. It feels wrong.

I can't stop the panic attack that takes over.

Everything is black, no, not black, it's worse than that, different than that. When I shut my eyes before, I could see the light in the room beyond, I could make out things, make out movement.

Now, there is nothing. Not darkness, just the absence of everything.

I know I'm in my bed, I know the rough parameters of this space, but I'm blind. Completely and utterly I'm blind.

My tears start to fall but because my eye sockets are essentially wounds it hurts so much.

I hear Ada gasp as the true extent of what that monster did is revealed, and in my shame, I drop my head, crying out more as the cuts on my arms give way.

Everything hurts. Every muscle, every nerve, every single part of my body.

“It’s okay.” Ada says gently. “Perhaps it’s best if you just stay here in bed and...” Her voice trails off and I know who’s there, who’s suddenly appeared.

“Like a whore.” Gunther snarls from what sounds like so far away.

Dear God, please don’t let him want me right now. I can’t take it. I can’t even contemplate it. Every part of me, every cell in my body is in agony from what I endured last night. I know I can’t take anymore, I know it.

Gunther stalks over to me. I hear the thump as Ada is pushed out of the way and then he’s gripping my face, no doubt examining my mutilated body.

“Blake.” He hollers, making me jump more.

I think a part of me dies, I think a part of me truly, finally, shatters entirely as I hear that man strut in. I can feel his presence, even if I can’t see it. I feel him standing there, towering over us all.

“You did all this?” Gunther says, like he thinks I just woke up and did it myself.

“I did.” Devin replies, his voice completely devoid of anything.

“You cut her skin?” He drags a finger across one of the deeper slices and searing hot pain explodes at the contact. “Why?” Gunther asks, ignoring my whimpers like he can’t hear them.

I hear the rustle of fabric as someone shrugs. “Why not?” Devin says.

It’s a lie. I know it is. I remember every word he said, every bit of it. That these are a form of ownership, that this bastard did this on purpose, not on a whim.

I open my mouth to say so, but my husband’s laughter cuts through everything “God, I thought Magnus was the fucked up one of you Blakes, turns out you’re even worse.”

Devin doesn’t reply. He just stands there, mute and yet just as deadly as ever.

I thought I hated him before, but what I feel now, it’s not hate, it’s something far, far deeper than that.



I DON'T LEAVE THIS ROOM FOR DAYS. I FEEL LIKE I'M TRAPPED IN A CRIME scene. Trapped in my own body in a way I can now never escape.

The doctor has to come to sort out the mess that is my eyes. He cleans the wounds, confirms what I already know, that my nerves have been severed, that there's no chance, even if I had a transplant, that I'd get my sight back.

Every day, Ada rubs something into those nasty wounds all over my skin. It stings but it also soothes. She tells me that it will help it to heal, that it will reduce the scarring, but I know that won't happen.

Devin didn't just carve willy nilly. He cut with intention. He cut me in a way to ensure it would last on my body until I was a rotting corpse.

When I'm finally able to move without ripping the scabs open, I'm escorted back through the Palace and back to Gunther's suite.

Every step I take feels impossible. I clutch Ada's hand, needing her support for guidance. She does her best to tell me where to step, when to raise my feet, when to turn, but I still stub my toes so many times.

And all this does is cement the new horror of my situation; that even if all the doors were open and every guard was gone, I'd never be able to run now.

I'll never be able to escape.

And with every step, I feel like I'm being watched. My skin itches, it prickles, and I know it has nothing to do with the new adornment.

When we slide the doors shut, it's almost a relief.

Ada helps me to where the couch is and I sink into it, my panic still causing me to tremble violently.

I just need this to end. I need everything to end.

Something moves in my periphery, fingers brush against my shoulder, and I scream out, feeling like I've hit the roof with the amount I've jumped.

Hot, stinking breath hits my face. A heavy breathing that I'd know anywhere accompanies the similar body odour to the one my husband has.

Whatever his facial expression is, I don't know, but I know who's there, who was probably waiting for me this entire time. Guthrie.

"Get out." I scream.

What the fuck is he doing here anyway? My head darts wildly around, expecting Gunther to be here, expecting to hear him declare that I have to fuck his brother now.

But my dear husband is notably absent, and that tells me everything I need to know.

“I’m trying to help you.” Guthrie says, cupping my cheek. “I know what’s going on, what this is...”

“What, what are you talking about?” I reply. I’m too exhausted and too broken for this, and my nerves are too close to shreds. My heart is still racing, still going a million miles from how he scared me.

“Gunther is losing control.” Guthrie says, his voice shifting like he’s glancing over his shoulder, but I know Ada is right beside me, does he not care for her witnessing this? “He was always on the cusp, but something has pushed him over the edge.”

“So?” I snap back. It’s more than evident what my husband is. My body bears the scars, my mind bears the haunting memories that I know will never fade, will never ever leave me.

“I can help you, I can help with all of this...”

“For what price?” Oh, I know there’s a price. There always is.

His fingers trace my cheek, “You look so innocent Paitlyn, so young, and yet, I think you’re just as shrewd as the rest of us. If you have half your mother’s wits, then I know you’ve got your own plans in place.”

I gulp, feeling like those words are a threat, not a compliment. What does Guthrie know of my mother?

My stomach twists with bile, my heart seems to beat faster, as though it’s preparing for another fight.

No. I won’t do that. I won’t be that. My husband might force me, but I will not willingly turn myself into *this*. I doubt he even knows a thing anyway. I bet he looks at me and see some silly little bitch he can manipulate, some silly little girl he can control. Well, I’m not that, not anymore. I might be all but powerless, I might be almost completely helpless, but I am not yet that weak.

“Get out.” I hiss, my fear turning to a raging anger that for once, I can’t contain.

Guthrie says something but I don’t catch the words. I don’t wait to listen.

I slam my fist into where I think his jaw is, beating him back, turning into some feral beast. And I can’t stop, I don’t want to. I rip open all those wounds again, feeling my skin turn to agony.

The strong arms that I know are the guards pull me off him, pull Guthrie away. He's shouting, hollering, calling me a good for nothing, ungrateful whore.

"You come near me again and I'll gut you." I spit. I have no means to back that statement up, I'm can't even see, and I have no weapon either, but I want him to fear me, I want him to know that I'm not the weak broken little thing his brother is determined to make of me.

Guthrie stops at what I guess is the door, "Soon, Paitlyn, really soon, I'm going to make you regret those words."

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CHAPTER

FORTY-FIVE



Pailtyn

T t's been three weeks since he stole my eyes.
Since he carved me up too.

Ada tries to help me get my bearings by having me count the steps from the bed to the bathroom, by having me feel my way around. It helps and it doesn't. I know I'm a sitting duck here. Between my husband, his disgusting brother, and the guards, it's all a matter of time before someone decides to do something.

Gunther is more paranoid than ever. I think the fact I'm blind now is the only thing that seems to sate him. Did he suspect me of being involved in whatever delusions are running around in his head?

He's had the Palace searched every single day since the assassination attempt, had every drawer turned out, had every nook and cranny investigated. Half the servants have been replaced. The ones who are

missing were apparently tortured to death. Some of the guards are removed too, though notably, Devin is not one of them.

Since his great saving moment, he's been promoted. My dear husband took so much delight in telling me that Devin Blake is now Captain of the Guard, second only to Commander Malik.

I'm itching to tell Gunther what these scars mean, what Devin confessed, but a voice in my head tells me if I do that, it won't just be Devin paying the consequences. That I'll be punished too. Or worse, Gunther will outright call me a liar and then he'll throw me to the guards, throw me back into the viper's pit and let them completely and utterly destroy me.

Without my sight, I don't stand a chance.

My husband began fucking me again the moment my wounds healed enough. What he doesn't know is, I had another period, though mercifully we managed to hide it from him, and everyone else too.

I wasn't hauled out, I wasn't thrown into a shed, locked away like I'm diseased. I'm almost grateful to that monster for what he did, because it at least spared me a measly week of agony.

Tonight, we're having another party. I know it's long overdue. Gunther declared that there would be no more guests, no one could get near the Palace without his say so. But apparently, these little soirees don't count.

Is it wrong to wish one of these so-called friends might just do us all a favour and gut him? I can just imagine it, some faceless person stepping forward, slashing out, the brightness of the blade, the rich redness of his blood as his gut is slashed right into two.

I shake my head slightly, telling myself that while understandable, such a thought is still a sin.

My hand is clinging to his chair, anchoring me to it. It was nearly impossible for me to get to this room unaided. I don't know what I'm wearing exactly but the fabric is flimsy and barely covering. I guess that doesn't matter though because I've been so mutilated, my husband actually takes pity on me. He declares me to be 'off-limits' and has Magnus Blake deliver a fresh batch of slaves for their amusement instead.

I don't know what his friends think. If they believe my husband is responsible for all the barbarity I've suffered.

I, thankfully, am spared their awful looks, spared the leers, but I can hear the whispers all the same. That's the one thing I have gained. My

hearing, my smell, all my other senses seem to be heightened.

I can hear all the nasty things they murmur when they think my dear husband isn't paying them attention. I can smell him too; Gunther now stinks worse than ever. Does he even wash? I've never seen him take a shower, never seen him bathe. But surely, he must wash. He's not so unkempt as that.

I sense Gunther rise from his throne-like chair beside me. I listen intently as his footsteps recede, each step a drumbeat signalling his departure from my side.

And as soon as he's gone, as soon as he's far enough away, all those whispers begin. All those hushed words that they don't want him to hear. I used to think all these people here were his friends, that they enjoyed the barbarity as much as he did, and though that might be the case, I'm certain now that none of them would care all that much for his downfall. At least, they wouldn't care what became of Gunther. They would only care about how it affected them, their interests, and their family's good names and fortune.

"Soon." Someone murmurs low enough that I'm certain he thinks no one can hear him. "Soon they will act."

"He sent away my brother. He had his entire family sentenced to a year in Oblivion." Another whispers, sounding more desperate, more panicked.

"I know, and I'm sorry..."

"Even Patty went there. Patty. The girl is twelve years of age..."

"I know." The other replies. "He's trying to force Blake's hand, to force him to open the Ark."

"Jesus Christ." He hisses back.

"It will happen, Gunther will be sorted. Everything is in place. But we cannot make a mistake here. One fuck up and you know how this will end. Oblivion will seem like a dream compared to what Gunther will do if he realises we're planning to oust him. You saw what he's done to his wife..."

I feel their eyes on me, I feel the way they both stare at me, even though I can't see it. It takes all I have to remain calm, to look like I've dozed off, like I can't hear them. But the excitement I feel, the promise I hear in their words.

Someone is working to get rid of Gunther, someone is going to remove him. It's so hard not to jump for joy. That bastard is finally getting what he deserves. Finally going to face some form of justice.

They may not have said the words but the only way a Chapter Lord can be removed is if they die. My heart leaps at the prospect that Gunther will die very painfully indeed.

The two men move away and seconds later my dear husband plonks himself down beside me.

His pudgy fingers grab my face, turning my head in his direction.

“You look tired, wife. Bored too.” He comments.

I draw in a deep breath and say nothing back. I’ve learnt now that he doesn’t want a response. He doesn’t want anything from me that proves I’m a living, breathing person.

After another agonising hour he gets to his feet, and he grabs my arm, announcing he is done for the night.

He leads me out, laughing as I stumble over various different objects that are in my way, and I swear he does it on purpose. He intentionally puts me on a path that causes me to trip over a chair, and slam into a table.

I’m quick to bite down the gasps, quick to silence the cries, even as one of his friends shouts out that I’m a stupid blind bitch now.

Gunther laughs at that. He laughs so hard, as if it’s the funniest thing he’s heard, and it takes everything I have not to scowl.

“Maybe I should have done that sooner.” He says.

He comes to an abrupt stop and, as he grips my head, I can already sense who is there. I can smell him. That recognisable hint of oud, of tobacco, of horror too.

“Shall we thank him, wife?” Gunther says. “Blake’s amendments to your body have been a great improvement indeed.”

I gulp, my stomach threatening to make me spew up all over them both.

“Say it.” Gunther barks, tightening his grip. “Thank him.”

I don’t want to do it. Who the fuck would ever thank someone for mutilating them the way Devin has me? And yet, I’m helpless, more than helpless.

Gunther is going to die. Gunther is going to be eliminated. I whisper those words in my head. I scream them so loud to try and mitigate the shame and disgust I feel but it does no good. It has no effect whatsoever.

“Thank you.” I whisper. Hating myself. Hating them, hating everything about this moment, my life, and the knowledge that I cannot do anything to stop this nightmare.

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CHAPTER

FORTY-SIX



Devin

He's twitching. Fidgeting. Giving every sign that he's about to do something outrageous again.

I can see the looks Curtis and Mace are giving and I brace myself for whatever shit is about to happen.

We're in the Senate. Around us, all the members are sat, sullen faced, clearly pissed off at being forcibly summoned here. For hours Gunther has been blustering off about the fact that he is God's chosen, he is our sanctified leader, and as such, every word he utters is holy.

His spit covers the polished table in front of us as he gets louder and louder.

But enough of the Senate are arguing back. Enough are clearly sick of his shit.

"It cannot be done." Aldric says, folding his arms. "It will cause outrage."

"Bullshit." Gunther replies. "What man would turn down the option of having multiple wives? Hell, we'll even hold ceremonies, I'll be the first, I'll lead by example, there were what, six other girls, other Founders, I'll marry them all. One of those bitches will give me an heir if this one fails to..." He points across at Paitlyn, at where she's stood, still as a statue, her face a perfect mask of obedience.

I tilt my head slightly, studying her.

The doctors clearly cleaned her up after my little amendments. Her eyelids are sewn shut, but you have to really squint to realise it.

All those beautiful cuts are healing to the point that they're now fresh scars. Livid red marks across her body. She looks magnificent. She looks more majestic than ever.

I have her eyes. I have them.

I kept them safe, kept them clean. Every night I pull the jar out and stare at my new blue diamonds.

It's a wonder her husband never asked where they went. Stupid bastard, he cares so little for her, notices so little.

He doesn't see what she is, he doesn't see her for anything beyond what he can have.

I draw in a breath that feels constricted, that feels so heavy. *Who the fuck am I right now? What the fuck is this?*

The girl is nothing to me. She is nothing. She's a whore, a worthless bitch just like every other woman, and yet, no, I won't say it, I won't think it, I refuse to damn well admit it.

I narrow my eyes, clench my fists, telling myself that I must be tired, that's all. I haven't left this bloody Palace in weeks. Since the assassination attempt, no one has been allowed to leave with Gunther's direct say so. And with me being the biggest, meanest of all the guards, he seems determined to keep me close.

Perhaps he's convinced I'm the only one who would save him. Would bother to. I guess that little punch up didn't exactly instil any confidence in the rest of us, did it?

"It will be done." Gunther bellows, slamming his fist onto the table. "I want it, I demand it."

Aldric lets out a low sigh, and he looks like he's trying to reason with a toddler.

"Why don't you take more wives?" He suggests. "No one needs to know. Marry all those other girls, then you can breed them all..."

"And have all the Brethren turn on me as a result?" Gunther snarls back. "Do I look stupid? Do I look like a fool? No, we must all be culpable, we must all embark down this road together, that way no one can challenge it, no one can question it. All the pigs have to eat from the same trough..."

It feels like he reveals some sort of secret with those words. As though he's shown his hand.

He jolts, blinking rapidly, staring from face to face, while he mutters something incomprehensible under his breath. Yeah, the bastard knows he's fucked up. He knows he's said too much.

It's moments like this when I wonder if he's actually mad at all, if this isn't just an act, a way to test us, to provoke us, to see how far he can push us.

His head snaps to the right, his eyes clamp on the only woman in the room.

He grabs her, slamming her back onto the table, repeating the same exercise he's done so many times before. She's a distraction, I realise, a way to change the subject, to shut everyone up.

He rips at her dress, tears the fabric right off her, letting us all see those beautiful lines I etched into her skin. They've healed so so well. Even in this moment, I can't help but lick my lips as I see the damage.

She doesn't scream, she doesn't fight, she just lies there, silently letting the tears fall.

Gunther forces her legs open, propping them up against the backs of two chairs.

"Whore." He groans as he starts thrusting his fingers in and out of her. "Little whore."

"Chapter Lord..." Aldric says, sternly, like he's done with this shit.

Gunther shakes his head, screws his face up, but he continues the assault.

"Chapter Lord." Someone else says louder.

Again, Gunther doesn't do anything but continue on as if we're all as enthralled by this display as he is.

“Little whore, you think you’re so much better than me. You think you’re so superior. I’m chosen by God. Me, not you.”

What he’s saying makes no sense. The girl hasn’t said a word. Hasn’t done anything.

Gunther looks about, stares from face to face as if he’s just remembered everyone else is in the room.

“Well?” He splutters, “Will no one get this bitch to come?”

Enough of them react, enough of them decide to get in on the act. They surround her, obstruct my view of her pretty skin.

She cries out, like she’s finally putting up a fight.

“Come, bitch.” One of them spits, and I can tell he’s doing something, touching her, assaulting her.

“Fucking come.” Another mutters, “then we can all get on with more important things.”

“We’re not going anywhere.” Gunther shouts. “No one is leaving this room. Not until this bitch comes.”

I don’t know what makes me do it. I don’t know what stupidity takes over me, but I’m moving, snarling, pushing the bodies out the way.

She’s laying there on her back, her hands splayed like she been trying to fight them all off.

The minute I touch her, I know she knows it’s me. I can feel the way she reacts, the way her body trembles.

I grab her throat, forcing her flat onto the wood and I put my other hand where I have no right to touch. Where none of these bastards have any right to be.

“No...” She cries, as though I’d listen to her. As if I’d give a damn what she wants.

She arches her back, trying desperately to get away but there’s nowhere for her to go.

I tighten my grip around her throat, I increase the pressure of my thumb, circling, teasing, touching her in a manner none of these men would ever know how to.

Her legs kick out, her face starts to flush. I can feel it, I can hear it, her pitiful moans that she’s trying so hard to hide.

That’s it, Malktā. Let them know. Let them all see. Let them realise what you are, what this is, that only I know how to truly manipulate you, how to twist you, how to ruin you.

She shakes her head, like she's going to refuse me. As if I'd let her.

I narrow my eyes, lowering my face, tormenting her even though I know she can't see my face, and, as she shatters entirely, I know it's me causing it, it's me that did this. Me.

Her screams ring out. They echo around the chamber. No one else moves. No one seems to dare too.

As I let her go, as I step back, I realise suddenly what I've done. What complete and utter madness that was.

Gunther stares at me like he's seeing me afresh.

There's a voice in my head telling me to do it, to kill him, to kill them all. To cover this place in their blood, to paint the walls red, before I carry her out, full caveman style.

But that too is madness.

I step back, retreat, return to my place along the back edge, wondering if this act will be the final straw, if this moment will be my downfall. I can't look at the other guards, but I can feel their piercing gaze on me. None of them have moved from their posts. None of them have taken one step.

The room collectively holds its breath. Gunther shifts, staring from me to his wife, who is still sprawled out.

"Get up." He spits, reaching down, wrenching her up by her hair because he clearly doesn't have the patience to wait.

He drags her to the door then shoves her out. "Fucking whore." He mutters. "We have things to do. You think we want to be distracted by you?"

CHAPTER

FORTY-SEVEN



Devin

Our dear Chapter Lord is going away, going on a trip. Rumour between the guards is he's been summoned to a meeting by the Grand Master but no one can actually confirm that. And the fact he seems so buoyant suggest he's off on some jolly rather than heading for a bollocking.

Most of my friends get to go with him, get to provide protection but not me. No, I get to stay here, play babysitter to the whore again. My teeth grind as that sinks in. That I'm essentially grounded while they're jetting off to Italy for some actual fun.

I don't mean to, but my eyes find hers as soon as I enter their suite. She's stood in the corner, as far out the way as she possibly can be, as if she's trying to blend into the pretty wallpaper.

Gunther is droning on, giving some lecture that nobody cares to hear, and yet, no one is telling him to shut up.

I draw a low, deep breath, hoping to smell her, and it's hard not to be disappointed when all I can detect is the stench of our dear Chapter Lord's body odour.

"...and you will behave." Gunther barks, waving his hand for me to step closer. Summoning me the way one would a dog. "Blake here is going to be watching you the entire time I'm away. He's going to be on guard the entire time..." He punctuates that point by poking his chubby index finger in her direction like she can see it. "...you so much as blink the wrong way and he has orders to beat you, do you understand?"

She nods just enough for us both to register the movement.

"I said..." Gunther storms over, grabbing a fistful of her hair and yanking her face up to look at him, "do you understand?"

"Yes." She whispers so quietly.

He tilts his head, dragging his nose across the delicate skin of her cheek. "I chose him especially." He murmurs. "I know how much this particular guard petrifies you..."

She whimpers and it takes all I have to fight to urge to smirk.

He pushes her back, shoving her hard enough that she trips and lands on her arse on the floor. She doesn't try to get up. She just stays there, like she's waiting for something to happen.

Gunther continues packing, grabbing things, shoving them into a suitcase, even though the servants have already seen to everything necessary.

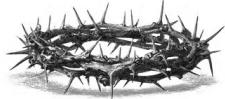
When he's done, he pulls me aside and tells me not to cut out anymore pieces of her, as if he imagines I'll what, take her nose? Take her ears?

"You wanna mutilate some bitches, get your brother to bring some slaves over from Oblivion, you can cut them up, cut their cunts out, do whatever the fuck you want to them, but I don't want you to make my wife ugly. The only thing going for her beyond her cunt is her face. Ruin that and I'll have to get rid, and the hassle of that..." He screws his face up, like he's not imagining already marrying a dozen other virgins, like he's not salivating at the prospect. "Do you understand?"

"Yes, Chapter Lord." I reply.

I don't need to cut her more. I don't need to do anything. My malktā is perfect as she is now.

He grunts, bellows for someone to carry all the extra bags and leaves without another glance at her.



SHE HASN'T MOVED FROM THAT SPOT. SHE'S JUST STAYED THERE, LIKE HER legs don't work.

I turn to walk away and leave her to it but as I do I hear the sound of something swooshing.

She slams into me, her entire body smashing into mine. Her fist finds my face and she gets a good enough hit to make my eyes actually water.

I fling her off the way one does a fly, sneering. "That the best you've got?"

She really is feisty today. Is it the thought of being all alone with me that's got her blood up?

"You absolute piece of shit." She snarls before grabbing my arm, turning me back to fully face her.

God, the way she loses it, the way that final grip on reality slips, it's delicious. It's more than that. It's addictive, it's incredible.

She throws herself at me again, not caring that I'm three times her size, not caring that she doesn't stand a chance in this fight.

My hand wraps around her throat. It's instinctive. It's exhilarating too, to feel the way her heartrate spikes, the way she goes from that fierce bravery to abject fear.

Her hands slap, her fists pound and somehow in the carnage, her fingers wrap around something cold, something hard, something I know will only heighten this little tete-a-tete.

She yanks the dagger free with her face morphing into something akin to triumph. Clearly, she thinks she's beaten me. I guess it's too much for her little brain to comprehend that I would let her take it, that I would willingly walk this path and see how far she's willing to actually go.

She shoves it against my throat, pushing enough that I can feel my skin bulging against the sharpness of the blade.

God, the feeling, the euphoria. Does she realise what she's doing? Does she understand that to a man like me, acts like this are greater than

foreplay?

“Go on.” I murmur. “Slit my throat. Drag the blade and do it.”

She draws in a ragged breath, her hand flickering just enough to catch, just enough to draw a little blood, and I swear that action goes straight to my cock.

“You know you want to.” I say. Like I care if I live or die.

But the tone of my voice, the way I’m speaking, I can see the effect it’s having on her, the way even now, it seems I have control over her.

I reach up, wrap my hand so tightly around hers, and I can see the ways her expression changes, the way she thinks she might be done for. Only, instead of pulling the blade away from my throat, I move it, I shift it so it’s no longer against my jugular, now it’s against my cheek.

She doesn’t move. She doesn’t even breathe. She stills, going as rigid as a statue.

And slowly, deliberately, I force her hand to move, force her hand to do it.

My skin slices open to easily. My blood bubbles up.

She whimpers, and for one second, for one beautiful moment, I think she’s as turned on as I am.

Only, she stumbles back. Of course, it’s me allowing her to, it’s me releasing her.

The dagger is still in her hand, and a voice in my head is screaming at her to do it, to bury it in my gut, to slice and to hack and to leave me a butchered mess.

Go on, Paitlyn, take the step. Cross the line. Prove you’re as fucked in the head as I know you are.

Blood is now streaming from the cut on my cheek. I lift a finger, smearing it, before bringing the digit to her mouth.

And as if that’s the final catalyst, she turns and flees. She races to the bathroom, slamming the door shut.

CHAPTER

FORTY-EIGHT



Pailtyn

I'm hiding in the bathroom, trying to hard not to cry, and yet the tears are falling anyway. I'm praying that the tiny bit of wood that separates us is somehow enough to keep this monster out.

I didn't mean to turn into that, to become that, to become that fucked up, irrational thing. I just couldn't take it. I couldn't take the fact that I was in the same room as him, that I was here, essentially locked in with the man who stole my eyes.

When my husband told me he was going away, I stupidly thought I might have a few precious days of silence, of reprieve. God, how stupid was I?

He seems more intent now to torture every minute of my existence, whether he is around to witness it or not.

I palm my face, and all I can think about is that moment, that horrific point when I had the blade against his skin. He didn't seem scared. He didn't even seem concerned. No, I bet his eyes fucking gleamed, sparkled more, like the devil part of him realised how close he is to returning home.

God, I'm an idiot. A stupid, stupid idiot.

He's going to make me pay for that. He's going to make me bleed again. He's...My rambled thoughts seem to falter as I realise the blade is still so tight in my left hand.

I sink to the floor, feeling those cold tiles against my exposed legs, but for once, the feeling is comforting.

There's an idea steadily growing in my head, one that has probably been here for a while and yet, I've never dared let it truly form. But now, now is the moment. Now, is the only chance I think I'll get.

My finger gingerly traces the sharp edge and with very little pressure it slices the pad in two. Maybe I'm high, maybe I've lost my mind, but the pain I expected isn't nearly as nasty as it should be.

I could do it.

I could use this knife, use this gift, and end all of this. End my suffering, end my shame, my abuse, everything.

It would be a fine thing to do, a nice little fuck you. Gunther isn't here to even try to stop me, and Devin, well, I've no doubt he'll finally get some recompense for all the shit he's caused.

I could practically laugh at the idea of it, of fucking him over in such a beautiful and final way.

My fingertips pick at the handle. It's not the fanciest of daggers. There's some sort of fabric wrapped around it, taped around it, that's fraying where the elastic is giving way.

I draw out a long, low breath.

Is doing this really the answer? In my head, I'd imagined my victory being one I could actually witness. I'd dreamt of Gunther going truly insane. Of him being locked away in an asylum, or even better, being done in by all those conspirators I heard him and Guthrie talking about.

But what victory is there when I don't have my sight? What victory can I have when I've been irreparably damaged?

Taking this route won't give me true vengeance. Taking this route will mean I'll always be regarded as unrighteous.

But does it matter? Does it matter what anyone else thinks? None of them have had to endure anything like the horrors I have. None of them have even come close to the suffering I've lived through, month after month after month.

No, this is a good option. A smart option. I don't want to die and yet I can't live like this, I can't exist like this. Not anymore. I'm too exhausted. I'm too broken to continue.

And doing this takes the power from them, this, for the first time in my entire life, puts me in charge.

A silent tear streaks down my cheek as the gravity of this hits me. I'm going to die. I'm going to die here, today. But in some ways, this won't be my death, this will be my rebirth, my freedom. If I'm lucky there will be a life after this, and if God has witnessed all my suffering then perhaps he will even forgive this offence, forgive this trespass and let me enter paradise.

I shudder, trying not to think about the alternative. About hell. About being condemned to damnation for all eternity. But then – it's can't be any worse than what I've experienced to date. It can't be.

I chew my lip, raising the blade and before I can deliberate anymore, I find the spot I'm after.

The metal feels cold, unforgiving and so very sharp as I press it against the softness of my wrist. I drag it down quickly, drag it from where my palm meets my wrist, till it's halfway towards my elbow.

Jesus, it hurts. It hurts more than I'd imagined.

I gasp out, before burying my mouth into my shoulder, anxious to keep the noise down so I won't give away what I'm up to.

Hot blood immediately starts pours out, it flows so quickly, splattering onto my thighs, no doubt cascading all onto those pretty tiles too, spreading rapidly around me.

I take the blade in my now weak hand make the same movement, telling myself that one last bit of strength, one last bit of bravery is all I need. It's both easier and harder the second time around.

My heart slams into my chest. My body trembles and I let myself slump back, let myself relax now.

I don't know how long it'll take for me to bleed out. How long I will sit here, feeling my life slowly slip away, feeling as my blood pours out, as it covers the floor, as it covers me.

I just hope I have the time. I hope I can do this.

It feels almost peaceful. It feels almost healing now. My heart seems to falter, seems to slow, as if it knows this is the end, this is the point of no return and it too is happy for it.

I let out a low sigh, wishing I could be in the garden one last time, that I could smell the sea – I always wanted to. I begged so many times, and my mother never took me. I guess that's another regret, another thing I'll never experience.

My head feels dizzy. My thoughts start to spiral more. I feel like I'm caught between reality and a dream. I feel like I'm dancing once more, spinning, twirling, only it's not Gunther who catches me, it's someone else. Someone loving. Someone caring. Someone who will take me away now, who will scoop me up and tell it's alright. That they have me, that I'm safe now and no one can ever hurt me again. They'll brush away my tears, soothe that fear in my bones and carry me to safety. Carry me to peace.

Why didn't I get that? Why didn't I deserve that?

More tears start to fall as a bitterness sets in.

I didn't deserve this life. I didn't deserve this pain and this suffering and any of it. I deserved to be cared for, I deserved to be loved.

Loved – the word catches in my throat, it makes my almost wail as it hits me I'll never have that either. Never know that. It's the one thing I would have sold my soul for, the one thing I wanted more than anything, and yet, that too has eluded me. That too has escaped me.

A wave of something washes over me. It feels cold, so very cold. I try to lift my hands to rub my arms but they're too heavy and they fall back limp against my sides.

Darkness is creeping in. Darkness is coming for me.

I smile, feeling like it's welcoming me home, welcoming me back.
And then everything just... stops.

CHAPTER FORTY-NINE



Devin

Blood. There's so much blood.
I slip on it, fall in it, as I scramble to get to where she's lying.

"No," I growl, seeing the way she's curled up, the way she's not moving.

She's so cold. She's so impossibly pale.
I slap her face, slap her hard, and to my relief her eyelids flutter for the briefest of seconds.

Both her wrists have two long, deep, cavernous wounds that stream out with blood.

I shake my head, letting out a roar, and tear my shirt off, shredding it. With the torn strips I wrap them tightly around her arms, creating tourniquets, trying to stem the blood flow.

She whimpers, shaking her head as she realises what I'm doing but she clearly doesn't have the strength to speak.

Right now, I doubt she has the strength to make it, and yet, I won't let her die. Not like this.

I scoop her up, carrying her to the bedroom and lay her down on the bed. She's breathing a little more regularly, she's shifting enough to prove I've not lost her.

I don't want to do it, but I know she can't just sleep this off, so I leave her there, leave her alone, and I race down to the infirmary, grabbing the first doctor I can find.

When we get back to her, she hasn't even moved. She's just lying there, and for one awful moment I think she's stopped breathing.

The doctor stares in horror when he realises who it is.

"Just fucking fix her." I snarl.

He gives me a look that ordinarily would have earnt him a beating but right now, but I need him, so I let it go.

He grabs his supplies and starts checking her over, muttering under his breath.

"She needs blood." He states, like I don't know that fact. Like she hasn't bled out half a gallons worth all over the bathroom floor.

"So go fucking get it," I spit back.

He shakes his head, muttering again. "There are rules, things in place, everything is signed out."

"Like I give a fuck." I reply. "If she dies, you die."

"The Chapter Lord will need to be informed."

I don't think, I don't hesitate, I haul his arse up, slam him into the wall, my hand wrapped around his puny throat. I shove my face right into his and I can feel the way this pathetic excuse for a human being is shitting himself. "Do your job and keep your mouth shut." I growl before letting him drop to the floor.

He scrambles up, scrambles away.

When he returns, there's a nurse with him. He starts barking orders, telling her what to do, telling me to move, as if I'm going to listen to him.

He puts in a line, hangs a bag of blood and I watch as the nurse starts connecting it all up.

"How long before she's stable?" I ask.

The nurse shrugs. The doctor just looks at me and looks away like he's too afraid to answer that question.

He unwraps the bandages and hisses when he sees how deep the wounds are.

Slowly, he starts stitching her skin back together. I tilt my head, watching as he does it, seeing the way her flesh folds, the way it fits back like a jigsaw piece where the bits aren't quite right.

When he's done, he says something about monitoring her. I nod my head, telling him to wait outside. He and the nurse too.

Paitlyn is lying there, half dazed, looking as if she's completely detached from reality.

"Malktā." I murmur.

Those beautiful features screw up and she turns those now hollow eyes on me.

"Don't." She says so quietly.

I crouch down, picking up her arm, examining the damage. She's fucked up the pretty pattern I made of her skin. All those pretty scars, those nice little swirls, they don't line up right anymore. I want to be mad at her, I want to be furious.

But my head is whispering things, whispering fears that I've never experienced before.

And there's a panic in my chest that I can't silence. I can't stop.

When I fix my gaze back on her face, she shudders.

"You could have let me die." She says. "I was so close. So close. How could you take that from me? How could you be that cruel?"

I wince, hearing the bitterness in her voice, the sadness too.

It's never bothered me before. Her tears, her pain, none of it has. It was nothing to me. She was nothing to me.

And yet, that's not true, is it.

"I couldn't do it." I snap back. "Just like I couldn't bear to watch all those men touching you when you belong to me."

Her face reacts. She trembles more. "No." She says with as much strength as she can muster. "No."

"You know it's true."

Her head turns towards the door, to where we both know two people waiting, are listening.

"You can't say that." She whispers.

I hear what she's not saying. That she knows my words are true, that somewhere, she admits it. She is mine, just as I stated.

I get to my feet, clicking my neck.

"I'll deal with it." I murmur low enough for her to hear.

It's not like they were going to live anyway. It's their bad luck they were working tonight, their bad luck they were here. I won't let them speak of this, won't let them divulge what Paitlyn tried to do, what happened here.

I'll have to burn the sheets, burn the rags too. But all of it can be managed. All of it can be sorted. One thing at a time.

I twist the silencer onto my pistol. No need to create more drama.

And quietly, I creep up behind the two unsuspecting medics.

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CHAPTER

FIFTY



Devin

I shouldn't be in here, watching her, and yet I can't help it.

It's been days since she tried to kill herself, days since she dared to try to leave me. She's still fast asleep, curled up, completely exhausted, and yet, I still feel like there's some battle raging inside her.

A little voice in my head tells me that I can do it, that I can steal her away, that it'd be easy right now. No one is around. There's a skeleton crew on watch. I could scoop her up, drug her just to make sure she's compliant and disappear into the night.

I shut my eyes, imagining how it would feel, imagining every step. The crunch of the dirt outside the Palace, the sneaking past all those cameras, ducking from the brightness of the floodlights.

I could leave all this behind. Could leave everything.

My body reacts to that thought, to that dream that's been in my mind since as long as I could remember. Since I was a child, hiding in Oblivion, hiding from my brothers.

Of course, then I used to imagine running away with my old friend. With Jefferson. I used to beg him to do it, beg him to follow me out. But the thing people don't realise about the darkness is that if you exist in it for too long, then soon enough it starts to alter you, change you, carve you into something new. It strips away the weak parts, it tears off the bits that dares to dream. And all you have left is the fear and the anger.

That's how it went with Jefferson. He made peace with his fate. He accepted what he was, where he was.

I'm not sure I'm ready to do that yet.

I look back at the sleeping beauty and take a step towards her. It wouldn't be hard to steal her. It really wouldn't be...

"Devin."

Cooper's voice carries from the doorway. Makes me freeze.

For a second I contemplate continuing, contemplate seeing this out to its logical conclusion. But to do that, I'd have to kill him. Not that I'm concerned about the morality of it, but Cooper is a decent enough guy.

I narrow my eyes, realising that this is a sign, a message. God is telling me what to do. That I need to leave this. That now is not the right time.

Step away, Devin. Step away.

I grunt a reply, stalking to the open door. "The whore is sick." I tell him. I don't want him checking on her, I don't want him realising anything serious has happened.

Cooper looks surprised. "Should we call a doctor?"

"Nah," I say. "It's just the flu. Let her sleep it off."

God knows what I'll say to Gunther when he sees the bandages, but that's a problem for another day.

He nods back and I stride past, acting all nonchalant while inside it feels like a fucking storm is raging.



I DON'T LEAVE MY DORM. I SIT THERE, JUST LIKE ALWAYS, STARING AT THE walls, counting down the hours until I'm back on.

I know Cooper will take care of her, and yet, he's not me.

He doesn't know what went down, he doesn't know to ask if she's okay.

He'll stand outside and keep his mouth shut, and ensure no one goes in, but that's it. He won't do anymore. He won't step outside the very specific rules we have.

It's almost a relief when I get back up there again.

I relieve him of duty, and he tells me there was nothing of note. The doors are shut.

But I can hear rustling beyond, I can hear movement.

As soon as it's safe to do so, I open the doors and stride right in.

Paitlyn is there. The maids are there, the old one and the new girl they got to finally replace the one who got burnt.

Paitlyn freezes when she hears me, and the maids look like I've got two heads.

She's got bandages around her wrists, but they're almost completely covered beneath two long silk gloves and some thick gold bangles. Her hair has been washed, her makeup is done to hide the bags, to hide every bit of evidence; she looks breathtaking.

The new maid is holding up some silk thing in her hands and as I study it, I realise it's lingerie.

"What the fuck is going on?" I snarl. She should be in bed. She should be resting.

"Chapter Lord gave his instructions." The older maid explains. "He's on his way back."

My eyes narrow, I stare at her face, silently waiting for the moment where she asks me to help her, where she pleads for it.

Only, she refuses to look my way. She keeps her face down on my boots. But I can see how her body is trembling; she's shaking so violently it's a wonder she can even keep standing.

"What else?" I ask. Clearly there's something else. Gunther doesn't have her primed and prepped like this.

"He has a guest."

I don't know who says the words. Who speaks it but they cut right to my soul.

I take a step forward, something crunches under my feet, and, as I reach out to touch her, she hisses.

“Don’t.” She says. “Just don’t.”

I want to argue, I want to tell her that one word, one fucking word and I will do stop this, only, I know that’s not true. Not possible.

I can’t stop this, not right now. I don’t have the power. And if I do anything at all, I jeopardise not only my safety but hers as well.

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CHAPTER

FIFTY-ONE



Pailtyn

I'm staring out at where I know the window is, when I hear their approach.

My wrists still throb beneath the bandages, only now, the wounds feel like a taunt, like a reminder that I was a failure in this too. That I'll never escape this life, never be able to leave until my husband is the one to do it.

The partition doors are shut but I can hear them in the room beyond. They're talking too low for me to make out actual words but when those doors slide back, it feels like the bottom of my stomach falls out.

"Wife." Gunther says in that expectant tone.

I don't want to turn, but I feel too weak to fight him. Too weak to fight this.

I keep my face down, focused on the floor and Gunther struts up to me, taking my hand as he pulls me closer to whoever else is stood here.

“See,” Gunther says. “Look at her. Look at her beauty. You expected me to turn this down? To reject her? As if any man would do such a thing.”

“You know why you should have.” The man replies sternly.

Only, it’s not just any man. It’s Antonio.

I don’t know if it’s joy or despair I feel as I lift my head. God, I wish I could see him, I wish I could... but it’s too late for that. Far too fucking late.

I pull my hand free of my husband as a shiver of repulsion creeps up my spine. I don’t know whether to be thankful or not that Gunther doesn’t seem to notice, doesn’t seem to react.

“Don’t be ridiculous.” Gunther replies. “Even you couldn’t say no to my little Paitlyn.”

God, the way he says my name, the way he lays ownership to it, to me. It’s so hard not to hide the scowl and I swear Antonio can tell.

“Our Grand Master...”

“Fuck the Grand Master.” Gunther suddenly bellows, picking something up, throwing it against the wall, smashing it to pieces as I physically jerk at the sound. “I am in charge. I am Chapter Lord. I am as good as God here and you would do well to remember that.”

“Such talk is blasphemous.”

“Denying my rights is also blasphemous.” Gunther retorts before he’s grabbing me, pulling me back against his chest. “And I have the right to enjoy my wife, to enjoy her body and her cunt, and all of her...”

My legs are trembling, threatening to give way, and I don’t want to collapse, not in front of him, not in front of the man who delights in my pain and my torment.

I can see how this is going to play out, how Gunther is going to prove those very words he’s just spoken.

Only, all that rage in him seems to suddenly fizzle out. “Stay, Antonio, you’ve had a long enough journey.” He says, before shoving me forward, shoving me so that I know I’m right in front of my Guardian and then he undoes the robe, pulls it aside, reveals my body to him. He drags a finger down the side of my breast as I swallow the bile.

“Stay. Enjoy my hospitality. And I’m sure after a few hours of it, you’ll see I was right all along.”

Antonio *must* know what he's saying, what he's offering. That I'm being laid out on a silver platter for him to enjoy the way so many have before.

I expect Antonio to argue, to tell Gunther where to shove it, only he doesn't. His breath seems to change, he steps forward in a way that feels threatening, not soothing.

Disappointment, hate, so many emotions swirl in me as I realise that this man will be just the same as all the others. He won't help me. He won't lift a finger, will he? Not when he has the chance to get his dick wet.

Gunther chuckles like he knows he's won this argument. He gives me one last shove, kicking at my ankles to ensure I can't keep my footing. Antonio grabs me to stop me from face-planting at his feet and I'm pressed against him now.

One of his hands moves to grab the robe and then Antonio glances at Gunther.

"I like to play alone." He says pointedly.

No. Nooo. This can't be happening. This can't be.

Antonio was my Guardian. He was meant to protect me, to help me... but then all of that changed the day I married Gunther, didn't it? By Brethren rules, the day I became a married woman was the day Antonio's duty was done.

Gunther lets out a noise half-growl, half-laugh. "You always were a sly dog." He sneers. "But fine, have it your way." He steps away and he walks to the where I think the door is. "Enjoy my wife." Gunther calls out as he slides them shut. "I'll let you play with her until sunrise."

The sound of the door clicking, of it locking seems to reverberate through my very bones.

I can't move. I can't breathe, I wait for the awful movement that confirms it. That seals it. That proves that all I am to the entire world now is a cheap whore.

His hand is still there, holding the silk of my robe so tightly. I flinch as I feel the fabric move but instead of being wrenched off, he wraps it around me, practically smothers me with it, before he does the tie up like it's a knot he doesn't want to come loose.

He feels like a grenade about to go off. This man, who's always been so cool and collected.

What the...? I open my mouth to speak but the fear of what is going to happen next silences me.

“How many?” He growls. “How many men has he let near you?”

My cheeks heat. Shame radiates off me and I can’t answer that. I can’t. Those tears I’ve been keeping in erupt, they cascade down my cheeks and I turn into an awful sobbing mess.

He snarls, smashing something against the wall, and I flinch, waiting for those fists, that violence to turn to me.

I don’t know what to do. Is it me he’s angry with? Does he think I’m the one responsible for all this?

“I told you.” He snaps. “I warned you...”

“You think I really had a choice?” I gasp. “You think Pearce would have listened? Or my mother would have, either?”

Does he really think I had such a luxury as free will in any of this?

I can see it, I can see those moments, they flash like images, like a movie in my head, playing out one by one. The stupid little performances Gunther put me and the other girls through. Did he have his sights set on me from the very beginning? Was the entire thing a set up? I mean, all the other Founder girls had families, had fathers. I was the only one without that. I was the east target, easy pickings...

I let out a ragged breath as my heartrate spikes. Maybe it was all a rouse. Maybe Pearce and Gunther had arranged it all, I mean, I wouldn’t put it past him, my uncle wanted power, no, he didn’t just want it, he needed it, with every fibre of his being. He believed he deserved it, and I know he would have sold me to the very devil if it would have given him that.

Antonio steps closer, wrapping his arms around me, rubbing my back in a way that feels comforting. Too comforting.

“It’s okay.” He says in that reassuring tone.

“It’s not.” I gasp, losing that last tiny bit of control over myself I have left.

He all but carrying me over to the couch and he makes me sit down while it sounds like he paces in front of me.

“What happened to your face? To your eyes?”

I can’t answer that. I can’t form the words to speak out loud about all the awful things I’ve suffered. I sob harder, lifting my hands to cover my shame.

“He did that...?” He moves to where I am and I realise, he’s crouching down in front of me. His hands pull mine away, his fingers trace where my eyelids have been sewn shut.

“Why the fuck did he do that?” He snarls.

I can’t, I can’t take this... I try to get up, try to stand and he holds me down, wraps his arms around me again and lets me sob into his shoulder.

“It’s okay.” He says, repeating that same line as if it has any meaning.

I can feel how wrinkled his clothes are. I can feel that his silk shirt is crumpled, creased. He’s normal so neat, so presentable. Where the fuck has he been? He could have stopped it, he could have stepped in, he could have done something...

“Have you spoken to my mother?” I ask, I’m not sure if I want to know his reply. It’s not like the two of them have ever seen eye to eye before.

Something changes in his body language. “No.” He says firmly.

“Have you...” I hesitate, half stammering as I say the next words, “Does the Grand Master know?”

“He knows.” Antonio confirms. “And he is not happy about it. About any of this.”

I don’t know if it’s relief or fear that racks through me. Our Grand Master has never been kind, none of our leaders are kind, but surely, he’d want to make an example? Surely, he would not allow a Chapter Lord to so openly disobey him?

“Please,” I stammer, shifting, dropping to my knees. “Please, tell me he’s going to do something, that he’s going to help me.”

Please. I need him to say this. I need him to promise me. I need... but his mouth doesn’t move, his body doesn’t either.

Oh god. Oh god.

He’s not going to, is he? He’s going to leave me here, he’s going to let Gunther get away with all of this, he’s going to... my mind panics more, my heart slams into my chest so hard I can’t even breathe.

I’m going to die here. I’m going to die.

And none of these men, none of them will do a thing to help me.

“Paitlyn,”

I barely hear his words. I’m spiralling, panicking, becoming half as mad as my husband in this moment. A shriek seems to escape my body and what little strength I have left evaporates. I crumble, I collapse, I sink down onto that ridiculously plush rug and I claw at my throat.

“Paitlyn,” Antonio says again, more urgently.

He grabs me, hauls me up and holds me against his body and he rocks me the way a parent does their hysterical child.

“I can’t do this. I can’t...” I gasp.

“You can. You can, Paitlyn.” He murmurs back.

“He’s going to kill me. He’s going to lose his temper one day soon and he’ll go too far.”

It doesn’t matter that I tried to kill myself, it’s not the same, because in my head, me choosing to die is a very different thing to my bastard of a husband hurting me so badly that ends up being the result.

He doesn’t reply. He just holds me, soothes me, but there is no real comfort here. There never will be.

“Please...” I whisper again.

“Listen to me.” He says gently, “I am getting you out. But it will not be easy. There are things at play, politics. A marriage such as yours cannot easily be put aside.”

I can’t help wondering if that’s true or simply an easy ‘get out of jail free card’ he’s using to shut me up.

“I will do anything.” I reply. “Anything you ask of me, anything our Grand Master asks...”

His finger shushes my words. His head shifts and I realise he’s looking to the door, to where it’s shut. Does he think Gunther is listening? Or is he concerned about the guards?

“It’s Devin.” I state.

“What?”

“The guard is Devin Blake. He won’t...” I fall silent as I realise that what I’m about to say might not be true. I don’t know for certain that Devin is actually on my side. He may have been kind to me one fucking time, he may have confessed things, treasonous things, things that would have us both executed and yet, he too could be playing his own game, his own manipulation.

And he was the one who took my eyes. He was the one who stole my sight.

“Blake?” Antonio repeats. “As in Magnus Blake’s brother?”

I nod.

His hand sweeps my hair back from my face and he lowers his voice so much, I know he doesn’t want even the flies to hear our words.

“This will end. Gunther will be sorted out. But I need you to be compliant, to do whatever he asks, to do whatever you have too, until it is over.”

Like I’m not doing that already.

“How long?” I ask, “How long will it take?”

He lets out a sigh. “I don’t know. A few weeks, maybe a month.”

“A month?” I hiss. I can’t survive that, not when every second here feels like an eternity already.

“Ssssh,” he says quickly.

“I can’t....”

He buries my face against his chest as if he doesn’t want to hear the words either.

I can smell that old familiar scent of him, the hint of tobacco, and cedarwood, and something that always felt too close to home for me to want to explore it further.

Exhaustion seems to take me, I lay there, pressed against him and for what feels like hours, we don’t speak, we don’t utter a word.

Antonio has more power than Gunther. Gunther maybe a Chapter Lord but Antonio has the ear of our Grand Master himself. If he says he can get me out, I have to trust him, I have to believe it.

“Why didn’t you come sooner?” I sound so pitiful as I ask that question, but it’s one that’s been repeating in my head over and over. Why didn’t he? Why did he let any of this happen in the first place? He’s meant to be my guardian. He’s meant to protect me.

He draws in what sounds like an angry breath of air. “Your mother is the reason.” He states.

“What?”

“Your mother pulled some strings, got me sent back to the US. Almost set off a full bloody civil war.”

My entire body reacts as he says those words. I thought she was on my side. I thought it was Pearce pushing this.

“Why?”

“Because she wanted to make sure nothing got in the way of you marrying Gunther. She wanted to ensure you became Chapter Lady.”

I can hear it, her words, I can hear what she said, how she all but promised me that Gunther was old, that he was sick, that he could be

managed. I can hear that argument too, all those months ago, back in our house, when she'd made the same justifications to Antonio too.

He'd scoffed then. He'd mocked her. And I'd been too damn naïve to realise the danger I was in.

I bite my lip, wondering if that concerned parent act she had going last time was just another rouse. We always felt like allies, like she had my back, like she was giving me all the tools I needed to survive in this world, even though she knew she wasn't meant to.

"Will, will she try to stop you helping me?" I ask.

He doesn't say anything and that tells me everything I need to know.

With his fingertips he brushes the long gloves back, seeing the bandages that are still hiding the evidence of what I tried only a few days before.

"Did you do this?" He says.

I gulp back, unable to confirm it. It's not like he doesn't know anyway.

"That's not the answer." He murmurs.

"You don't know what I've gone through, what he's done." I hiss.

He reacts in a way I can't see but he's tracing the pattern that Devin made, the one he carved into my skin.

"Don't do it again," he says. "Trust me, trust that I can get you out."

"And if you can't?" I don't want to ask that question and yet it slips out anyway.

He tenses for a moment, before pulling me in again, telling me to sleep, to get some rest. That he will make everything right, he will fix everything. And God do I want to believe him. I need to. I cling to his shirt, shutting my eyes, telling myself that Antonio is my saviour, Antonio will save me. I just need to hang on.



SUNRISE COMES TOO SOON.

It streams in through the half-drawn curtains, warming my face enough to wake me.

I have a pounding headache and greater sense of dread than I think I've ever had. Whatever is going on, however this plays out, there will be serious consequences for all of us.

Antonio was as good as his word and he gets up from the floor, stretches with a groan, and acts like all this is perfectly normal behaviour.

He fixes his clothes in the gilded mirror before I hear his boots turning in my direction. “Remember what I said, Paitlyn. Remember.” He says, placing his hand on my shoulder.

I nod back, feeling both despair and hope mingling inside me.

“And whatever you do, don’t repeat a word of it to anyone. Not the maids, not the guards, and especially not your mother.”

I nod again. I won’t. I won’t say a word. It’s too great a risk to even consider it.

The doors slide open so quickly I recoil in surprise.

My husband takes a big step inside, like he expects to find Antonio fucking me still. Too bad, you bastard. Too fucking bad.

I clench my jaw, pulling the covers up to hide myself. I still have the gown on but underneath, I feel exposed. I feel every inch the cheap little whore he wants to make of me.

“Well?” Gunther asks and I can hear the smirk in his voice. “Did my wife play her part?”

Antonio doesn’t take his hand from me. It feels like he can feel how much I’m crumbling. But he also doesn’t reply to Gunther. He just turns and stalks out as if the very question is an insult to him.

I know Devin is there, I know he’s beyond the doors. I don’t want to think of what he must imagine happened. I don’t want to contemplate how he too must see me.

My tears start falling more and I bury my face, silently giving into my despair.

CHAPTER

FIFTY-TWO



Devin

“Well? Did my wife play her part?”

I know exactly what the fucker is asking, what he wants to know. Did Paitlyn fuck him? Did she whore herself out well enough for this arsehole to be satisfied?

I don’t know who the fuck he is, I don’t know what power he has, but evidently, he’s a big enough player for Gunther to give him so much playtime.

Before I realise I’m doing it, I’m silently stalking after the man, following him down the hallway, down the steps. I don’t know why he’s up this early, why Gunther didn’t leave him to enjoy Paitlyn a little longer, but the benefit is that the Palace is deserted. There’s no one around but him and me.

I slide my hand into my pocket, pulling out the tiny slip knife.

I can hear his steps on the polished floor ahead of me and I know he can't hear mine.

He's twenty paces in front of me. He walks with purpose; he gives off the feeling that he owns the world. Whoever the fuck he is, he'll be dead within the hour, if I have anything to say about it.

My fingers curl around the knife in my pocket, the familiar weight of it grounding me as rage threatens to blur my vision. The metal is warm from my body heat, and I can feel every groove in the handle through the fabric. I've killed with this blade before. It's silent. Clean. Unlike the pistol holstered at my hip, which would almost certainly wake half the palace and bring guards running before I could even savour the moment.

He turns left down the east corridor, and I follow, my steps measured and careful. The palace feels like a tomb this early, all shadows and whispers, and perfect for what needs to be done. Perfect for justice.

Because that's what this is, justice. Not jealousy. Not the sick, twisting thing in my gut that makes me want to tear him apart with my bare hands. Justice for the insult he's committed, for the way he's contaminated something pure.

His shoulders are back, his stride long and unhurried, like he owns every stone beneath his feet. Like he's conquered something worth conquering.

The sight of it sends fresh fury coursing through my veins. How dare he? How dare he walk through these halls like he's some sort of victor.

I quicken my pace, closing the distance between us. Fifteen paces. Ten. The knife seems to pulse in my grip, eager for blood, for the satisfying resistance of flesh giving way to steel. I can already picture it, the blade sliding between his ribs, the shocked gasp he'll make, the way his arrogant smirk will melt into confusion and then nothing at all.

He rounds another corner, and I follow, my heartbeat hammering so loud I'm surprised he can't hear it. This corridor is even more isolated, lined with storage rooms and servant quarters that won't be occupied for another hour at least. Perfect. As if fate itself is conspiring to help me right this wrong.

Eight paces. Six. My hand tightens on the knife, and I can feel my muscles coiling, preparing for the strike. This will be easy. Quick. Satisfying in a way that will finally quiet the roaring in my head.

Four paces.

I draw the blade free, keeping it low and hidden against my leg. The morning light catches the edge for just a moment, throwing a silver gleam across the wall. Beautiful. Deadly.

Two paces.

I raise the knife, my body moving with the fluid precision of years of training. One quick thrust upward, between the fourth and fifth ribs, angled toward the heart. He'll be dead before he hits the ground.

"Blake?"

Malik's voice cuts through the silence like a whip crack, freezing me mid-stride. The knife wavers in my grip as my target stops walking, his entire body going rigid. Slowly, deliberately, he turns around.

Our eyes meet.

His are brown, I notice. Plain, unremarkable brown, set in a face that's handsome enough but also forgettable. The kind of face that blends into crowds, that you wouldn't look at twice under normal circumstances. But there's nothing forgettable about the way he's looking at me now, sharp, calculating, like he's taking inventory of everything he sees.

The knife is still in my hand. Still visible. Still hungry for blood.

I could do it. Right now, right here, with Malik somewhere behind me and witnesses be damned. I could drive the blade home and watch the life drain out of those ordinary brown eyes. The thought sends a thrill through me so intense it's almost sexual.

But Malik is calling again, closer now, and I can hear footsteps echoing off the marble. Multiple sets of footsteps. And this bastard is still staring at me with that unnerving focus, like he can see straight through to my soul and isn't impressed by what he finds there.

Does he know?

Does he understand exactly why I'm here, exactly what I was about to do?

The possibility should terrify him, should send him running or screaming or begging for mercy. Instead, his lips curve into the faintest suggestion of a smile.

"You should go along," he says, his voice just loud enough for Malik to hear. Like I'm a wayward dog being called to heel. Like I'm some common servant who's wandered away from his duties.

I feel my upper lip pull back in an involuntary snarl, every instinct screaming at me to lunge forward, to show him exactly what this particular dog can do when provoked.

But his smirk only widens, and I realize with cold, furious clarity that he knows exactly what he's doing. He knows I won't strike now, not with Malik bearing down on us and the sound of other voices drifting through the corridors.

He knows I'm trapped, forced to stand here and watch as he walks away unpunished.

And he's enjoying it.

The bastard is actually enjoying my impotent rage, savouring it like fine wine. Like the memory of Paitlyn's skin beneath his hands.

"Blake." Malik calls again, and now I can hear the irritation creeping into his voice. "Where the hell are you?"

The man, this nameless, worthless piece of shit who dared to touch what's mine, gives me one last knowing look before turning away. His stride is even more confident now, more leisurely, like our little encounter has only confirmed his superiority. Like he's won some contest I didn't even know we were playing.

I watch him go, my entire body vibrating with frustrated violence. The knife feels useless in my hand now, just dead weight and broken promises. I should put it away, should compose myself before Malik finds me, but I can't seem to make my fingers obey. All I can do is stand here and burn with the knowledge that justice has been denied, that this insult will go unanswered.

For now.

CHAPTER

FIFTY-THREE



Pailtyn

My husband fucks me that night. I think he hurts me more to prove a point.

In the morning, I get my period again and for that heinous crime, I'm once again locked in that freezing cold outbuilding. Chained up. Left to starve and bleed for six days and this time it's so much more haunting, more horrific because I can't see a thing, I'm surrounded by darkness, and the creaking of the wood, and the constant sounds of what feels like monsters trying to get in, trying to devour me.

By the time the final day comes, I'm a mess. I think I'm hallucinating from the cold because it's winter now, snow is on the ground and yet, I had nothing but a shift dress on.

When Ada and the new maid come to get me out, I can't stop shaking. I can barely stand and the cold water they have to wash me down and purify

me with does nothing to help me get warm.

They half carry me, half drag me back into the Palace, back past all those faceless guards I know are there. It takes forever to get up the stairs. My feet smack against every single one and though I know I should feel the pain of it, I don't feel a thing, and that alarms me more than anything.

They manage to get me into the bed and wrap the blankets around me and still, I can't get warm. I can't stop shaking.

"Get her some hot chocolate." Ada says.

The new girl nods before disappearing off.

Ada kneels down on the carpet and starts running her hands up and down my curled-up body, trying to create friction.

"You'll be okay." She says quietly. "You just need to warm up."

I can't reply. My teeth won't stop chattering enough to let me say one word.

I gulp down the drink when it comes. The sugar helps, though I wonder if, after days of nothing but water and stale bread, that might be a mistake. It warms my belly as it settles there, but still, my feet are so so cold. My hands are like useless blocks of ice.

As the hours seem to pass, I don't get better.

Gunther waltz in, mutters about something under his breath and as he climbs into the bed beside me, I can do nothing but grit my teeth and endure his wandering hands.

I wonder whether my chattering is turning him on? Is the sound of my literal bones jarring against one another that sexy to him?

He pushes two fingers inside me, and I yelp with the pain.

"Jesus," He snarls. "Even your cunt is cold."

He yanks them back out, before throwing the duvet off us both while I mentally try to prepare for another beating.

"Useless bitch." He states while shuffling around the room, picking up things, rifling through various objects. As he slides the door open and bellows for the servants, I realise what's happening.

He's not going to beat me. He's leaving, packing his things, going to sleep somewhere else.

I can't even feel the joy I should. I can't even celebrate that fact because I feel too numb, too cold, to feel anything,

When the servants appear, they must take one look at me and see something is seriously wrong, because they ask if they should summon a

doctor.

“No.” Gunther replies. “Leave the bitch as she is, if she dies, she dies. It is God’s will.”

God’s will.

It was God’s will that I married this man. God’s will that I apparently suffer all of this abuse.

When will God finally be done with me?

When will he finally decide that I have endured enough, that I have gone through enough, that I’m worthy enough now to enter his kingdom and leave this cursed world forever?

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CHAPTER

FIFTY-FOUR



Devin

I don't know how I stood there, how I heard him say those words and didn't rip out his throat, didn't beat him to a pulp, didn't make him suffer for everything he has made her endure.

Once I'm certain he won't return, I creep into the room, creep to the bed.

She's still shivering so much.

"Paitlyn." I murmur.

She gasps, stilling for a second before her shivering returns. "You, you, you shouldn't beee in here." She stammers.

"Like fuck I'd leave you alone right now." I state, revealing more parts of me, more pieces I should keep locked away.

She doesn't reply. She just buries her face in the pillow, and I know that muffled noise is the sound of her sobs.

I get on the bed, grab her in my arms and hold her so tightly.

“I can’t get wa-warm.” She stammers.

She’s shaking so violently. Too violently. I know this isn’t right. I know whatever this is, it’s not going to go on its own.

She looks so pale, she looks almost blue.

“Paitlyn?” I whisper.

She doesn’t respond now, she just lays there, like simply existing is too painful for her to manage.

I’m not letting her die. I won’t let her.

I force myself up, force myself from the bed, and I storm through the Palace. If I bump into Gunther right now, he’ll absolutely question why I’m not at my post and I think I might just gut him the way I planned to gut his friend.

I make it down to the infirmary. The doctors are occupied and one of the nurses tries to ask me what I’m doing here and what I want.

I shove her out of the way, using my hand over her face to ensure she gets the message. She yelps as she falls to her arse, but I don’t give a fuck. Not about her, not about any of these people. If any of them try to stop me, if any of them get in my way right now, I’ll happily pull my weapon and start firing.

I kick the door to the storeroom open. The medicines are all piled up on neat little shelves. All alphabetically which is helpful.

But meds won’t fix this. There’s no magic pill to cure what Paitlyn has. I know the signs. I’ve seen enough people die of this to know exactly what’s wrong.

I grab at the bags of fluid, at a giving set too and all the other bits I need. On my way out, my eyes land on a box and I grab that for good measure.

As I walk back onto the ward there’s a crowd of them, two doctors, a handful of nurses, all waiting for me. Creating a human barrier between me and the exit.

Are they missing their friends? Have they put it together where they went the other day, why they didn’t just return afterwards?

“Excuse me.” The most senior of them says. “You can’t just help yourself...”

I draw my body up, towering over them all. “You gonna stop me?” I growl.

They exchange looks, nervous noises too and that tells me all I need to know.

“Get the fuck out of my way.” I snap as I barge through them.

They land in a heap of limbs, but I don’t stop to even look at them. I just keep on, rushing through Palace, rushing up the stairway until I get to her.

She hasn’t moved. She hasn’t moved an inch, and I can also see that she’s no longer trembling.

Shit. Shit, shit, shit.

I toss the items onto the rug, scooping her up in my arms.

“Don’t you dare fucking die.” I snarl.

She’s limp, she’s barely moving, and I can hear her breath is sounding more rattled than ever.

I carry her over to where the fireplace is. I lay her down, getting the stuff I stole from the infirmary and my fingers fumble as I try to set it all up. I know I’m running out of time, that any minute now her body is going to give up. She is going to give up.

“Come on,” I hiss, not to her, but to me.

I’ve never felt helpless like this before. I’ve never felt useless. With the size I am, defeat is such an unlikely outcome that for most battles, I know I can fight my way out of it. But how can you fight death?

The syringe pierces the soft skin in her arm. She doesn’t even react, doesn’t even hiss as I slide it further into the vein. The packaging for the giving set is a bitch to open and I end up tearing it apart with my teeth. I connect the ends, holding the fluid high enough that gravity should help, but I’m squeezing it all the same, squeezing it so hard.

She has to live. She has to.

I stay there, on my knees for what feels like hours. Her chest is barely rising, her body still looks so impossibly pale but eventually it feels like it might be making a difference, like she might be rallying, if only a tiny bit.

I pull the blanket further around her, turning it into a cocoon and then, reluctantly I shift away. The fluids will help get her vitals up, but we need to get her core body temperature higher, and this duvet isn’t doing it.

I grab the logs, tossing them into the dark, dirty hole. I haven’t made a fire in years, why would I need to when I have enough servants to do that shit for me? As the flames start to catch, I move back, move to where she is.

She’s shifting a little, like she’s trying to wake up. She still looks weak but that has to be a good sign.

“Hey,” I murmur, sweeping the hair from her forehead.

Her mouth twitches with the hint of a smile.

I scoop her back up, holding her in my lap with my one arm and in my other hand I squeeze that fluid bag, keeping the pressure on, and the entire time my eyes are on her face, practically daring her to defy me, daring her to even think of giving up now.

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CHAPTER

FIFTY-FIVE



Pailtyn

That pounding in my head seems to ease. That awful ache inside every single one of my bones seems to calm down, seems to soften.

I know he's holding me. I know he has me.

I can feel the heat of the fire and I can see the flicker of the flames as the light dances across the room.

The entire time, I know he hasn't taken his eyes from me. It's unnerving. It's intimate. It makes me feel so vulnerable, makes me feel like all those carefully built walls that I've constructed to try and protect myself are now gone. That he's destroyed them.

He's stroking my face. Acting like I'm something precious. Something of worth.

I don't understand this behaviour. I don't understand what this is.

He's a monster. A fucking monster.

“Devin...” I whisper his name and his entire body reacts. Those devilish limbs that I swore would devour me, somehow, they soften.

“I’m getting you out of here.” He says quietly.

“What?” I must have misheard him. I have to have.

He tightens his grip, and he lowers his mouth to my ear. “I’m going to stop this. I’m going end this. You’ll never have to endure his beatings, endure his abuse, any of it again.”

Am I hallucinating? Am I as crazy as the rest of them clearly are?

“When?” I shouldn’t sound as hopeful as I do. I shouldn’t sound as desperate either.

“Soon. Really soon. I need to put some things into place. I need to ensure no one can find us afterwards. That we’re safe.”

“Us?” Surely, he’s not saying what I think he’s saying? Surely, he’s not suggesting...

“Us.” He growls back. “I’m not leaving you, not losing you. Once we’re free from here, once we’re free from the Brethren, then you and I can be together. You and I...” He pauses like he doesn’t know how to articulate the words, the feelings, any of it. “I love you, Paitlyn. Do you understand that? I fucking love you.”

I gulp, hearing the anger, the frustration and more than anything, the pain in his voice.

But this man doesn’t have a clue what love is. No one does the things he’s done to me if he were capable of feelings like love.

Anger rages through me at the thought that he thinks we can be together, that we can what, skip off into the sunset? After everything he’s done to me, everything he’s allowed to happen too.

I don’t want his love. I don’t need it.

I don’t say that though, I don’t voice it. This could be my chance; this could be the moment I’ve been praying for.

If I can escape this Palace, if I can be free of Gunther, then... then what? I’m blind. Fucking blind. If I leave this place with Devin, how the fuck will I ever manage to get away from him?

I tremble harder, my mind whirling with both hope and disappointment.

One thing at a time, I guess. I just need to focus on the now, on the existing now. Antonio said he was getting me out, Antonio was helping me. I know I can’t tell Devin that without facing his wrath. I just need to keep my mouth shut, play along, play it safe until my real protector comes back.

“We can’t escape them.” I state, trying to sound like I’m his partner in crime now. “We can’t escape the Brethren. It’s not possible.”

I think for a second he’s going to call me out on it, on the fact that I haven’t said ‘those three words’ back, but instead he says, “there are ways.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means the Brethren aren’t as all-reaching as they believe themselves to be. There are gaps, chinks in their armour.”

This feels like traitor talk. Fear creeps up my spine and I turn my head towards the door, wondering what would happen if we were overheard right now.

“Leave it to me.” Devin says. “Let me take care of this. Take care of you.”



I WAKE AS THE SUNLIGHT STARTS TO STREAM INTO THE ROOM. I’M STILL IN his arms. I’m still curled up here with Devin holding onto me in front of the fire.

It feels so alarmingly safe, and I don’t understand it. How can this man suddenly feel so peaceful? How can he go from a raging tornado into this, this?

He told me he loved me. I know that’s bullshit. I know that’s just another fucked up bit of manipulation and yet, in this moment, I could almost believe it, believe him.

Some desperate broken part of me wants to stay like this, wants to lay here and pretend that nothing outside this exists.

But it does. And we can both hear as the door creaks open.

Fear. Adrenaline so many emotions explode in my stomach.

The gasp tells me it’s Ada. From the distance I’d say she’s stood on the threshold, staring in. She walks in, taking those quick practised steps I know so well. “He’s coming.” She says quietly.

I turn my head towards Devin, and for the briefest of moments, I wonder whether this moment will be it. Whether he will have his vengeance now.

But his body seems to sink a tiny bit. He scoops me up, carries me back into the bedroom and he lays me down. As quickly as he can, he slips the needle out before folding my arm up into itself. “Put some pressure on. It’ll stop the bleeding and the bruising.”

I wish I could see his face, I wish I could see his expression because I have no idea what’s going on in there, what thoughts are swirling inside. He stalks back out and I want to call after him, to scream, to beg him to just say something.

But instead, I hear his massive frame slip out, I hear him disappear into the corridor and my tears stream uncontrollably.

“Paitlyn,” Ada says, kneeling beside the bed, tucking the covers up to make it look like none of last night went down the way it did. To make it look like this was where I slept, this was where I woke too. Alone.

It feels like there are so many unspoken things between us. She shifts her body to the door then back to me and I know then that she knows. That she can tell that whatever this was, it wasn’t just a guard looking out for me, ensuring I lived for his master. She knows.

I open my mouth but fall silent as a shadow covers me.

“Well, I see you’ve made a recovery.” Gunther says.

I gulp, nodding.

“How do you feel?” He asks, like he doesn’t give a damn about my reply.

“Better.” It’s the only word I can muster.

He grunts. “Seeing as God’s seen fit to spare your life, you will spend the rest of this day giving thanks in the Chapel.”

The Chapel? That means I’ll be on my knees all day. I shudder, praying that that damned priest won’t be there, because I know he delights in my torture as much as my husband does.

“Did you not hear me?” Gunther growls, yanking the covers off, dragging me from the bed by my arm.

I cry out but he just mutters under his breath about disobedient and ungrateful bitches before shoving me hard enough that I trip and fall.

“Useless fucking bitch.” He says. “Maybe we should cut your legs off next, seeing as you don’t know how to actually use them.”

I don’t have time to react, time to even bury the horror I feel at that threat. If he takes my legs, if he amputates them, then I really will want to die.

But Antonio is coming.

I repeat that as he kicks me in the belly, as he makes me crawl on my hands and knees and mocks me as I bang into one damned piece of furniture after another in my weak, confused state.

Antonio is coming.

I just need to hang on. I just need to survive.

I can beat Gunther, I can beat them all.

Even Devin can shove his supposed love up his arse. Antonio will rescue me, he'll take me away, and then I know the Grand Master will do something. Will step in. Will make these bastards pay.



THE DAY PASSES IN AGONY.

My knees scream out in protest against the rock-hard floor. Ada is beside me, acting as my support every time I think I might give in and collapse. I keep telling her to go, to leave, but she refuses.

My mind won't stop spinning. I can't stop thinking over and over about what *he* said, what he confessed.

I don't love him. I know I don't. He stole my fucking eyes. How the hell can anyone fall in love with a man who does that?

I clench my fists, driving the nails into my palms.

He clearly has a plan, doesn't he. Does he see me as easy pickings? A chance for him to elevate the Blake family name somehow? Well, he can fuck right off with that.

I have to pray Antonio gets to me first, that he and our Grand Master and whatever the fuck he has planned, it happens before Devin is able to act because I know if Devin takes me, then I don't stand a chance. He's too dangerous, he's too...

I shudder trying to bury my fear. I need to be smart here. Smarter than I have been. I need to play this man, pretend, make him think that I'll go with him, that I trust him. It'll be safer that way, after all, I've already learnt what happens when I piss him off. I just need to convince him, and then Antonio will be here, Antonio will save me.

“You can do this.” Ada whispers and I know she’s talking about my current situation and not my chances of escape, but that’s how I take it, that’s what I convince myself she’s really hinting at.

That I can do this. That despite the odds, despite how near impossible it feels, I can get free of this place, of my husband, of all of them.

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CHAPTER

FIFTY-SIX



Devin

I t's not as reckless as it feels, despite the odds being against us, I know I can get us away from this place and safely hidden away before anyone has a clue that we're gone.

Lucky for me, Collins is on the door when I get to her room. He doesn't ask questions, doesn't even raise an eyebrow when I tell him I need access. He just steps aside and acts like this is all perfectly normal.

She's curled up in bed, not that that's surprising. Afterall, it *is* the middle of the night.

She gasps when I wake her up but when she realises it's me and not her husband, she relaxes. And that tells me everything I need to know.

"What, what are you doing here?" She whispers.

"I'm going to end this." I say.

She frowns, looking confused, as though she's still half-asleep.

“I’m going to end this.” I repeat. “I’m going to get you out of here.”

She sinks back against the pillow letting out a low breath and I can tell she’s trying not to panic.

“No one will find us.” I reassure her. “We’ll get away, far away, where the Brethren can’t reach.”

She shakes her head, starting to shake and I realise she’s hyperventilating. That she’s having a full blown-panic attack.

I pull her into my arms, engulf her with my body. “It’s okay.” I reassure her, “I’ll protect you. I’ll make sure there are no clues, nothing to get a trace from. We’ll be like ghosts. We’ll just vanish and no one will know where we went.”

Only, my words clearly don’t have any effect. She crumbles more, she starts whimpering, gasping like she can’t breathe properly.

I brush her hair back from her face, grip her chin in my hands and plant as soft a kiss as I can on her forehead. “I’m a Blake and a Reaper.” I tell her. “I have enough money, enough resources, I can ensure we’re safe.”

She nods back, even as the tears stream down her face. “When?” She whispers so quietly I barely hear it.

“In a day or two.” I reply. “I just have one last thing to sort.”

She gulps, looking so impossibly beautiful and yet, so petrified at the same time. My poor little malktā, I can’t wait to free her, I can’t wait to get her out of this prison and show her what real living is.

From the door, Collins makes a slight whistling sound, and I know my time is up, that someone is coming.

I plant one final kiss on her hairline and then let her slip out of my arms. She just needs to be brave, needs to trust me, and by this time next week, we’ll be free of all of this forever.

CHAPTER

FIFTY-SEVEN



Pailtyn

My heart thumps in my chest as I make my way down the back passageway. I know if I get caught now, then it'll all be over.

Collins has his hand around my wrist, leading me on the way someone does an animal going to slaughter and, in a way, that's exactly how I feel.

He snuck me out, told me to go with him, that Devin asked him to get me and bring me to him. Of course, I was suspicious, but he didn't exactly give me an option and it's not like I could make a fuss and risk everyone finding out about this escape plan.

Outside, I can hear the wind howling. A storm must be coming, and it feels even more like a bad omen.

I can't figure out how to get out of this, how to stop this.

I know if I go with him, if I allow Devin to take me way then it's an almost certain that Antonio won't find me. I'll be trapped, stuck in the same situation as I am now, only I won't have anyone to help me, and I won't have any way to escape.

I contemplate calling for help, screaming for the guards, but what good will that do? If Gunther finds out, I'm convinced this will be the final straw, the excuse he needs to send me to Oblivion. He can get a new wife then, one of the other girls. He's threatened me with it a few times now, threatened to 'replace me' because I'm not yet pregnant.

My stomach twists. It's a small mercy I'm not pregnant, either with his, or someone else's cursed child.

As we round the corner, we pause, and I hear the sound of light footsteps passing. I guess it's only a servant and not a guard from the way they walk and once they're definitely gone, Collins pulls me on, down a flight of steps and into a space that smells musty, earthy too.

I wrinkle my nose, realising that this must be some sort of storage room. Is Devin meant to meet me here? Is that his plan?

We come to a stop, and it feels like the world is on tenterhooks, like something is happening, something awful, only, I can't see a damn thing.

Suddenly an alarm goes off, it rings out so loud I physically jump in shock.

Collins curses under his breath. Is the game up, then? Have we been found out before this has even started? I don't know whether to feel relief or horror at that, because Gunther isn't going to see me as a victim here, he's going to see me as the instigator, the whore who seduced his guards, who somehow persuaded them to help me.

I can feel Collins twisting, turning, like he thinks we're under attack, like he can see this entire space suddenly filling up.

"What...?" I murmur, only he flings me forward, practically throws me onto the ground and I slam into the cold concrete. Dry, dusty bits of dirty cover my face, my hands, it gets up my nose, it makes me cough so badly and I try to calm myself before it kicks off my asthma.

I hear his panicked footsteps disappearing off as he runs away and leaves me here. Alone.

I have no explanation for this, no reason to be here, wherever the fuck I am.

I try to get up, try to push myself up and I realise that awful throbbing in my wrist isn't just a bruise. Did I break it? I whimper, pulling my arm into my chest and I try to shuffle my way over to I don't even know where. I can't hide, I can't exactly conceal myself when I have no idea where I am, where anything else is.

Something wet seeps up from knees. I pause, feeling the strange liquid now seeping through my skirt.

I frown, reaching down to touch whatever it is. If it's some spilled food, will it leave a trail? Will it become breadcrumbs that they can follow and lead to me being caught?

As my fingers touch it, I fall backwards, realising with horror what it is. Blood. So much blood.

Panic overwhelms me. Adrenaline makes my heart explode as I frantically try to find the source. What if it's Devin, what if they've found him, realised what he was doing, and they killed him?

No, they wouldn't just kill him. They'd make an example of him, an example of us. That thought doesn't give me any comfort.

My hands find something solid, something big.

And then that stench hits me, that familiar, overwhelming, stench that I know only too well.

I scream with horror as I realise it's Gunther. He's laying there, unmoving, with what feels like a dagger buried into his stomach right up to the hilt.

I tap his face, try to rouse him, but he doesn't react. I place my fingers on his neck trying to find a pulse and there's nothing. Not even a murmur.

My hands tighten around the dagger, around the coarse fabric of the handle. I know that detail, I know that blade. It's Devin's dagger. It's the same one he used on me; the same one I tried to kill myself with.

God, did he do this? Did he kill Gunther? Is this what he meant by getting me out?

I tremble, collapsing beside the man I was forced to marry. The man who's lying dead in a pool of his own blood.

Devin killed him. He must have done.

As footsteps start clamouring towards me, I stay where I am, paralysed by my horror and my disbelief.

Devin did this. He killed Gunther. He killed him for me.

I shake my head, coming to my senses far too fucking late.

The sounds of footsteps, of guards fill the space. I know guns are now pointed at me as they realise what is happening.

No. No. It can't end like this. It can't.

They're going to take me to Oblivion, they're going to hurt me more, torture me. God, what is the sentence for killing a Chapter Lord? My tears stream down my face as I realise everything I've endured up until now will be paradise compared to that place.

But if I can make them angry, if I can somehow get them to kill me now...

“It was me.” I hiss. “I did it. I killed him.”

I hear the footsteps as Devin pushes his way through, and I panic. I lose complete and utter control.

“He deserved to die.” I spit. “He deserved it for what he did to me.” I realise the blade is still in my hand and I bring it to my throat. Maybe I don’t need them to do it, maybe I can see it done. A throat is better than wrists right. A throat bleeds out far faster.

“I’d rather die than let that man touch me again.” I snarl. “I’d rather die than let any of your arseholes touch me again.”

I drag it quickly, feeling as it starts to slice my skin with a pain I welcome in my very soul. But the guards nearest spring on top of me, they grab at the blade and though I’m able to stab at one of them, another is there, yanking my arm back, forcing it from my hand.

I scream, I kick out. The cut at my neck isn’t nearly deep enough to do any real damage. I’d have done a better job if I’d simply buried the thing in my heart. God, why didn’t I do that?

Someone punches me hard enough to momentarily knock me out. My arms are wrenched back. My legs scrape along the ground and, as they start to drag me away and I hear Devin lose control entirely.

CHAPTER FIFTY-EIGHT



Pailtyn

Tt's freezing cold. Pitch black.

All I can hear is the distant sound of someone screaming.

Oh, I know where I am. Where I've been taken too.

I used to think this place was the worst nightmare I could imagine but after Gunther, I'm not so sure.

My arms are locked into shackles that keep me pressed against a freezing stone wall. My legs are curled under me. I don't know when they stripped me down but I'm naked. Completely naked.

I shudder, wondering what horrors come next. Will Magnus auction me off? Will he sell me to the highest bidder? Or will he parade me out, let all those degenerates have a go with a Founder?

The thought of it, the thought of enduring more pain, more abuse, I hang my head praying that my body might break, that god will be merciful.

That he'll look down on me in this moment and just strike me down, give me a heart attack, a stroke even. Something that could be quick and relatively painless. I at least deserve that after everything my husband put me through.

My thoughts falter as I hear the lock click and then the heavy door swings open.

One pair of boots scraps across the floor as whoever it is struts in.

Is this my new jailor? My new guard?

I gulp and then my body trembles with horror as I realise who it is. As I get a whiff of him, of his stench.

"You're mine now, bitch." Guthrie says as he squats down, getting right into my face.

"No." I gasp.

He grabs hold of me, grabbing hold of a part he has no right to touch.

Behind him, someone else walks in and I pray that this is a mistake, that this is my salvation. Is this Antonio or my mother? Please, let them be here, let them save me.

Only, it's not either of them.

"Magnus." Guthrie says.

Magnus says something back as if he's bored of me, bored of my existence.

"Well?" He adds.

Guthrie gets to his feet, stepping back but I can feel that he doesn't take his eyes off me for a second.

"You want to save your brother then this is the deal." Guthrie says. "I get her. I get the bitch. As far as anyone else knows, she's dead. She died in the attack..."

"And what about Devin?" Magnus cuts across him.

Guthrie lets out a huff like he wants to call out the interruption but thinks better of it. "You can have him. I don't give a fuck what happens to him. The bitch was the one to do it anyway. There's no connection..."

"It was his knife." Magnus states.

"Only, you, me, your brother and this whore know that for a fact. I'm willing to keep it secret in exchange for a few favours."

Magnus shifts just enough to set a voice screaming in my head. "What favours?"

"Ten million."

Whatever Magnus's reaction is, it's enough for Guthrie to give a chuckle that sends a chill down my spine. "How much is your brother worth? How much is your family's reputation worth? Ten million is pocket change to you."

"Are you threatening me?" Magnus snarls.

"No," Guthrie says. "I'm stating facts. You want your brother out of this mess. We can both ensure that. All you have to do is give me what I want and all of it will go away."

I can practically hear the clogs in Magnus's head as he thinks it over. Why wouldn't he? Why wouldn't he save Devin? And for only ten million, that price is a steal and we all know it.

"Fine." Magnus replies.

"And the bitch stays here. I know you have private cells. Elite slaves, owned by one individual. That's what she becomes."

"Fine. The bitch stays here. But if anyone finds out, anyone at all, I'll slit her throat myself."

Guthrie moves his arm, does something to make his fancy suit ruffle. "No one will know. You have this place locked down better than even your father managed."

Magnus grunts, murmuring about transferring the money and the need to see to his brother.

"Wait," I scream as he turns to leave. "Please, wait, Devin..."

His fist slams into my face. The force of it smashes my head back into the stone and pain explodes behind my empty sockets. "You keep his name out of your mouth." Magnus snarls. "You forget him. Forget he even exists, do you hear me?"

"But..."

Magnus goes to beat me again and Guthrie is there, stepping between us. "I'd rather you didn't ruin all of my fun." He says. "Give me a month and this bitch won't even remember her own name, let alone anyone else's."

Magnus grunts, probably giving me a look his brother has given me so many times before.

"Fine." He spits. "I'll have her moved by nightfall."

He walks out without another glance at me.

Guthrie is still stood so close and while I hate this man almost as much as I hated my husband, he's my only chance now.

"Please..." I beg as soon as the door shuts.

Guthrie immediately backhands me. “You keep your mouth shut, bitch. The only time you get to open it is when you’re choking down my cock, do you hear me?”

My chains rattle from the violent shaking of my body. I can’t keep the tears down as I realise what this is, what my future is now.

He squats down, taking hold of my face. “He never let me touch you. I sat there and I watched from the sidelines as he let everyone else fuck you. As he let his guards have their fun, as he let his damned Senate get to play, but me, me, I was off-limits.”

His hand smashes into my face. Into my socket. My head jerks back, slamming once more into the stone and I scream, turning my head, reeling from the impact.

“What makes you so special? What makes you so fucking precious that my brother kept you from me?”

He hits me again, aiming for my mouth this time. I feel my lip split, I feel my blood start to pour, and I can taste it on my tongue, between my teeth.

“I guess I get the last laugh, don’t I? You’re mine now. All fucking mine. Gunther thought he was so smart, strutting around, telling us what to do all the time, but you wanna know a secret?” He yanks my head, lowering his disgusting face so that he’s right by mine. “I know who killed my brother.” He taunts. “And I know it wasn’t you or that fucking guard either.”

He shoves my head back, crushing it into the stone. I swear my skull actually cracks; I swear my brain turns to mush. A pain so excruciating I can barely describe explodes in my head, shoots down my spine.

“You’re mine now, bitch. Mine to touch. Mine to fuck. Mine to hurt in any way I please.”

I jerk in my chains. I scream out as I hear him undoing his belt. I know what’s coming. What he’s going to do. Somehow it feels so much worse knowing it’s *him* violating me. Him touching me.

But this is my future now. This disgusting brute of a man.

And I can’t escape it. I can’t get free.

And worse than that, I know no one is coming to save me. No one even knows I’m here.

As far as the world is concerned, Paitlyn Helseltine no longer exists. Paitlyn Helsetine is dead.

I'm a nameless slave now. A nobody.
And I'm trapped in this hell until the day I'm finally allowed to finally die.

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CHAPTER

FIFTY-NINE



Devin

I'm thrashing, jerking, trying to get my arms free but the jacket they put me in keeps them pinned to my sides. God only knows how they found a thing big enough to fit me.

I'm in a padded cell. It's big enough that I can do a running smash into one wall and then the other. But all I do is faceplant against the cushioned sides. I don't even know where the door is, it's concealed by the giant squares of foam.

By the time it opens, I'm fully feral.

I snarl up, preparing to launch myself at whoever the fuck walks in.

Only, it's Magnus.

He takes barely more than a stride into the room and the look on his face, I know that look, that mixture of contempt and disappointment.

"You took your time." I mutter.

He raises an eyebrow at me. “So you’re rational enough to speak, I see.”

“Get me the fuck out of here.” I bellow back.

He shakes his head at me. “No can do, brother.”

“Excuse me?”

“I warned you.” He snarls. “I fucking warned you for months. You think I didn’t see it. You think I couldn’t tell that you were losing it. That you were turning into her.”

I blink back as I realise what this is. Why I’m here. He thinks I’ve lost my mind, he thinks I’ve succumbed to the same condition our mother had. “You did this. You had me locked in this place.”

He nods. That tiny little movement that feels more condescending than anything else.

“You brought this on yourself, Devin. I tried. I fucking tried to help you, but you wouldn’t listen, and you wouldn’t take your meds.”

“I don’t need meds.” I snarl back. I’m not fucking insane. I’m not.

He lets out a cruel laugh. “Says the person in a straitjacket.”

“Let me out, Magnus. You don’t understand, you don’t understand any of this.”

“Oh, I understand alright.” He says, pulling his immaculately pressed suit trousers up enough to allow him to squat down without putting any creases into them. He gets right into my face, which despite the level of my incapacitation is still a damned bold fucking move to make. “You were fucking her, fucking that girl.”

I don’t respond to that. It’s not like Gunther didn’t know. Hell, he let me spend more than enough hours punishing her, just as he did the other guards too.

My face twitches as I recall it, that scene in the guardhouse. The way he’d let us all fuck with her one after another. The way she cried and she sobbed and the way her perfect little body looked as those fuckers stuck their putrid damned cocks into her mouth as if they had a right to touch her. As if they had a right to even look at her.

She’s mine. She’s always been mine.

And she will always be mine until the day she dies until the day she draws her last fucking breath. And I intend to be the one to take it, to take her life, her soul, every last bit of her. Every last slice.

He slaps my face, slaps me hard enough to jerk me right out of wherever I went to.

“Her cunt was that good, was it? That fucking sweet that you forgot who you are, what your duty to this family is?”

“Gunther was passing her around. We all had her at some point.” I spit back. It’s the truth and it’s a lie too. She wasn’t just a cheap whore, at least not to me.

But she killed him. That stupid bitch killed him and she tried to set me up for it.

“Gunther is dead.” Magnus states, as if I didn’t see his body myself. “The Senate have stepped in. There’s an emergency council in place while they establish a new Chapter Lord...”

He continues on as if I give a fuck about any of it. As if I give a fuck about the Brethren and who our new leader is.

I need to get out of here. I need to get to wherever the fuck Paitlyn is. Desperation claws at me and it’s a feeling I’m not used to. A feeling that makes me feel weak, useless.

And then I remind myself that those feelings are traitorous, wrong. She’s not my love, not my joy, that bitch tried to ruin me. She tried to destroy me.

I glance down, trying to pull my arms free for what must be the millionth time. If I can just get out of this stupid jacket, then I can get myself out of here. I know I’m strong enough, I know I can take on whoever is the other side of that door.

“Are you even listening to me?” He snaps.

I blink, looking at him, seeing that same twisted anger our father used to have.

“I need to get out of here.” I state. “I need to get to Paitlyn.”

It’s the wrong thing to say. The wrong fucking thing. I’m not thinking straight, I’m not thinking rationally at all. My mind feels like it’s whirling. I feel like the entire world is spinning around me and I need it to stop. I need everything to just fucking stop.

I need to get to her. I have to get to her. I’m going to make her pay for what she’s done.

“You’re not going anywhere.” Magnus replies. “Paitlyn is gone.”

“Gone?” I repeat. What the fuck does that mean? Has someone taken her? Has she been sent to our Grand Master? She’s a Founder, do different rules apply to them?

His hand slaps my face again and I growl at him this time. I swear to God if he does it again I'll bite his fucking fingers off.

"Forget the damned girl." He spits. "She's a whore. A useless, good for nothing whore. You need to focus on our family right now. Focus on sorting your head out."

"I need Paitlyn."

"She's dead, Devin. The bitch is dead."

Dead? No. No she can't be. They wouldn't have killed her, they wouldn't have.

I start thrashing, start losing control. It feels like the entire world opens up beneath me and I'm falling through, falling into the abyss beyond.

"Malktā." The name slips past my lips. It feels like a curse now. Perhaps it always was and I just didn't realise it.

The door smashes open. Two men come rushing in. They're dressed in white tunics. White to match the walls. White to match the jacket. White to match the colourless nothing left now that she is gone.

One of them jabs at me. I try to jerk away but I'm lopsided without my arms and I fall face first into the stupid cushioned floor. A sting flicks against my neck and I know what they're doing, what this is.

"No." I growl. "No."

If they drug me, then I can't get out. If they drug me then I can't get to her.

Dead. She's dead.

I don't fucking believe it. I won't believe it. Not until I see her body, not until I see her rotting fucking corpse.

My anger fizzles out. My emotions flatline. I slump over, roll over, stare up at the ceiling and realise that's cushioned too but it's so high up I doubt anyone could even reach it. Are they worried we might fly? We might rise up and escape through the rafters?

A face peers over me. It's fuzzy. Hard. Fuzzy hard, and I know it's my brother. That the bastard is still here, watching this, witnessing this, allowing this to happen.

"Get well, brother." He says as if he gives a shit about my wellbeing.

"Pait..." I can't even speak her name. can't even form the syllables. My mouth refuses to work. My throat is locked up tighter than Oblivion.

"She's dead." Magnus states. "Dead or as good as."

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AFTER



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CHAPTER

SIXTY



Pailtyn

The darkness breathes around me, thick and suffocating, pressing against my skin like sopping wet velvet.

I can't remember how long I've been here, minutes, hours, a lifetime? It's all become meaningless. Time is a concept that dissolved along with everything else I thought I knew about reality.

My throat burns. It feels like I've been swallowing shards of glass.

Have I been screaming?

The sound echoes back to me now. A raw, animalistic wail that doesn't sound like my voice at all.

It bounces off invisible walls, multiplying until it becomes a chorus of my own despair. Until it becomes an echo that never truly dies, it just fades into the background hum of this place, wherever *this* place is.

I press my palms against what feels like stone. My fingers explore the surface, searching for seams, for doors, for any indication of escape. But there's nothing. Just endless wall stretching in every direction I turn.

The texture is rough beneath my touch, and I realize with a distant sort of horror that some of the wetness I feel isn't condensation, it's blood. My blood.

When did I start clawing at these walls? I look down at my hands, though I can see nothing in this absolute darkness.

A ragged bitter laugh escapes me then as I remember that I wouldn't be able to see if the entire space was illuminated.

They took my eyes. They took my fucking eyes.

It shouldn't be funny. It isn't fucking funny. And yet, in this moment, it damned well is.

I can feel the jagged edges where my fingernails used to be, the raw flesh beneath. The pain should stop me, but it doesn't. If anything, it drives me harder. I rake my fingers across the stone again, feeling skin tear, feeling something warm run down my wrists.

Pain is the only thing that feels real anymore.

Pain is the only proof that I'm actually alive.

My body shakes, from cold, from fear, from exhaustion. I can't tell which. Maybe all three. Maybe none. Maybe this trembling is just another lie my mind is telling me, another betrayal in a long line of betrayals that have brought me to this place of absolute nothing.

“Help me.” I whisper, and my voice cracks like old paper.

The words disappear into the void, swallowed by darkness so complete it seems to have weight. “Please, someone help me.”

But who would help me now? Who is left?

Old memories come in fragments, sharp-edged pieces that cut at my consciousness. Faces that turned away. Promises that crumbled like ash. Hands that pushed me down when I needed them to pull me up. Everyone—everyone—chose something else over me. They chose safety, comfort, or their own preservation. They chose anything but me.

Except, he didn't.

I know it now. I understand it now.

He didn't choose to betray me, not really. He was saving me.

I just didn't understand it then.

I thought he was my enemy, I thought he was trying to steal me away, that that was the words he was whispering when I was too weak and tired to understand them. That wasn't the justice he was offering. He wasn't giving me freedom, he was giving me something far more precious than that.

I don't know where he is now.

I don't know... I freeze up, lock up, as I hear those dreaded, awful steps.

Guthrie is here. Guthrie is back.

I swallow down the whimper, curling up all those parts of myself that are still me and I slip back, slip away, become the thing he's made of me.

The dead, and yet still breathing creature, lost to the darkness.

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CHAPTER

SIXTY-ONE



Devin

Dead or as good as.

Those words repeat in my head as I stare out, as I look through the darkness ahead of me.

Five years is a long time to wait for revenge. To wait for recompense. And god, does it feel good to be finally free, to be finally back in the world. Finally reminding myself that I am still alive.

I slip through the back door, expertly picking the lock. It's so quiet I can hear the blood pounding in my ears. I can hear my breaths, heavy, weighted.

Behind me, Cooper, Mace, and seven others are jostling to get inside and get this show on the road.

Our dear friend here had enough men stationed around the perimeter to give us a nice little challenge, a nice little fight.

As I step inside, my heart races with a mixture of adrenaline and bloodlust. The house is eerily silent, save for the soft sounds of the night creeping through. There's a grandfather clock that's slowly ticking away.

The entrance hall is choked with shadows. Perhaps all the demons of Hell are here tonight. My lips pull into a grin at the thought. Now that would make this entertaining, wouldn't it?

I move quickly, creeping through the dimly lit corridor. A floorboard creaks loud enough for me to pause. Oh, I know there are more guards up here, more people waiting to protect their precious quarry.

But nothing happens. No one comes.

To say I'm disappointed is an understatement.

I find the stairs, not bothering to mask my footsteps as I ascend. There's no need for subterfuge now.

The door to the first room I approach is half-open, a sliver of light spilling into the hallway, illuminating the jagged edges of the world that's about to become one of their nightmares.

A girl I know to be his daughter is curled up in the bed. Poor bitch, she might be technically innocent but that won't spare her. I know my brother will have both her and her mother sent to Oblivion. They'll both be turned into slaves. Both be turned into whores for the great Brethren to enjoy.

I wrinkle my nose, not that I care what her fate is.

But for a minute, for one fleeting second, it's like my mind plays a trick on me. I blink, rubbing them with my fingers as her features morph, as they alter.

Suddenly she no longer looks like Titus's daughter.

Her hair turns a shade lighter, her nose becomes slenderer, and her mouth, her lips become fuller.

She opens her eyes, blinks back at me, and I can see those devastatingly blue eyes.

Paitlyn.

My heart slams into my chest. Something in my head roars.

I rush forward, wrenching the covers off and the girl screams, waking in an instant.

"You traitorous bitch..." I snarl, grabbing at her, yanking her out by her hair.

It makes no sense that she's here. Why the fuck would she be? Unless Magnus knew I was coming here, unless I've been double-crossed?

I glance at the men, my men, they're looking back at me in confusion.
“We got her.” I spit. “We got her.”

Before I can get the words out, Titus's guards come crashing into the room. Curtis and Lyndon are quick to eliminate them, but the sound of gunfire will be enough to wake everyone up. To alert every fucker in this place.

The girl in my arms jerks, screaming out and I wrap my hand around her mouth to silence the damned noise.

“Shut the fuck up, Paitlyn.” I spit.

“Devin, that’s not her.” Cooper says with such an uncertain tone. As if he thinks I’m mad, as if he thinks I’ve forgotten what she looks like. Like I wouldn’t be able to pick her out, with my eyes covered and the room packed full of people.

I glance down, seeing the way the splice of moonlight catches her face. And I swear to god, she smirks at me.

“Grace...” A woman cries coming out of nowhere.

Mace grabs her, subdues her, as she lashes out with her hands being the only weapon she has. She’s wearing a flimsy little nightgown. It shows off every curve she has, it shows the slight roundness of her stomach too.

“Please.” She sobs. “Please let my daughter go.”

I narrow my eyes. My mind registering that somewhere in this house, Grace is also here.

“Grace.” A gruff voice repeats.

We all tense when we see who it is. The great man himself.

Titus Ratcliffe.

He’s holding an assault rifle, has it pointed right at me, as if he’d have the nerve to pull the trigger.

“Let her go.” He says.

“You don’t give the orders around here.” I spit. Like fuck I’m going to do that anyway, not when it’s taken me this long to find her, this long to hunt the bitch down.

It’s curious that she is here though. Curious that she’d be so easy to capture. I would have thought my brother would have been more imaginative than this. Perhaps he doesn’t want to lose face, perhaps this nurses his ego more.

After all, this ties everything up with a neat little bow. He gets his rival. I get the whore.

“Momma...” The girl in my arm squeals, getting free from my grasp.

“Devin...” Cooper says, taking a cautious step like he’s no longer on my side. Like I’m a grenade about to go off.

I frown, staring at the room, feeling suddenly like the entire tables have flipped. That everyone here is against me.

“Momma...” The girl screams again, louder.

I look down and that face, that serene, beautiful face of my jezebel changes. The blue eyes turn brown. The smirk vanishes. Instead of a fully grown woman, I’m holding a teenager.

It’s Grace. Not Paitlyn.

What the fuck is going on? What the... I shake my head, trying to clear it. I know it was a trick, a momentary lapse, but I can’t tell the others that. I need them to trust me, to look up to me. If they realise what I am, I won’t get that, I won’t have loyalty, I’ll end up with a bullet in my head.

I yank the girl’s hair, pulling her head back until her neck is exposed. With a small blade, I trace along her jugular. “Be a good boy and drop the rifle, Titus.”

The mother moans, sobs, says something incomprehensible, but I’d put money on her telling him to do it, to surrender, to give in to save their precious daughter.

Titus looks between us like he’s weighing up whose life is worth more to him, his or his family.

“You’ll take them to Oblivion.” He spits.

I shrug. Even though we all know that’s the case, it’s not my decision to make.

“I can’t, I won’t...” Titus screws his face up, staring back and forth between his precious wife and his precious daughter. “She’s seventeen.” He says. “She’s a child.”

I tilt my head, taking a deliberate sniff of the girl in question. I have no interest in children, no interest in anything beyond one woman and my revenge, and yet, I’m more than happy to torment this fucker.

“Bastard.” He cries. “Get your filthy fucking hands off her.”

“Won’t be the only ones on her the minute she turns of age.” I smirk. We all know her future, know what will happen. This bitch will be auctioned off. Her purity will fetch a fine price considering who her parents are. And after that, well, let’s just say, she’ll be lucky to make her thirtieth birthday.

Those words clearly send him over the edge, he pulls the trigger, narrowly missing my ear. Too bad the man is a poor shot, a little more to the left and he might have actually made a difference.

Cooper jumps on him, wrangling the weapon from his grasp, then uses the butt of it to knock him to his knees.

“Please,” Titus cries. “Let her go. Just let her go.”

Like fuck I will.

I jerk my head for Mace to move and both of us are dragging our quarry out, down the hall, down the stairs down to where we’ll set up a nice little welcome party for my brother.

Grace kicks and bites the entire way. Little bitch has some fire, I’ll give her that. Even a good smack to the face doesn’t seem to subdue her.

“Keep that spark.” I growl into her ear. “It’ll make it all the more enjoyable when the first man gets to fuck you.”

She whimpers before slamming her head back into my nose and I let out a groan half pain, half pleasure.

I slam her onto the floor, leaving her curled up in a heap, while I get on with finalising this shit-show.

In the kitchen is an old-school farmhouse table and chairs. I grab two of them and carry them over to where I left the girl.

She’s started crawling away, as if she were an insect, as if she could simply slither into the dark.

I place a heavy boot on her back, tutting.

“Please,” She half-whispers, half-pleads.

“Don’t go soft on us now, bitch.” I reply, as my fingers dig into the silk of her nightshirt.

I haul her up, then shove her down onto the chair. Mace tosses me some rope and we tie both her and her mother up.

Behind us, we hear the shouts as Titus is bundled down.

“Let them go. Please, let them go. They haven’t done anything, they haven’t...”

God, will he stop waffling on?

“Please.” He says, staring at me, trying to look me in the eye, only, I’m head and shoulders above him so he has to wrench his head up to do it.

“I won’t fight. I won’t cause any problems. You want me to surrender, to let Magnus win, fine, I’ll do that. Just let my family go. Spare my family...”

I grab the first thing I can see, a napkin, and ram it into his stupid face.

Does he think we're here for my brother? Does he think that's what this is? That I'm some errand boy, running around, doing as I'm told?

"Get him out of here." I order. I need him gone; I need him secure.

Cooper and Mace haul him out, and the silence that follows is pure fucking gold.

I fix my gaze back on the two women. Both of them have been gagged so they can't speak but their eyes are wide, the terror in them illuminates the room with more beauty than the full moon has ever been capable of.

I kneel down, staring at the fake Paitlyn. The imposter. I can see now, how I was fooled. I can see the similarities go only as far as her pretty pale skin and her golden hair.

I scrawl out a note, folding it quickly, then place it into the girl's hand.

And then I slip out, leaving them to the darkness, while I find a nice little hiding place.



IT ONLY TAKES AN HOUR.

One beautiful, delightful hour of waiting.

Magnus, Conrad, and all their little buddies turn up, smashing the door in, acting like they're about to set the world to rights.

Or ruin, more like.

I smirk, seeing all the commotion. Seeing one light after another switch on and the entire house is suddenly illuminated.

Has he found them yet? Has he realised what this is?

If I could have risked it, I would have gotten closer, would have hidden near enough to see the expression on his face when reality kicked him the arse.

But he's no fool. And I'm not a fucking idiot either. I know doing so would have been too much of a risk.

A snarl rings out.

The door swings open and I see that all too familiar figure come storming out.

He's raging, fuming. Stupid bastard thought it would be easy. Stupid bastard thought he could simply dangle my freedom in front of me as if that would be enough to buy my loyalty. Like I was as easy to win over as that.

I run my hand over my face, and I swear I can still feel it, the mask, the contraption they locked me up in.

He did that. My brother.

He claimed to love me, to care for me, that the three of us would protect each other above everything else. And yet, when push came to shove, he chose himself, he chose his power, his greed.

And he sacrificed me the way my father sacrificed our mother.

Only, unlike her, I'm not so weak and crazy to take it. I've done my time, I've spent my years in purgatory, waiting, and now, it's my time to shine. My time to make my mark on this cursed world.

Magnus tried to hide me away like I was the black sheep. He's about to find out that some things cannot be hidden. Some things cannot be forgotten.

And some things have to be paid for, and preferably with blood.

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CHAPTER

SIXTY-TWO



Devin

We drag the man into the bunker. Despite the sedatives we gave him, the fucker is still putting up a damned good fight. Danos and Soren are all ready and waiting for us, and they take the bastard from our hands and toss him into the furthest away cell.

I don't have any plans of messing with him. As far as I'm concerned, he can sit there and rot until the time comes for him to be a nice little bargaining chip.

The door slam shuts behind him. The rest of the men fill the main room, sinking into chairs, kicking off their protective gear.

"Good night all round," Soren says, grabbing a beer from the manky fridge in the corner.

“You got the last of them?” I ask. While a few of us played tricks on my brother, the rest were off, finalising Magnus’s shit list. Yeah, it technically does him a favour, but it also twists the blade, increases the pressure he’s under. Because Magnus can’t be announced Chapter Lord until it is absolutely safe to do so, until everyone on his precious list is eliminated. His mistake was revealing that fact to me, because I know what it also means; that once that list is done, he and Titus need to have one final ceremony. One final ritual.

And Magnus can’t do that, while Titus is here with me, can he?

My lips curl, seeing again the frustration, the fury my brother showed when he realised I’d beaten him.

Too bad, brother. Too fucking bad. You brought this on yourself the day you had me locked away like a fucking lunatic.

Lyndon walks up to me, his face twisted into a look on concern.

“What?” I ask.

“You, you sure about this?” He says quietly. “I know you want revenge, but Magnus...” He shakes his head. “Magnus is going for Chapter Lord, he has help, he has numbers behind him. If he figures out where we are, he can simply wipe us off the board.”

“That won’t happen.” I state.

“Why?”

“Because I’m his brother.” I say.

“Devin, he had you locked in a fucking nuthouse.”

Yeah, that’s true. But if Magnus was truly done with me, he would have had me eliminated. He would have had me exterminated. The fact I’m still alive proves I’m a weak spot.

“He needs Titus.” I add. “Without him, he cannot perform the final ritual.”

“Other Chapter Lords have gotten around it.”

That’s true. We both know that, but right now, the Brethren is fractured. The Esau have seen to that. But that too works in our favour. After the death of Gunther, and then the explosive death of Turner, his successor, the Brethren are on shaky ground. We need stability.

It’s no doubt, another reason why my brother was chosen in the first place, why he became a viable candidate.

“Trust me, Lyndon,” I say. “I know what I’m doing.”

He narrows his eyes, searching my face as if he could possibly read my thoughts, and then he gives a reluctant nod.

I pat him on the back, reassuring him, before I turn back to look at all the others.

“Brothers,” I say loudly, getting their attention.

The noise, the chatter, all of it instantly dies.

“Tonight, we made our mark, tonight we got a nice tiny slice of revenge. So drink, celebrate, enjoy our victory, and tomorrow, the rest of us will be here to celebrate too.” I declare.

Cheers erupt at my words.

I grab a beer, necking half of it in one go.

I have no intention of getting drunk, no intention of losing control. The alcohol might take the edge off but if there’s one thing I know about my brother, it’s never underestimate him, never rest on your laurels.

Silently, I slip away, slip into the darkness of my room. This compound is so big we’re fortunate enough that none of us have to share, despite our numbers.

I toss my boots off, sink onto the crinkly sleeping bag and reach up onto the shelf, pulling down the glass jar. It took me a lot of effort to get hold of this. To break in, to get past all those new guards. It’s the only piece I own of her right now, but it won’t be the last.

I stare into it, stare into what feels like the abyss.

And I know it’s staring right back at me.

Bright blue, devastatingly brilliant eyes. Her eyes. My eyes now.

Windows to her very fucking soul.

CHAPTER SIXTY-THREE



'Devin

*T*he padded room spins around me, like a cyclone of muted colours and stifled sounds, as the world beyond these walls becomes an echo of the madness inside my head.

My reflection blurs in the metallic sheen of the mask's surface, a horrific visage that stares back at me with hollow, rimmed eyes. It's a wicked twist of fate, a mask designed to confine my teeth and quiet my very soul, but oh, how the irony ignites my spirit.

Because it doesn't quieten me. It doesn't dull me.

Instead, it sets the beast in me free.

I embrace the chaos, licking at the fringes of insanity like a moth to flame.

With a frantic growl, I writhe against the straitjacket that confines my movements. The canvas is stiff and unforgiving, and just like always, it

tightens its grip as I attempt to free myself. It feels like a cage constructed not of wood or steel, but of my own decaying sanity.

The dim lighting dances across the walls of this prison cell, taunting me with the absence of any escape.

My body and mind are at war, playing a sick game where I crave liberation while simultaneously dreaming of a blissful surrender.

In my desperation, I summon every ounce of strength I can muster, and I thrust my right shoulder forward, feeling the sharp, delicious pain blossom as the joint dislocates with a sickeningly loud pop.

Nausea seeps through my veins. Adrenaline surges with it.

I tear at the fabric, forcing my damaged limb to work, and like a bird released from its cage, I find my hands have some semblance of freedom.

I claw at the mask, my teeth gnashing wildly against the leather restraints. I grasp at the edges, while the coarse material burns against my skin, but with one final desperate pull, I fling thing off.

Air rushes into my lungs like a long-lost lover, invigorating, electrifying. Pure fucking bliss.

My fingers tremble in the wake of my liberation, the raw sensation flooding my senses like heroin. But this moment of triumph is fleeting.

The sound of the door opening slices through my euphoria.

The doctor steps in, his white coat stark against the muddled grey of my surroundings. I see him approaching, but all I can think of is the primal urge surging within me, the untamed beast that threatens to spill forth.

But why should I stop it? Why should I hold back? They treat me like a beast, they act like I'm a monster.

Well, if it's a monster they want, then that's what I shall give them.

I roar, a feral sound that echoes off the walls and sends a smatter of goosebumps along my forearms.

The thrill of violence surges through me as I charge full pelt.

The doctor's calm demeanour crumbles into shock as I leap. My senses sharpen, the air infuses with a metallic tang.

It paints the walls. It illuminates them.

I taste salt and iron, the sharp tang of blood bursting forth beneath my frantic assault.

A sense of ecstasy cascades over me as the warmth spreads, flowing like a dark river down my chin, feeding the insatiable beast within.

More. I need more.

More blood. More violence. More...



I SHUDDER, BLINKING, BURYING THE MEMORY OF WHAT I WAS, WHAT I AM.

The sound of my heartbeat echoes in my ears, a rhythm that matches the pulsing urgency of my thoughts.

I can feel it, the beast, wanting to get out, needing to.

He calls to me, he screams in my head, he whispers so seductively and a part of me knows if I give in, I will become everything my brother believes me to be. And yet, would that be such a bad thing? Would it?

My hands flex, my heart thrums in my chest as I see the vehicles coming up over the brow of the hill.

It's always moments of silence that bring *this* out in me. Always moments when it's quiet and still that I get a chance to think.

The dust kicks up behind the vehicles, the heat beats down and the ground around me is so baked it feels as hard as concrete. It hasn't rained in weeks. But I can see the storm clouds on the horizon, I can feel it in the air. Something is coming. And if that isn't prophetic, then I don't know what is.

Beside me, Malik shifts his weight. His eyes bore into the trucks as if he thinks this is some sort of trap.

When they come to a stop, he doesn't move, he stands still as a statue, glaring.

"Devin." Noah grounds out as he practically jumps from the first vehicle.

His face is etched with scars, his body looks aged far beyond his years.

I incline my head before he clasps my hand and brings me in for an embrace.

"It's good to see you, brother. Damn good." He mutters.

Elijah follows him, practically pushing him out of the way to embrace me.

"Jesus," He mutters as he breaks apart. "You look more fucked than we all are."

My lips pull into a tight grin. The years have not been kind, not to any of us, but we're here, we've survived, haven't we?

When they spot Malik and they both still, staring at him like he's an apparition. A reminder of all our pasts that might be better off forgotten. As if we could.

Elijah moves to embrace him, but I hold up my hand to stop him. "He doesn't like being touched." I state.

They exchange looks, glances that say it all.

As the rest of the guards clamber out of the trucks and gather around, I can sense the uneasiness.

I guess it's to be expected. All of us have paid the price these last five years. These bastards here were the last of us to get free. The Brethren were smart enough to separate us. Do I feel guilty about not finding them sooner? Guilt is for the weak. Guilt is for lesser people. What's done is done. And now, we will get our revenge.

"Come on," I mutter, jerking my head for them to follow. "Cooper and Mace have sorted out a nice little welcome for you all."

Elijah's eyes light up. Noah practically jumps with the prospect.

As I walk into the compound the sound of screams reaches my ears. Apparently, they got the party started early then.

"What the...?" Noah says, staring at the carnage, at the mess, at the naked women who are half trying to escape, half already giving in and submitting like the whores we know they are.

"They were being trafficked by some small-time prick." I mutter. "I decided we had more use for them than they did."

Cooper spots our new friends and jumps to his feet. He's naked, his cock is standing up to attention and in his tight-fisted hand, he has a tearful redhead with a bloodied nose.

"Fuck me." He growls, before looking at me. "You did it. You got them out."

I shrug. "Said I would, didn't I?"

He grins more. "Yeah, you did, but you're a crazy bastard, hard to tell what's real and what's just in your head."

I throw my head back and laugh. Like I don't have the same problem these days.

"Get your fill." I say to the men behind me. They don't need telling twice.

The few girls that haven't been claimed scream when they see them coming towards them. I let out a sigh, swiping a beer and watch it play out.

I have no interest in fucking now. I have no need for it.

My only focus is on finding that blonde bitch, finding Paitlyn, and making her pay.

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CHAPTER SIXTY-FOUR



Pailtyn

I press my face against the cold stone and try to remember what sunlight feels like. The memory is already fading, becoming as insubstantial as smoke.

Did I ever really feel warmth on my skin?

Did I ever really see colours other than this endless, suffocating black?

Maybe I've always been here. Maybe everything else, the betrayals, the abandonment, the slow dissolution of everything I thought was real, maybe that was the hallucination.

Maybe this darkness is the only truth there is.

The thought should terrify me, but instead it brings a strange sort of peace. If this is all there is, then I can stop fighting. I can stop hoping for rescue that will never come, stop believing that somewhere beyond these walls, people who claim to love me are working to bring me home.

“I trusted you.” I say to the darkness, because the darkness is all that’s left to talk to. “I trusted all of you.”

I curl into a ball on the floor, my ruined hands tucked against my chest. The blood has stopped flowing, or maybe I’ve just run out. My body feels disconnected from my mind, like a machine that’s running on fumes. Every breath is an effort. Every heartbeat feels like a choice I have to consciously make, and I don’t understand why I haven’t just stopped it. Stopped it all. Stopped breathing, stopped pumping blood around myself, just fucking stopped.

“I’m sorry.” I whisper. “I’m sorry I wasn’t strong enough.”

But even as I say it, anger flares in my chest like a struck match. Sorry? Why should I be sorry? I didn’t choose this. I didn’t ask for my mind to fracture, for my reality to become this nightmare of isolation and never-ending pain. And I didn’t ask for the people who were supposed to protect me to turn their backs when I needed them most.

The anger feels good. It feels clean and bright and real in a way that nothing else has for so long.

I grab onto it, feed it, let it burn through the despair that’s been drowning me and suddenly I’m not fighting to get through the waves, I’m an inferno. I’m a thing that can’t be stopped and it feels both exhilarating and horrifying all at the same time.

I lean my forehead against the wall. The stone is warm here, almost body temperature. But that’s wrong. Stone should be cold, it *is* cold, especially in a place like this. Unless...

Unless this isn’t stone at all.

I press my ear against the surface and listen. There, faint but unmistakable, is a rhythmic thumping. Like a heartbeat. Like breathing.

The wall is alive.

I jerk backward, nearly losing my balance. And those chains rattle worse than ever. My rational mind tries to reject what I’m perceiving, but rationality feels like a luxury I can no longer afford.

In this place, anything is possible.

In this place, the walls themselves might be part of some larger organism, some entity that feeds on fear and despair.

“What are you?” I ask the darkness. “What do you want from me?”

The thumping grows louder, more insistent. It’s definitely a heartbeat now. There’s no denying it. The sound reverberates through the floor

beneath my feet, through the air around me. I am inside something living, something vast and something so very very hungry.

The realization should drive me deeper into madness, but instead it clarifies something for me. This isn't random. I've been fed to something, offered up as a sacrifice by the people who were supposed to care about me.

They didn't just abandon me. They delivered me.

I think about my mother's face again, but this time I see it differently. The expression I read as disappointment, what if it was guilt? Guilt at betraying me, guilt at delivering me to this fate, this destiny.

The betrayal runs so deep I can taste it, metallic and bitter on my tongue. But beneath the pain, there's something else growing. A cold, calculating fury that makes my earlier anger seem like a candle compared to this raging fire.

If they want to feed me to the darkness, fine.

But I won't go quietly.

I won't curl up and die like a good little sacrifice.

I'll find a way to survive this, and when I do, there will be a reckoning.

I place my palms against the living wall again, but this time I don't claw at it. Instead, I spread my fingers wide and try to understand what I'm touching. The surface is warm and slightly yielding, like soft skin over muscle. The heartbeat is stronger here, so strong I can feel it in my very bones.

"I know you can hear me." I say. "I know you're aware of me."

The heartbeat falters for just a moment, missing a beat before resuming its steady rhythm. Good. I have its attention.

"They gave me to you because they thought I was broken." I continue. "They thought I was weak and useless and disposable. But they were wrong."

I start walking again, this time with purpose. If this is a living thing, it has anatomy. It has systems and structures and vulnerabilities. And if it has vulnerabilities, it can be hurt.

The thought brings me a savage satisfaction. Let them think they've disposed of me. Let them sleep peacefully in their beds, believing they've solved their little problem and all the while, they have no idea what they've actually done.

My fingers find a seam in the wall, a place where the surface dips inward slightly. It feels different here, softer, more sensitive. I press against

it experimentally and the heartbeat quickens. The entity around me shudders, and for a moment the darkness seems to lighten just a fraction.

“Found something, didn’t I?” I murmur, feeling suddenly exhilarated by this.

I dig my ruined fingernails into the seam, ignoring the fresh pain as I work to widen the gap. The entity writhes around me, the walls contracting and expanding like breathing. Whatever I’m doing, it doesn’t like it.

Good.

Warm liquid begins to seep from the wound I’m creating, not blood, but something thicker and more viscous. It glows faintly in the darkness, the first light I’ve seen since arriving in this place. The sight of it fills me with a fierce joy that borders on madness.

I can hurt it.

I can make it bleed.

The entity’s distress is palpable now, communicated through vibrations in the walls and floor. The heartbeat becomes irregular, frantic. But I don’t stop. I can’t stop. This is the first real power I’ve had; the first time I’ve been the one inflicting pain instead of receiving it.

“How does it feel?” I ask the darkness as I work my fingers deeper into the wound. “How does it feel to be helpless? To be weak?”

The glowing fluid is flowing more freely now, pooling around my feet and casting eerie shadows on the walls. In the faint light, I can see that my suspicions were correct, the surfaces around me are definitely organic, ribbed like the inside of some massive throat or stomach. I am inside something, and that something is now bleeding because of me.

The discovery should horrify me, but instead it fills me with a cold satisfaction. They wanted to feed me to the darkness? Fine. But I’m not going down easy. I’m going to tear this thing apart from the inside.

I reach deeper into the wound, feeling my arm sink up to the elbow in warm, yielding flesh. The entity’s screams echo through the space around me, not sounds, exactly, but vibrations that I feel in my bones. It’s in agony, and I’m the cause.

For the first time since arriving in this place, I smile.

“This is just the beginning.” I promise the darkness. “This is just the start of what I’m going to do to everyone who put me here.”

The light from the entity’s blood grows brighter, and in its glow, I can finally see my own reflection in the wet walls. The face looking back at me

is gaunt and wild-eyed, streaked with luminescent fluid and dried blood.

I look like a madwoman.

I look like a monster.

I look absolutely fucking perfect.

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CHAPTER

SIXTY-FIVE



Devin

I 'm close enough on their tail for them to notice.

I didn't want to be, but it would have roused more suspicion for me to have stayed back. Stupid fucking car that was in between us had to be a selfish prick and make a right turn and that left me exposed. Left me visible.

Besides, I'm not expecting to get anything out of today. It's a reccy, nothing more.

Each bend my brother takes feels like he's slipping further from my grasp, taunting me with the possibility that not only does he know where Paitlyn is, but he delights in the fact I don't.

It's a game of chase, like a wolf playing with its prey.
And I fucking hate it.

I grip the wheel tighter, feeling the familiar pulse of frustration itching in my fingertips. My brother is sharper than he looks, and if I've learned anything, it's that he always has one eye trained on the rearview mirror.

I drop back, keep better distance, attempting to blend in with the sparse traffic; a passing car swiftly grants me the shelter I need, and I breathe out, if only for a moment.

Then the instinct kicks in, my gut screams in rebellion. He knows I'm here. The way he turned just before the drive suggested he caught a glimpse of something amiss. Every sense in my body ignites with tension.

I pull back further, letting the distance grow, annoyed at how easily he seems to read my moves.

Suddenly, we're weaving through backroads. My heart races, it thrums in sync with the rhythm of the tires against the tarmac. I can't shake the feeling that Conrad is leading me on a wild goose chase, that he's enjoying this cat-and-mouse game a little too much.

The sky is a canvas of brooding greys, the sun a mere suggestion behind the thickening clouds. It's as if nature itself is conspiring to reflect the turmoil within me.

I find myself on a stretch of road lined with overgrown brush and dilapidated fences, the kind of place that time forgot. The road isn't even tarmac, it's something older, it's covered in potholes. Pitted with them.

It's here, in this neglected slice of the world, that Conrad's car slows to a crawl before disappearing behind a copse of trees.

My pulse quickens.

This is it.

I kill my headlights and coast to a stop, parking a safe distance away. I don't dare follow any closer; I've come this far by trusting my instincts, and they're screaming at me to proceed with caution.

I step out of the car, the chill in the air biting through my jacket. The silence is almost deafening, broken only by the occasional rustle of leaves in the wind. I move forward on foot, using the shadows as my ally, each step measured and silent.

I'm a hunter closing in on its quarry, yet the prey is elusive, always one step ahead.

"She's not here, Devin."

His voice is thick with derision. With mirth too.

I can't see the bastard. Can't figure out where he's hiding.

Behind me, I feel a flicker of it before I see it, before I recognise what it is.

Fire.

It catches quickly, it engulfs my car with record speed.

I stare at the flames, wondering what it would feel like to step into them, to wrap myself around them, to let their heat and their beauty embrace me.

The screech of tyres rings out, telling me what I already know, that Conrad is gone. That the coward played his trick and then fled.

I'm miles from anywhere. Even the main road is a good hike from here.

A laugh seems to bubble up. It explodes out of me, and I sink to my knees on that muddy, dirty, stick riddled floor.

Is this meant to be a threat? Is this meant to what, put me on warning?

My other brother apparently knows me just as little as Magnus does.

I would hike for days, I would crawl across the longest dessert, through trenches filled with needles, if that's what it took, if that was what was necessary.

Unlike them, I enjoy the pain, I enjoy the journey.

I don't need the easy way. I don't want it.

The fact that I have the strength to do what I know most men would fail at, proves what I am, what I am capable of.

I reach out, taking handfuls of dirt in my hand. It clumps under my nails, it collects there. Is Conrad celebrating right now, does he consider this some sort of 'win'? Stupid bastard. I'm tempted to sneak my way into Oblivion, to find his pretty little wife and snap her spine in a far more final way than he has.

But that would be too permanent. I have hopes that Conrad might play a more favourable part in all this. He was always the better brother to me, so it stands to reason that he might turn from Magnus.

I shut my eyes, rubbing that dirt over my skin, relishing the coolness of it.

Killing his wife won't help me get Paitlyn.

But breaking into Oblivion... that might just be the solution I'm looking for.

My lips pull into a grin as it sinks in what the answer to this is, how obvious it's been this entire fucking time.

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CHAPTER

SIXTY-SIX



Devin

The problem with building supposedly impenetrable fortresses is, everyone assumes they're certifiably impenetrable, including the fuckers defending them.

They don't look for chinks, they don't look for proof that their belief is wrong.

They're as bought into the lie as the fuckers locked inside, and that ultimately, is their downfall.

I slide down the last few feet of the narrow tunnel, my heart pounding in my chest.

The darkness envelops me like a thick fog, and I can barely see a foot in front of me.

I feel invisible. Invincible.

I've only been in these old tunnels a couple of times, technically trespassing, and navigating them now feels more like a test of will than skill. The scent of damp earth fills the air, mixing with a bitter undertone of something long forgotten.

Oblivion is just ahead, a labyrinth that, at least for tonight, I intend to conquer.

As I scramble up another tunnel that feels carved out of the very rocks, I can feel as it turns from jagged edges to something a little smoother.

I don't know who built this. I don't know when they did it. But it's a secret I will take to the grave. Neither of my brother's will ever find out about this. Even if we do somehow make it up. This here, is an insurance policy. A safety net I will never let go of.

My footsteps are silent as I make my way. It's dark here but my eyes have adjusted to the light and besides, I know the exact amount of strides it takes to get from one room to the next. I know where the raised bits of floor are, I know where the steps appear as if rising from the pits of hell. I know it all.

When I reach a larger room, my eyes land on something. It's right in the centre. Hunched over, as if in eternal prayer, though I know the person was never a religious man.

I recognize the frayed jacket and the tattered remnants of clothes.

It's him. Jefferson.

My old friend, my only friend, a man more of a father than Magnus was. All the hours we spent here, all the days he let me hide away, let me exist.

I kneel beside the remains, my fingers trembling as I trace the contours of his skull. There are still tiny bits of flesh attached to it, tiny bits of decomposition.

How cruel it is that he's lying here, alone and decayed, trapped by the very system he sought to evade.

My throat tightens. Sorry, old friend; sorry we eventually lost each other to the shadows.

But as I stare into the hollow eye sockets, a pang of relief washes over me too. No more suffering. The prison's grasp has finally released its hold on him.

And what better place to be, what better tomb to claim. His bones can lay here, can be at peace here. He won't be turned into a trophy. His skull

won't be encased in gold, won't be turned into a treasure, and stashed away to disappear alongside all the thousands of others.

No, this is a fine death.

A good death.

The sort of death bastards like me can only dream of.

I rise back to my feet, the chill of the chamber settling deeper than I'd imagined possible.

There's no time to wallow; only darkness waits for slack souls.

I edge past the skeleton and keep my movements slow and deliberate. The space narrows into a dim corridor, where the air is still and thick with dust.

I swallow and focus on the distant sounds of footsteps echoing through the concrete walls. I've learned their rhythms, the way security patrols fluctuate. This place operates like clockwork. All the shifts, all the timings, all of it is the same as it was when my father was in charge, when his was before that.

The dimly lit corridors of Oblivion stretch out before me, a maze designed to disorient and detain. But I know these halls, every turn, every blind spot. They were once my playground. They were once my sanctuary. My escape.

I move like a shadow, my knowledge of the prison's inner workings guiding me through the maze that's designed to disorientate, that's designed to keep all the prisoners trapped.

I approach a concealed service entrance at the far end of the tunnel, hidden behind a shroud of vines and debris. My pulse quickens with each silent step, my breaths shallow and controlled.

I almost want someone to find me. I almost want this be more of a challenge. My fingers flex with the urge to crush something, that beast inside me screams that all too familiar demand for blood.

Soon. Very soon.

I press my ear against the cold metal door, listening for any sign of life on the other side. The murmur of distant machines hums like a swarm of mechanical bees. It's now or never.

With a gentle push, the door creaks open just enough for me to slip through. I'm greeted by the sterile smell of industrial cleaner, and it's a stark contrast to the earthy tones of the tunnel.

Ahead, I can see him, the man I've been searching for. He's got his back to me; he's too busy scrutinizing the dozens of screens that display every inch of the public parts of Oblivion.

I reach into my pocket pulling out a small cloth. I doused the fabric with a potent sedative. One good sniff, and even a man my size will succumb to its particular charms.

I inch forward; each step measured to avoid the betrayal of a sound.

My heart pounds in my ears. I'm close now, close enough to hear the soft rustle of Dustin's uniform as he shifts his weight. Close enough to get a whiff of his body odour beneath the heavy spray of his deodorant.

I raise the cloth, my hand steady despite the adrenaline coursing through my veins.

In one swift motion, I clasp the cloth over Dustin's mouth, my other arm wrapping around his chest to hold him in place. He struggles, his instincts fighting against the unexpected assault, but the drug works quickly.

Within moments, his body goes limp, and I'm left supporting the dead weight of the man who, only seconds ago, held the keys to my family's kingdom.

I lower him to the ground, careful not to make any noise that might alert the nearby guards. His breathing is steady and deep. I flicker his eyes open, checking the pupils and I can see how dilated they are. Yeah, the fucker got a good hit, didn't he?

I give him a good kick and he doesn't even moan, doesn't react.

The sedative is strong, but it won't last forever. I have to move quickly now, have to be more careful too.

Getting into Oblivion is easy. Getting out was always going to be the challenge.

CHAPTER SIXTY-SEVEN



Pailtyn

I know I'm not there. Not in that space I was before.

My head feels blurry. My head feels wrong.

I try to flex my fingers but even they refuse to cooperate.

And then the door opens. A man walks in, quickly followed by another and another.

Are these demons? Are they here to claim my soul? Is that where I am now, I've finally left purgatory and I'm now in the pits of hell.

My heart races and races as they stand with me between them, as they pull me along and my feet drag against the freezing cold tiles.

Something nonsensical escapes my lips, it could be a scream, it could be a laugh too.

Hell is empty and all the demons are here. And they're dancing. Dancing with me.

My head rolls back uncontrollably, it jerks so violently it makes my neck jolt, and I wonder if I've snapped it.

I have no real feeling in any of my body so I could have done for all I know.

Someone slaps me hard. I blink, desperately forcing myself to focus. We've stopped moving now but somehow it only makes me feel more disorientated.

And then the man who's speaking, his voice, it's so close, it's so close to his. But it's not deep enough, not nearly physically as domineering as my monster is. It doesn't fill me with the equal measure of horror and desire.

"Fucking bitch."

"Who, who...?" I can't get my tongue to form the words.

A sharp, nasty thing bites into my skin, it tears into the vein in my neck. Icy cold fills my body and that awakeness is fading, is rapidly being replaced with the darkness I know so well.

The darkness that is my friend.

The darkness that embraces me. The darkness that loves me.

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CHAPTER

SIXTY-EIGHT



Devin

Blood spurts out as I make a beautifully deep slice into his chest. My breaths are measured, my heart is a steady drumbeat of anticipation.

Dustin's eyes are wide, pleading, as he looks up at me from the chair he's bound to. The ropes cut into his skin, adding to the tapestry of terror etched upon his face. I can see his mind racing, searching for a way out, a lifeline to grasp onto.

"Devin, please," he begs, his voice cracking like a whip against the silence. "We can make this right. Magnus is a forgiving man. You're his brother, we can reconcile."

A laugh bubbles up from deep within me, a sound so foreign and yet so fitting in this chamber of horrors. Is he mad? Does he truly believe I'm

naïve or desperate enough to fall for such a blatant lie? Magnus's forgiveness is a mirage, a cruel trick of the light.

There is no reconciliation for me. No path back to the warmth of family or the comfort of brotherhood.

"You think I'm stupid, Dustin?" I lean in close, my voice a blade sliding against his ear. "You think I haven't seen the rot at the core of our little family? Now, I know you know where Paitlyn is."

His denials spill forth like a broken dam, each word a feeble attempt to try to convince me that I'm the one lying here. But I know my brothers too well. Know Conrad far too well. Stupid bastard wouldn't be able to keep his mouth shut. And with Magnus preoccupied with become Chapter Lord, he would have needed him to step up.

Stupid fucks, it's like they wanted to make this easy for me. Like they laid out a load of breadcrumbs and waited for me to find them.

"I don't know what you're talking about, Devin. I swear it."

With a swift, practiced motion, I raise the knife again. The steel catches the dim light, revealing the smattering of blood that's already covering the surface.

"Don't." he screams, but his protests are nothing more than the buzzing of a fly to me.

I am focused; I am fucking relentless.

"I know Conrad knows too." I say. "Tell me where she is, and all of this ends..."

He sobs, shaking his head.

"Should I go back to Oblivion, walk right in and get Conrad's little wife? I could string her up right beside you. I'm sure she'd be easier to carry away, what with her useless legs and all...."

Dustin's face contorts with anger now, a flicker of defiance amidst the fear. "You're a monster." He spits out, blood flecking his lips.

"Perhaps," I concede with a shrug, pressing the blade gently against his cheek, just enough to draw a single bead of blood. "But even monsters have their uses. Now, tell me where she is, Dustin. Tell me if you want to live."

The room is silent for a moment. I hold my breath waiting for him to speak, only he just cries more.

"I can't." He whispers, a tear mingling with the blood on his face. "They'll kill me."

Like I won't. Like he doesn't know I'm just as bad as my brothers, just as ruthless, and the difference is, I have nothing to lose now, nothing at all.

I drag the knife over his flesh, slowly peeling away a nice little layer on his chest.

He screams and he struggles but he can't do shit to stop me.

"Say the words, Dustin." I mutter. "Tell me what I need to hear, and all of this will be over. All this pain will go."

He whimpers, pleads, begs as I continue to strip away layer after layer. His blood turns sticky, it makes the handle hard to hold but that only results in my fingers slipping and me cutting him a little deeper than I intend.

I can do this all night. I can do this all fucking week if I have to.

Only, Dustin doesn't have a week. I doubt he's got until sunrise.

His eyes roll back in his head, he looks like he's about to pass on and I give him a good hard slap around his face. Fucker is not dying yet, not until I get what I need.

He mutters, stammers, his pupils dilate as they fix on me, but he speaks those golden words. He says the one thing that makes my soul sing.

I blink back, watching his blood continue to drip out of him and then I bury the knife as deep into his throat as I can. He chokes, he splutters. Blood splatter covers both him and me and I wipe the smear of it off me.

I'll have Lyndon see to his body. We'll wrap him up, lime him up, and dump him far enough away from us that he can rot quietly in this compound until he becomes nothing more than dust. It's better that way. Better than burying a body and having some unfortunate stumble upon it.

CHAPTER

SIXTY-NINE



Devin

The hallway stretches out before me. It's a sterile, fluorescent-lit gauntlet that I'll happily walk. The echo of distant alarms and shouted orders bounce off the walls, but my focus narrows to the door at the end of the hall. Room 307.

A guard rounds the corner, his hand fumbling with the walkie-talkie at his belt. His eyes widen as he sees me, and he reaches for his baton as if that could stop me.

I don't give him the chance. My fist connects with his jaw, and he crumples to the floor with no further fight.

Patients in varying states of lucidity peer out from their rooms, their eyes reflecting the chaos like tiny moons. A woman with wild hair and a gown that barely covers her knees lunges at me, her nails like claws. I sidestep her, using my hand on her face to push her into the room before

locking the door behind her. Her screams add to the noise that's steadily growing around me.

The door I've been searching for is locked, but a well-placed kick sends it crashing open. The room is dimly lit, the air thick with the scent of antiseptic and something sweeter.

Paitlyn lies on the bed, her arms bound in a straitjacket, her eyes glassy and distant.

She doesn't even blink as I approach.

Perhaps she can't sense the danger she's in, perhaps she's too drugged up to realise.

For a second I stare at her, at those eyes. Did she regrow them? Is that a thing? They look too round, too blue. I narrow my own, trying to figure out what the fuck this is, and then it hits me. They're not glassy. They're glass. Someone put fake fucking eyes in her sockets.

"Wake up, Paitlyn." I growl, grabbing her face. "Your little vacation is over."

Her skin is cold, her cheeks sunken. Whatever they've pumped into her has turned her into a shell, not that she was much more than that, living in the Palace.

I undo the ties, my fingers brushing against the rough canvas of the straitjacket. She doesn't resist as I pull her up, and her body hangs limp like a rag doll.

I throw her over my shoulder, her breath hot against my back. She's lighter than I expected. After all this time, I expected her to have put on some weight, after all, was she not being managed, was she not being looked after in this facility?

As I turn to leave, a figure fills the doorway. His brown eyes meet mine with a mix of concern and determination. He holds his hands up in what should be a gesture of peace, but I'm not buying it.

"Devin, stop." Conrad says, his voice steady and so fucking expectant. Like he believes I'll just shrug my shoulders and walk away, walk away from all of this, this insult, this outrage. "You don't have to do this. We're on the same side, remember?"

"The same side?" I spit the words out like poison. "You mean Magnus's side? I don't trust him, and I sure as hell don't trust you."

Conrad takes a step forward, his hands still raised. "You're being paranoid, Devin. Think about it, why would we betray you? We're your

brothers, remember?”

Brothers. The word echoes in my head, it’s a mockery of what we once were. He’s trying to confuse me; he’s trying to get into my head the way they always have.

I can’t trust him, not now. Not after everything that’s happened.

I pull my gun, holding it out, pointing it right at his chest.

“Get out of the way, Conrad.” I warn. “I won’t ask again.”

He takes another step forward, his eyes never leaving mine. “This is unnecessary, Devin. Put the gun down. Let’s talk about this.”

A snarl rips from my throat. “You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

I pull the trigger, the gunshot echoing in the small room.

Conrad stumbles back, his hand clutching his stomach. Blood seeps through his fingers, staining his pristine shirt a dark red. He looks up at me as I step over him, his eyes filled with pain and shock. Did he think I was bluffing? Does he know nothing about me, about what I’m capable of?

I glance back as I leave, seeing him crumpled on the floor, his blood pooling around him. A pang of guilt stabs at me, but I push it down.

He’ll live. We’re in a hospital, after all, they’ll fix him up. Sort him right out.

Paitlyn is still limp over my shoulder, her breaths shallow and even.

She doesn’t struggle, doesn’t scream.

Truth be told, it’s almost disappointing. I want her to fight, to rail against the inevitable. But she just lies there like a dead weight.

The hallway is now chaos. Guards and patients alike are running in every direction. I walk calmly through it all, my eyes fixed on the exit.

No one tries to stop me. They’re too busy dealing with the aftermath of my arrival.

The night air is cold as I step outside, the sky above me is a blanket of stars. I adjust Paitlyn on my shoulder, feeling her body warm against mine.

This is just the beginning, the first step on a long road to redemption.

And I’ll drag her kicking and screaming down that road if I have to.

I’ll drag her right back to the very gates of hell.

CHAPTER SEVENTY



Pailtyn

I come to with a start.

The air is sterile, cold, and the silence is deafening. I try to lift my head, but it feels like it's filled with cotton wool. Feels like it's rammed to the very brim.

Where is the darkness? Where is my friend?

My thoughts are sluggish, but there's a clarity underlying the haze, a clarity I haven't felt in... I can't remember how long.

I try to sit up, and a wave of nausea hits me like a truck, preventing any further movement. I retch, but nothing comes up. My stomach is empty, hollow, in a way that suggests I haven't eaten in a long, long time.

As my head stops spinning, I realize something's not right.

I'm not in Oblivion. I'm certain of that fact. But I'm also not in whatever the hell that place was I woken up in before. Where the fuck am I?

I can feel the flimsy gown I'm wearing, the kind you wear in hospitals, draped over me. My arms are stretched out to the sides, secured to some sort of board. I tug, but the restraints hold fast. Panic starts to rise, a cold sweat breaking out on my forehead.

I can hear a far-off drip, the sound of a tap that's not been turned off properly.

This is not a hospital. Hospitals have machines, beeping sounds, charts at the foot of the bed. This place has none of that. A shiver runs down my spine, and the hairs on the back of my neck stand up.

Something is wrong. Something is very very wrong.

The door swings open, and the sound of two figures walking in makes me freeze. They move towards me, their steps echoing ominously in the cold room. I shrink back as they reach for my restraints, but I can't get away from them. They've ensured that by tying me to this damned board.

Before I can react, they undo the straps, grab my arms, and haul me up. My feet drag limply behind me as they pull me out of the room and into what I guess is a corridor. I try to struggle, but my body feels disconnected from my mind, my limbs heavy and unresponsive.

When we finally reach wherever they're taking me, they push me hard enough that I stumble, falling to the cold floor.

One of them grabs my face, turning it. "Look." He says, in a voice that is almost certainly distorted by some sort of tech. "See them, see all of us here, ready to witness justice?"

I don't know what he's talking about. I can't see fuck all and they must know that. Clearly, they're goading me, and yet I feel like an animal in a zoo, a spectacle for their entertainment.

Is this my new punishment?

Is this some new form of torture the Brethren have come up with now that Guthrie is dead?

Well hard luck to them. I'm beyond that shit now, beyond it all. The darkness is my friend. The darkness is my salvation.

A man steps in front of me. His heavy boots announce his presence. He grabs a fistful of my hair and yanks my head up. I squint, trying to place that smell, but my brain feels sluggish, like I'm still a little drugged. There must something in my system, some medicine that's stopping my brain from working properly.

“Are you ready to confess your sins?” He asks. His voice is harsh, grating. Mechanical, like he too using something to mask it, to alter it.

I manage to find my voice, though it feels stiff, like I haven’t used it in months. “What sins?”

He doesn’t reply, he just takes a step forward and without warning, he slams a fist into my stomach. I double over, gasping for breath.

Pain explodes through my body, and I can feel the bile rising in my throat.

As they stand over me, it’s more than apparent what’s about to happen. Instinct has me curling up, trying to protect myself, but my body won’t cooperate. The first blow lands on my back, sending a shockwave of pain through me.

I scream out, a raw, primal sound that sounds so far removed from that perfect little girl they tried to mould me into so long ago.

“Confess your sins.” One of them shouts.

Sins? What sins do I have? I let out a gurgle, a laugh at the absurdity of this. Are we really back here again, back with this bullshit?

That hard thing comes down again and again, each blow echoing through the room, each impact sending a fresh wave of agony through me.

I can hear the people, I can hear their muffled cheers and jeers. They’re enjoying this. They’re enjoying my pain.

Confess your sins. Confess your sins.

The words echo in my head, becoming a twisted mantra.

But I can’t confess. I don’t know what they want from me. I don’t know what sins they’re talking about.

Do they really think they can break me with this? Do they really think my mind will give in? I laugh more, laugh harder. Do they have any clue who I am, what I’m capable of, what I’ve endured these last god knows how many years.

This is amateur. This is pathetic.

Did they think a few bruises would have me spilling all my secrets?

I’m better than that now, far fucking better. They can hit, and they can beat, and they can break my very bones, but they’ll get nothing from me. Nothing but derision.

Another blow has my back jerking.

Darkness starts to creep in at the edges of my vision. I twist, leaning into it, welcoming it as it numbs the pain, as it takes it all away like the

good friend I know it to be.

Oh, these people may think they can beat me, but I know better.

Pain is my ally. Darkness is my friend. I learnt to exist in the places beyond, the slithers of ether between this world and hell itself.

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CHAPTER SEVENTY-ONE



Pailtyn

The world narrows to the sound of my choked, strangled screams and the rush of water invading what feels like every orifice.

I thrash more out of instinct against the restraints that are cutting into my skin.

Only, the water keeps coming. It's a relentless torrent that fills my lungs, stealing the air I so desperately need.

Time stretches, each second turns into an eternity of suffering. Just when I think my lungs will actually burst, it all stops.

I gasp, coughing up water, choking on the air that now feels foreign. The fabric is ripped from my face, and I blink away the tears and water, as my lungs physically burn.

"Ready to talk yet?" one of the men asks, his voice both cold and detached.

I can imagine the sneer that must be playing on his lips. I try to speak, but all that comes out is a wheezing cough that rips at my bruised throat.

I know I could play the part they want, that I could plead and beg as they expect. But why should I? Why do I have to pretend? I spent my entire life up to now pretending. Smiling, simpering allowing everyone to use and abuse me and it didn't help, did it. It didn't ease my suffering.

No, I won't pretend. I won't deny what I am now. What I've turned into. What I was forced to become simply to survive.

I take in one last delicious hit of air then shake my head as best I can. Let them do their worst. I fucking dare them.

The other man grabs my face again, his fingers digging into my cheeks. "Wrong answer." he growls.

Fabric is shoved over my face once more and with it, my adrenaline surges, my heart beats so fast I think it might explode.

Now, wouldn't that be a fine thing? I go out with a bang right when they think they're winning.

My lips pull despite the pressure against them and I cackle sounding every bit like a witch on Halloween.

"Crazy fucking bitch is laughing." One of them says.

"We'll see how funny she thinks it is by the time we're done." The other growls, yanking on my hair enough that I know he's pulled some from my scalp.

Water rushes in again. It swallows me whole, and I imagine I'm a fish, a whale even, that I'm in the deepest, darkest depths of the ocean and this is just part of it. That I'm gulping down fish, eating all that I can. I'm gobbling up mouthful after mouthful instead of drowning.

But then the waves get too high, the water is too much.

My fantasy shatters and reality hits me in a way I can't deny. I thrash harder, I kick out and they must think I'm giving in, that I'm submitting because it all stops. Everything stills.

Someone pinches my face, barely letting me splutter up the contents on my lungs.

"Who else was involved? Who helped you kill Gunther?"

Fear, panic, so many emotions I've buried too deep to acknowledge come rushing back at the sound of that name. So, this *is* what it's about. This *is* why I'm here. It's the same old shit as before, the same ghosts still haunting me.

I hate it. I hate that even now this man has that effect. Has that power.

“I didn’t kill anyone.” I say, not that it matters. I know they won’t believe me. No one ever does.

The second man laughs, a harsh, bitter sound that echoes around this awful space. “We all saw you, we saw the blood, and the dagger in your hand. Question is, how you managed it considering you can’t see fuck all.”

I snarl back. I don’t even think it through but the way he taunts me about my sight makes me go absolutely feral.

His hands grab at my face, his fingers dig into my cheeks, and he holds me still, while that fabric comes down again.

The water starts, quickly filling my mouth, my nose, my lungs. I fight against it, my body convulsing as I try to find air where there is none.

The world starts to go dark, my focus tunnelling as oxygen deprivation sets in.

Just as I think I’m going to pass out, just as I’m so close to disappearing into the darkness, the fabric is pulled away and I gasp, choking and coughing once more.

“This can stop anytime you want,” the first man says, his voice almost gentle despite its distortion. “Just tell us who else was involved. Give us their names, and all this pain goes away.”

I shake my head, spitting water back at them. My breath coming in ragged gasps that hate I so much. I don’t want them to think that I’m afraid of them, that I’m afraid of this. I’ve endured far fucking worse and lived, haven’t I? But I’m stupid enough to try to rationalise with them all the same.

“I can’t give you what I don’t have. I didn’t kill anyone.” I retort.

Let me go. Let me slip back into the darkness and just stay there.

The second man growls, his grip on my face tightening. “You think this is a game? You think you can just lie your way out of this?”

It’s a fucking shit game, that’s what it is.

The first man sighs, his voice tinged with disappointment. “Very well. If that’s how you want to play it.”

The fabric comes down again, and the water starts like this is a bad movie on repeat. Only, this time, I don’t fight it at all. I lie there. I let the darkness take me, let it pull me under.

Maybe, if I’m really lucky, I won’t wake up. Maybe this will all be over and then I’m free. I’m done.

In my head I can hear a lullaby, I can almost hear the demons of hell singing, welcoming me home. I hold my hands out, offering them for all the devils to take. I'm coming home. I'm finally coming home.

But luck has never been on my side, has it?

My body convulses violently as I cough up the fluid from my lungs. Life, reality all of it hurts as I take in one horrible breath after another.

I know I'm back in the room, strapped to the board, and those men are still there, ready to hurt me more.

"Welcome back," the first man says, his voice cold. "Ready to talk yet?"

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CHAPTER SEVENTY-TWO



Devin

I can hear Paitlyn's ragged breaths echoing off the cold walls, the sound of her suffering a symphony to my hatred.

I don't look back. I don't need to see her pitiful state to know she's broken.

But not broken enough. Not yet.

The hallway is dimly lit, the air thick with the stench of bleach, as I make my way back from the toilet block to the main room. A few of the men got a little too handsy with the girls we dragged down here. A few of the girls didn't make it.

The ones that are left are drugged to their eyeballs. They're so high right now they have no idea where the fuck they are or what is going on.

One is spinning around on a scaffold pole Mace procured from God only knows where. Her hands are sliding all up the metal from where

they're covered in her blood, but she doesn't seem to notice. Her head is thrown back, her legs are wide, and she's going around and around in circles while humming some tune that sounds eerily like a nursery rhyme.

No one is even looking at her. If she fell and smacked her head, I don't think anyone would care.

I shake my head, noticing how the room quietens down as I enter. All their eyes following me like I'm the fucking Pied Piper.

I sit at the table, pick up my rifle, and start breaking it apart to clean it again. The ritual is soothing, the cold metal against my calloused hands a comfort.

As I unclick the barrel, my mind drifts to Magnus. I wonder what the bastard is doing right now. Is he plotting against me, trying to find a way to take me down? The thought makes me smirk. My brother is no fool. He may be occupied right now with becoming Chapter Lord, but that doesn't mean he's forgotten me.

Besides, we still have Titus, don't we? The clock is ticking faster and faster for when Magnus is going to need him.

I shake my head, ramming the pipe cleaner down into the barrel.

"You think she'll talk soon?" Jackson, a burly man now with a beard down to his chest, asks, bringing me out of my head.

His eyes are bloodshot, too many nights of little sleep and too much drink to try and quieten down the nightmares he suffers when he finally does get some shut eye.

I shrug. "She'll talk when she realizes there's no other way out."

"Maybe we should just end her." Jackson suggests, his voice gruff. "She's clearly off her head. And she's causing more trouble than she's worth."

I look up, my eyes meeting his. "She's worth it." I state. "Think of all the hours, all the years of suffering you've endured because of that bitch. We end her now, what does that give us? It doesn't give us justice, it doesn't give us recompense. She deserves to suffer just as much as we have. She deserves to lay in that cell, to rot away as we carve out every single moment of our sentence into her flesh."

He grunts but doesn't argue further. He knows better. They all do.

The room falls into a tense silence. The only sound is the soft click of my rifle parts as I reassemble it. I can feel their eyes on me, waiting for my next move, my next order.

These men used to be something, used to be the best of the best. Paitlyn did this, Paitlyn created this. They're like sheep now, lost without their shepherd. But I'm no shepherd. I'm the fucking wolf.

"She needs to eat." Lyndon says suddenly.

I glance over at him.

"Let the bitch starve." Mace snaps.

"She hasn't eaten since we got her." Cooper says.

He's right. She hasn't. Not that that's a bad thing, better we keep her weak, better we keep her frail.

"Bitch has had enough water to keep her alive for weeks." Jackson spits and a few of the others laugh.

I let out a sigh, before jerking my head for Cooper to follow me. Perhaps he's right, the bitch does need sustenance. But that doesn't mean we have to give her a feast, do we?

I stalk into the storeroom, grabbing a few supplies, then head for her cell. Cooper is on my tail like a second shadow.

Before we enter, we pick up the masks, covering our faces and distorting our voices. I don't know why it really matters. I don't know why I don't want her to know that it's me doing all this.

Maybe she would talk if she realised. Maybe she'd understand how truly fucked she was and just give in.

And yet, I still don't want to do it. It feels like a trump card, a final piece in my arsenal. I want her at breaking point, I want her on her knees, utterly destroyed, when I reveal the truth.

When we walk inside, the girl is curled up, whimpering, though I can't tell if she's awake or not. My mind flickers back, back to a moment so long ago, in a room with silk sheets and pretty painted walls. She'd whimpered then, hadn't she? When she was asleep, when she'd all but collapsed with exhaustion after I'd spent hours ruining her.

Yeah, she'd whimpered alright.

She'd cried and she'd begged too.

I shake my head, ridding myself of that memory and I give the girl a good kick in the ribs to get her attention. Her body tenses as she comes to.

We keep her drugged enough that she doesn't have the mental capacity to think logically. All of us have fucked her in some way or other, it'd be easy enough for her to guess who we are. The drugs eliminate that possibility.

“Grab her head.” I order Cooper.

He twists his hand around her dirty hair, using it like an anchor to pull her head back.

“Open wide.” I spit, forcing the tube in over her tongue, forcing it down her throat.

She tries to scream, tries to fight as I ensure it’s far enough down that’s it’s past her sphincter and truly into her oesophagus. I don’t want this to accidentally go into her lungs, I don’t want the bitch to aspirate and die on me. In my other hand I have a protein shake. I snap the lid off, pouring the contents in, watching as it streams down the semi-transparent tube.

She screams more, she begins to choke, and I do nothing as I squeeze and squeeze.

“Imagine it’s one of our cocks.” Cooper sneers. “You always enjoyed choking on one of those.” He laughs at his joke, giving her a hard slap on the back for good measure.

I don’t react, I just continue squeezing until the bottle is empty and then I yank the tube out, doing nothing to stop it from catching on the way up.

Paitlyn splutters, she doubles up onto all fours and half sobs. Cooper laughs more, telling her she’s clearly out of practice while I stare at her, stare at the woman, the creature that once, I was going to risk everything for.

I would’ve burnt the world down, I would have sacrificed everything I was, everything my brothers were. And for what? For this? For her?

She lifts her hand, pleading with her body because her words have done nothing so far.

I sneer down at her, not that she can see the expression, and with all my strength I kick at her fingers. I kick so hard so collapses, her body slams into the concrete and that’s where I leave her.

CHAPTER SEVENTY-THREE



Pailtyn

The pain is indescribable.

I thought waterboarding me would be the worst.

But as white hot, searing agony shoots through every cell in my body, I know that this is it. This is my limit.

It feels like my brain is boiling. It feels like my blood is curdling in my veins.

My skin is on fire. Every inch of my flesh is burning.

My tongue feels so swollen I can't even speak if I wanted to.

I tried laughing it off, I tried revelling in it, but as the voltage increased even the adrenaline hit wasn't enough to balance it out.

“Come on, bitch.” The man’s voice carries to me, over the shriek of my own. “Confess and it’ll all be over. Confess and this will end.”

I don't want to. I know doing this makes me weak. Doing this means I'm betraying the only man that ever did something for me, that sacrificed for me, even if he is a fucking monster. Even if he does bloody well deserve it.

And yet, it's too much.

Tears stream down my cheeks. I try to pretend, try to imagine this is something else, that this is enjoyable, but I can't do it. My mind *can't* do it.

I shudder, biting my lip, and another wave of electricity rips its way through my body.

"Please..." I gasp.

"Confess."

Confess, as if it's that fucking easy.

I clench my fists, feeling as something inside me breaks. As if physically snaps.

"Tell us, bitch. Tell us who you were working with. Who else is involved."

I shake my head again, sobbing. Can they tell? Can they see how close I am to breaking?

"He did it to save me." I whisper. "He was trying..."

It doesn't matter what he was trying, it didn't work, did it?

I wail as that realisation hits me.

My monster may have had good intentions for the first time in his entire fucking life but that doesn't alter the fact that I'm here. That I've spent the last five years locked away, enslaved, abused by a man who so closely resembles my husband, most days it was hard to tell the difference.

"Who?"

I bit my lip, chew my tongue, doing everything I can to stop myself but it makes no difference.

They shock me again. They shock me even harder and I know that's it. I know I can't fight anymore.

I scream the name.

I don't mean to. I don't realise I'm doing it but as that final bolt of electricity shoots through me, I pray that this is it. This is my ending.

I want to die now.

I want it all to be over.

I want it all to end.

I can't take any more pain.

I can't take anymore of just existing.

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CHAPTER SEVENTY-FOUR



Devin

Why the fuck is she saying my name? Why the fuck is she screaming it like her life depends upon it?

Is this some trick? Is she trying to manipulate me again?

I grab her throat, tightening my grip enough to ensure I leave a nasty impression on that beautiful alabaster skin.

“Tell the truth.” I snarl.

My face is pressed into hers. I can smell her through the mask, and that sweet innocent scent almost sends me into a frenzy.

She’s sobbing harder, becoming more hysterical as each second passes.

“Speak, bitch.” I order.

She shakes her head, but she speaks anyway. “He, he did it. He did it to save me.”

“Who?” I demand. What the fuck is she talking about? Was she fucking someone else? Was this whole a thing a ruse?

She doesn’t reply. She looks like she’s given up. Her body slumps, her head seems to roll back, and I swear to god, if she dies right here, then I will follow her cursed soul into the very depths of hell and drag her right back.

My hand strikes her face so hard I leave an imprint.

She gasps out, coming round once more.

“Who are you talking about?” I snarl. “Who else was involved?”

She trembles, shifting, like she’s forgotten where she is.

“Dev, Devin.” She whispers. “He did it. He killed Gunther.”

This has to be a joke. This has to be some fucked up wind up. Does she know it’s me? Have the drugs worn off, is that it?

I stare back at her, and I can feel the looks from all the men in the other room, all the other guards watching this.

Why the fuck would she say I did it? Why... something clenches at my chest, some twisted realisation hits me. She believes it. She truly believes *I* killed her husband.

This entire time, she hasn’t been answering us, she’s been silent, enduring my torture to protect *me*.

I take a step back, my hands trembling for what must be the first time in my entire fucking life.

Has she, was she, did she believe that? Did she do all this because she was trying to save me? Me?

She had my knife. She used my knife... but that was only after, wasn’t it?

Anyone could have taken that from her room, while I was busy trying to stop her from bleeding out.

And nothing explains how she got to where she was, how she and Gunther were there, how she, a blind person, could stab him without cutting herself, without him fighting back.

She had to have help, but what if it’s not what I think it is, what if use was used too, manipulated, somehow taken there as part of the set up?

Suddenly, this mask is no longer comforting, it’s smothering. I shake my head, yanking at the thing covering my face. It comes off easy enough.

And then I’m stood here, staring at her, seeing every cut, every mark, everything we’ve done in the name of revenge. A revenge we apparently

didn't need to take.

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CHAPTER SEVENTY-FIVE



Paitlyn

H ave I finally cracked? Has my mind finally given in and started conjuring up the one thing I believe could save me because it knows I'm so far gone now?

That I'm beyond help. So far beyond it.

“Paitlyn.”

He sounds like him. He sounds like my monster.

He smells like him too, moves like him... no. This is a trick. It has to be.

He takes my hand and traces my fingertips over his face. It is him, it is, only, there are deep scars now where before there were none. Did Magnus do that? Did he get punished for what he did? Surely if anyone else knew,

he'd have been locked in Oblivion. He'd have been executed. So what the fuck is he doing here?

I'm still strapped to this table. To this metal grid. And there are still prods attached to me, ready to electrocute the hell out of me and fry my very soul.

I don't know what I imagined. I don't know who I thought was doing all of this, but I would never have believed it was him.

"Wha, why are you...?" My voice falters as I realise, he's the one who's been torturing me. Hurting me. Inflicting all of this on me.

What the fuck is this?

He moves quickly to undo the bindings and as much as I want to jump off this contraption, as much as I try, my legs give way and I crumple to the floor, landing at his feet.

"No need to worship me so soon." He murmurs as he bends down to my level.

I raise my hand, slapping at his face so hard it stings my palm.

He doesn't react, he just stays where he is as though he didn't even feel it. So, I do it again. I slap him harder. I slap him across one cheek and then the other.

"Paitlyn..." He murmurs, as if he has a right to speak my name, as if he has a right to say anything to me right now.

"Bastard." I spit. "You absolute piece of shit."

I curl my fist up, swinging wildly, slamming it into his jaw and that seems to snap him out of whatever stupor he's in.

He grabs my wrists, hauling me up by them, and then he drops me back onto the table in a sitting position.

"Stop." He says.

Only, I can't stop. I can't. He broke me. Devin fucking Blake. After everything I have been through, everything I have damn well suffered for this man, how is it he was the one inflicting all this pain?

"You bastard." I scream again.

He grabs my shoulders, shaking me so hard. "Shut up, shut up and listen." He says quickly.

"To what, to your excuses, to your lies..."

"I thought it was you. I thought you did it. That you orchestrated it." Devin growls. "You had my blade remember?"

“I thought it was you.” I scream back. “I thought that’s what you meant when you said you were getting me out. That you were ending this.”

He draws in a breath that could almost be described as ragged, only nothing rattles Devin, nothing affects him.

“You had nothing to do with it?” He asks, as if he need me to say those words out loud.

“I hated him, I wanted him dead.” I won’t deny that, why should I? “But I didn’t do it.”

“If you didn’t do it, then who did?” Devin says, only he doesn’t sound accusing now, he sounds puzzled, like he’s balls deep in some fascinating mystery that he needs to solve.

I turn my head, taking in the room, if anyone else is in here, I can’t sense it, I can’t hear it.

“Where the fuck are we?” I ask as I move to stand again.

Before he can speak the door crashes open. Someone comes storming in.

“What the fuck is this?” The stranger spits.

Only, he’s not a stranger because I know him. I know that voice, that tone. Another man comes up behind him, then another.

I shift back, realising exactly who they, who all these men are.

“Jesus.” I whisper under my breath. It’s them. The guards. All the men my husband let abuse me. They’re here, they’ve been witnessing this, watching it, no doubt enjoying every moment of this torture.

My body trembles as one awful memory stirs after another. Of being there, in their guard house, of being thrown about, of being forced to service them all, to suck their cocks, to endure their hands and their mouths and...

“Why is that bitch free?” The man snarls again. “We agreed...”

“It’s not her.” Devin states while I move to stand.

“What?” One of the others splutter.

“It’s not her. She thought it was me, she thought...” He starts rambling, pacing, acting so far removed from the controlled beast I know him to be.

Someone strides towards me, grabbing hold of me and they throw me back onto that metal trolley.

I scream out, throwing a punch but unsurprisingly I miss.

He slams his own fist into my side in response and I double up in pain.

“You said she’d pay.” He hollers. “You said she’d suffer.”

“It wasn’t her.” Devin snarls louder.

I know what he’s going to do, this other guard, I can hear it, the sound of metal, and plastic. As he grabs the prongs, I throw myself at where I’m certain he is, using all my weight to bring him down.

We land in a heap but it’s my hand that somehow wrestles the gun from his, my hand that rams it against whatever part of his body I can find and before he can register what I’m doing, I pull the trigger.

He explodes. His guts are like a tsunami jetsoning out from the hole. His blood splatters my face, bits of his flesh cling to the walls.

I take my hand, wiping the mess from my face, but it only seems to smear it more.

When I get to my feet, I keep my fingers still wrapped around the trigger, and I wonder how many more I need to kill. Yeah, I know it’ll be tough to do it, but if they come at me, I’ll at least hear their heavy boots. I know there aren’t that many bullets, but surely, I could take a good few of them out before I ran out?

“She wasn’t involved.” Devin states again.

I hear him move to block them. To block me too. I think he has his back to me, and I wonder how he trusts me enough not to put one in his spine. He bloody well deserves it considering what he’s done.

“This...” Devin says, and I hear the crumple of fabric telling me he’s gesturing in some manner, “this is over. We’re done with her. Now we need to figure out who really did it. Who really is responsible.”

CHAPTER SEVENTY-SIX



Devin

The water trickles down onto her body.

She's tense. Alert. Clearly on the verge of panicking.

Maybe this wasn't as a good an idea as it seemed in my head, but she was filthy, and I thought getting her clean would at least sort one problem out.

Her head keeps darting to the door like she's expecting all the others to come bursting in. Like she thinks they're going to disobey me.

Well, more fool them if they do.

I grab the sponge, lathering up the soap enough that it gets foamy and I start wiping away the muck. Each swipe reveals that perfect, beautiful skin beneath, reveals that intricate pattern I carved into it.

She tries to step away, but I won't let her.

I lift her chin, force her to look at me with those fake eyes. “Who gave you them?” I ask.

She winces, trying to pull her face out of my grasp but I just tighten my grip enough that she whimpers.

“Who gave you those eyes?” I repeat.

“He did.” She spits back. “He said he wanted to pretend I could still see, that I could watch what he was doing to me.”

Fucking bastard. I should have killed Guthrie when I had the chance. I mean, I did technically anyway, but the man died far too quickly, far too pain-free for my liking. One little flashbang and the fucker keeled over. That wasn’t the way he deserved to die. I had a far better plan in mind, one that involved a hot poker right up his arsehole, while I turned him on spit.

“What are you going to do with me now?” She asks. She doesn’t sound afraid, if anything it feels like she’s challenging me.

“You’re mine.” I state.

She shakes her head. “No.”

“Paitlyn,”

“No.” She suddenly screams. “I’m not, I’m not...”

I shove my hand over her mouth, pushing her back into the dull beige tiles. “I told you I would take you.” I growl into her ear. “I told you how this would be. Maybe the timing is a little off but God has seen fit to give us this anyway.”

She struggles harder, starts fighting me with her fists and I turn her around, pressing her soapy body against the wall.

Perhaps I should wait. Perhaps I should let her cool off, get her bearings.

Only, I can’t. I’ve waited for five fucking years.

I kick her feet enough to widen her thighs. Oh, I know my little malktā knows what’s coming with that action. But instead of crying out, instead of pleading, she swears at me, rages, like she’s finally found some proper fire.

I shove myself up, bury cock so hard into her cunt my eyes roll back in my head and I swear I might just pass out from the feel of it. She’s warm, wet, so fucking delicious.

I slide out, then slam back in. “My cunt now.” I groan. “Every part of you is mine.”

She shakes her head, she digs her nails into the tiles as I start fucking her mercilessly but I’m not going to let her pretend that she’s not enjoying

this, that she didn't imagine that all the times Gunther was fucking her, that it was me.

"Christ, you feel so good."

I feel like an addict that's finally fallen off the wagon, that's finally gotten the hit they've been craving. I don't care if I die here, I don't care if this moment here is my last.

I reach around, determined to prove to her that she wants this as much as me. Little whore came for me enough times, you'd think she remember how well I can manipulate her body.

Only, as my fingers slide between her thighs, as they touch that sweet spot above where my cock is almost splitting her in half, I realise that something is missing, that she feels different, that...

"What the fuck?" I snarl. What the fuck is this? What the fuck is wrong with her?

I slide myself out, turning her around. Her cheeks are flamed, her head is turned and I know that look of shame only so well.

"What the fuck happened to you?" I ask.

She doesn't speak, doesn't do anything but draw in one furious long breath.

I drop to my knees, using my hands to force her limbs apart, and I stare at her pussy, at where her clit should be. All that's there now is a livid scar. Even her labia looks different, as if they cut that back, as if they mutilated all of her leaving just a hole to fuck and nothing else.

"He did this?" I don't need her to answer that. I don't need her to confirm it. Of course he did it.

She sinks down, falling into the gap between my knees and the wall. "I..." She covers her face, even as the water continues to pour over us. "He did it to punish me, he did it because I'm a whore. He said that now that he had me, he only needed my cunt and my mouth and that I didn't deserve to feel pleasure."

I stare at her, taking those words in. Guthrie did that? He cut her clit out?

"I'll get it fixed." I state, not that I know if that's even possible.

She shakes her head. "It doesn't matter." She replies. "None of it does."

Nah, I won't have that, I won't have her thinking that, acting like she doesn't want to come for me. Acting like it's okay that someone else cut parts of her out, someone other than me.

I pick her back up, holding her body more gently and I push myself back into her, though I'm slower this time, more considerate. She still screws her face up, still clearly feels the pain as I bury myself inside her.

With one hand, I rock her hips, forcing her body to move, to comply with my wants, and with the other, I keep her pressed into the wall, held by her throat.

Her tits bounce, those beautiful scars all over her body glisten as the shower water pours down. I'm so tempted to lean down and bite them, to bite her nipples, but I remind myself that I'm trying to be nice here, trying to be gentle for the first time in my entire life.

Her whimpers never change to moans, even when I'm certain I'm pressing against her g-spot. I guess she's playing hard to get but that's okay, I have time, we have time. No one can take her from me now. I can spend hours, days, hell, even weeks entangled with her, learning what makes her body tick, proving that the circumstances may have altered but she's still my little whore.

I throw my head back when I come, growling so much it's a wonder I don't smash the glass cubicle. I slide out, panting, and she stumbles as I release my grip and let her feet touch the floor.

There's blood. Not much, but enough to tell me I did hurt her.

"You took the spikes out." She says quietly.

I glance down, realising she means the barbs in my cock. I didn't take them out, the doctors did when my brother had me institutionalised. Definitely not my finest moment, being held down while someone manhandles the most sensitive part of me.

"We both had things done to us that we didn't like." I state.

She wrinkles her nose, her face turning to fury as I switch the water off.

"I'm not your fucking toy." She suddenly spits. "You all think that I'll just go back there, just become something you can all fuck, well I won't. I won't."

I grab hold of her, slamming her back. If that's what she thinks this is, then she's very wrong indeed.

"No one is fucking you but me." I state.

She shakes her head, and for a second I can almost believe those fake eyes are truly glaring at me.

"I'm not yours. I'm not."

“No?” I growl, returning my hand to her throat, pinning her up by it so that her feet kick out and she realises how precarious her situation is. “Where the fuck do you think you’re gonna go then? You think anyone else cares about you? Everyone believes your dead, and those that don’t, well,” I grin, even though she can’t see it. “You don’t want to let those bastards know you’re not?” I state.

She shudders, digging her nails into my forearms.

“Accept your place, Paitlyn, accept your new role in life.”

“And what is that?” She spits.

“My whore, my plaything, and my wife-to-be.”

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CHAPTER SEVENTY-SEVEN



Pailtyn

The breeze is so cool, it's almost unnerving.
I can hear the faint rustle of the trees, the sound of birds chirping.
I can't even remember the last time I was outside.
I slipped out the moment I could. I had to feel my way, had to listen to the wind howling beneath the doorways to know which one to pick.
I'm wearing a man's t-shirt and a pair of loose-fitting cargo pants. They feel military but that could also just be the fabric.
A voice in my head is screaming at me to run. But how the fuck can I? I can barely take a few steps without injuring myself. And besides, I have nowhere to go.
That thought hits me like a freight train, even if I did manage to get away from wherever the fuck I am, I don't have any money, any friends, anything to help me.

I pick up a pebble, tossing it in what feels more like anger than frustration.

I never imagined I would be free, I never imagined I'd ever get out of Oblivion. I thought that place would be my tomb, and I'd made my peace with that. I'd embraced that.

What the fuck do I do now? Where can I go from here? Is Magnus hunting me, does he plan to return me to my nice little prison cell, or will he simply eliminate me from the board?

I want to ask Devin, I have so many questions, and yet, we've never had a normal conversation, one where he treats me like an equal, where he tells me what I actually want to hear.

Will be just mock my fears?

Will he pat me on the head and tell me to leave it alone before he fucks me again?

I shudder, feeling that old familiar pain between my thighs. I didn't want to fuck him. I didn't want to do anything with him, and yet, just like always, I don't have a choice.

He called me his wife-to-be. Like fuck I believe that. I know it's another form of manipulation. That he must be playing me. And yet, there's a tiny voice telling me he isn't, that this is his plan, to marry me, to use my status as a Heseltine and a Founder and... what? What can he get from me?

It feels like an entire freight train slams into me as I realise that. I'm not a prize anymore. I'm not something to covet, to desire. I'm the lowest of the low. It should give me some relief after everything, but it's hard to deny my feelings of shame, of disgust.

I am nothing now. I am ruined in every conceivable way. And yet, Devin claims to want me? It just doesn't make sense.

I don't realise I'm walking, pacing, until something sharp bites into the sole of my foot. I'm not wearing shoes. The skin on my feet has become pretty tough after years of being barefoot, but as I wince, I can feel there's a tiny thorn sticking out.

"Fucksake." I mutter, crouching down to assess the damage.

It's not so bad. I sit down in the dirt and use my nails to try to pry it out.

Just as I toss the offending bit, a crunch of something alerts me to the fact that I'm no longer alone. No doubt Devin's come to find his little whore, to see where his blind bitch has stumbled off to.

I screw my face up at that name, that insult, even though it's my own mind that came up with it.

"God, it's good to see your face." My mother murmurs, sounding like she's breathless with joy.

I swear my stomach drops at the sound. A the literal ghost from my past. "What the fuck?"

I don't know how far I am from the compound. I know it's behind me, that I need the heat of the sun on my back because it was in my face when I was walking. But there's no way I can get there if she tries anything.

I'm half tempted to scream, to scream for the guards, for Devin, but what if they're all in cahoots? What if that's what's really going on here? She's somehow gotten them on her side, and they've held me until she was able to show up and...no, that can't be right. It doesn't make sense for them to be torturing me if that was the case.

"Aren't you going to say anything?" She asks.

"Like what?"

"Like you missed me?"

She really thinks that would be the first words out of my mouth? It's been what, five years, she thinks of all the things I want to say, that would be my opening?

"You fucked me over." I snap. "Antonio told me everything."

She huffs. "Antonio is lying."

"Like fuck he is." I spit.

She sits herself down so delicately beside me and the way she starts positioning her dress makes it feel like she's sitting on a soft cushion and not the dry, arid dirt. She tries to take my hand, and I quickly jerk it away.

"Paitlyn," She says. "Hear me out."

"Why should I?" I snarl. "You knew, you knew what he was, you knew what would happen, you knew exactly what you were setting me up for."

"It wasn't meant to go that way. I was assured Gunther was mad, but he wasn't violent."

"Assured by who?" I ask.

She sighs like that's a secret she doesn't want to reveal and that tells me everything. She's playing me again, manipulating me again. She didn't come here to tell me any facts, and she certainly didn't come here to actually apologise.

“Paitlyn, this whole thing is far bigger than you, far bigger than me too. It goes back generations, it goes back centuries.”

“What?” I screw my face up at her words.

“The Brethren were never meant to be like this, not originally.” She sighs. “We were taking it back, we were going to reset, to restore, to stop all this abuse. We didn’t want our daughters to continue to suffer, we didn’t want them to have to marry men they didn’t want to...”

“And yet, that’s exactly what I was forced to do.” I retort. God, can she hear herself?

“You were supposed to be the final sacrifice.”

I can feel myself trembling, I can feel my body responding, reliving those moments, reliving the horror that she was also responsible for.

“It was meant to end with you.”

I don’t know if she means it to sound the way it does, but it sounds like she expected my death, that that was the plan.

“I know it’s hard to understand, darling, but it was never meant to finish this way. Gunther was meant to be a puppet. You were meant to rule through him...”

“And then what?” I gasp. Did she really think I cared about being in charge? I just wanted a good husband, a family.

She sighs, reaching out to cup my face in what should be a loving gesture, but I know I can’t trust her.

“It wasn’t meant to...you have no idea who you are, who you really are...” She trails off. “They killed my friend. Magnus did. On their wedding day. He murdered her and no one said a thing, no one did a thing.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Magnus murdered Bethany. She was his wife, and he murdered her. And even her family let it go. She wasn’t the first of course, almost every friend I had, every woman I knew, was forced into an arranged marriage. Was forced to endure rape, and abuse, and God knows what else. But I knew that day that I couldn’t let it continue. I didn’t want to. So, when the opportunity presented itself, when I realised we really could change things, I had to take it, I had to.”

“So, you sold me off.” I state.

She sniffs. “I never...”

“You did. You knew what he would do. You saw it, in the cathedral and that first night, you even held me down.” I half-cry, remembering that awful

moment. How he'd abused me with her witnessing it, her helping him.

"I didn't know what to do." She admits. "I just, I knew things were in place, that it would be only a few weeks, a month at best, and then he would be dealt with."

"It was months." I reply. "It was months and months of abuse, and torture and..." I cover my face, forcing the tears back down because I don't want her to see them, I don't want her to think that she can use this weakness against me. "He took my eyes, he took my sight." I scream the last bit, and then realising I'm on my feet, though I don't remember standing.

All this anger is suddenly exploding in me. I'm shaking with the amount of adrenaline flooding my body.

She hasn't even acknowledged it.

She hasn't even admitted she knows that part of the story.

And I realise then, that it doesn't matter that it wasn't my husband wielding the blade, because she is the reason I was there, she put me in that position.

"I'm so sorry. It wasn't supposed to be like this. They promised me." She says so fucking silkily.

"Who?" I snarl cutting across her.

She sighs again, and I decide that I don't want to hear another word. She's not here because she cares, she's not here for me, she's doing this to ease her own guilt and nothing more.

"Paitlyn, please, please wait." She pleads.

"I have nothing else to say to you." I mutter, trying to go back up that stoney path, trying to navigate my way like I have a clue where the bunker is.

She grabs my arm, pulling me back and the movement makes my head spin. "Wait, don't you see, don't you get it? You can be free now, you can be whoever you want to be. Come with me, I can look after you, I can keep you safe."

"Safe from who?" I reply. As far as I can tell she's put me in more danger than anyone else has.

"Safe from them, from him, from the Blakes."

I pull myself free, only, she grabs at me again, this time more forcibly and I realise then what I'd not paid attention to. What I'd ignored the whole time we were talking.

Footsteps.

Too many footsteps.

Someone is approaching us; someone is so close to being beside us.

Instinct takes over, some reflex tells me that I can't go with her, with them. Whoever the fuck they are. My mother is not safe, my mother is not going to protect me. She never has.

I scream, I lash out, I pull myself free as best I can, but I lose my footing almost immediately and end up slamming into a rock.

Gunshots ring out almost immediately. They're far off and yet I hear the whistle of them as the bullets race past me. I don't know where to hide, I don't know where is safe or how exposed I am. In truth, I don't think I've felt more vulnerable, more in danger because of my blindness, than this moment here.

I can't crawl away when I could very well end up crawling right into the hands of the enemy.

So I curl up, I make myself so small against the boulder, and I try not to make a sound as it feels like an entire battle explodes above my head.

I can hear my mother yelling, I can hear her calling for me, begging for me to go with her. But I can hear other voices; strangers, and also the guards. They're getting closer, they must be barely a few feet away from me. I don't know if it's relief or disappointment to know that fact. To know that none of my options right now are good ones.

"She's here." Someone says. A voice I don't know.

A hand wraps around my arm, and I'm yanked forcibly away from the rock. I scream out, unsure who the fuck it is. Within seconds a shot goes off that sounds far deeper, far bigger than all the ones before. The hand holding me lets go, a strange man's cry rings out before I hear the loud thud of something heavy hitting the ground.

More footsteps approach but they're followed by more of that same awful gunshot, and I realise I'm slowly being surrounded by a pile of the dead and the dying.

It's only when the chaos turns to silence, it's only when that distinctive smell of gunpowder eases, that I realise it's over.

I don't dare to move. I don't dare to breathe.

Footsteps approach, too many to count but I recognise the voice barking orders, I'd recognise his voice anywhere.

When the steps get closer, I know it's him, I recognise the way he walks, the pressure of his soles, that familiar stride too. He scoops me up, picks me up like I'm a damsel in distress and he pauses, checking me over, checking for any wounds, any damage.

I don't know if it's relief I feel to know he has me. No, it can't be, but it's not abject fear either. My adrenaline is pumping so fast though my veins, and some part of me feels almost turned on by it.

I gulp as I realise my pussy throbs, My breathing feels so intense. I swear if Devin checked my panties right now, they'd be dripping.

"I'm unhurt." I murmur, trying to keep my voice as calm as I can. I don't want him to know, I don't want him to realise. What if he decides to fuck me here, what if he decides to rip off my clothes and pin me down amongst the dead and fuck me until I'm a weeping, horrible, dirty fucking mess for him?

He lets out a low huff before his fingers find a graze along my arm.

"Not exactly." He replies, as if I'd care for such an insignificant cut as that. As if he himself hasn't done far worse to me.

"Are they gone?" I ask. I don't know what I want him to say, on some level I'll admit I am regretting my choice, regretting my decision. My mother may have sold me, may have used me as a means to garner power, but realistically, what choice did she have in the matter? Gunther was Chapter Lord, he had enough means to ensure he got what he wanted. It would be madness to expect her to refuse him.

And besides, Devin is hardly a fucking saint, is he?

I shudder as it hits me again that I am still, after all these years, just a pawn, a thing for all these people to fight over and abuse.

CHAPTER SEVENTY-EIGHT



Devin

I put her down on the table. She looks disorientated, confused too, though I can't blame her for that. I doubt anyone would look too with it, after sitting there in the dirt while a damned battlefield rages around their head.

I place the pistol down beside her and then start barking orders, telling the men to get our shit packed up. Clearly, the site is compromised, it's only a matter of time before Paitlyn's bitch of a mother, or worse, my brother, turns up with more men.

While the rest of them race around, shoving what we need into holdalls, I grab a first aid kit and start fixing my woman up. She's sitting calmly enough but underneath the surface I can tell there's a tempest brewing and right now, I need to contain it.

The clothes she's in dwarf her petite figure, they're also covered in dirt and blood. I don't know if she's aware of that fact but when we get to our new safehouse, I'll find her something more suitable, something more ladylike.

The graze on her arm isn't too bad. I give it a good clean with an antiseptic wipe, ignoring the hiss from her.

"Better to be safe than sorry." I state.

"Like you can talk." She snaps back.

I grab her chin, forcing her to face me. "What does that mean?" I ask.

She winces, like all that bravado has suddenly left her, like it's blown itself out, though I don't believe it for a second. I'm realising this meek girl act is just that, an act. Nobody endures the kinds of things she does, nobody survives the horror of it without becoming twisted up, fucked up.

"Come on now, malktā. Tell me what's in your head. Speak those devil thoughts out loud."

She screws her face up more at the tone I use, but I can see she likes it, despite her attempts to pretend otherwise. Her chest is rising and falling enough to make me think she's turned on, to make me think she's desperate to be fucked all ways between here and Sunday.

"I'm not, I'm..." She huffs again looking more thunderous. "What does that even mean, that stupid name you keep calling me?"

Is she trying to cover it with anger? Is she trying to cover her need and hide from me? My lips curl as I tilt my head and study her.

She's mine. This woman here, she's all mine now. It feels good to finally admit it to myself.

"It means 'queen' in Aramaic." I state.

Yeah, that makes her freeze, makes her gulp too. "You, you speak Aramaic?" She whispers.

"Some." I reply. I don't need to explain the whole story of why, but I'll admit I'm enjoying the concern that knowledge has. That she thinks I have deeper connections within the Brethren. That my network may go that far.

"I'm not a queen, not your queen, not..."

My hand over her mouth silences that bullshit.

My other hand in her trousers, in her cunt makes her squeal. I don't care that everyone here can see this, I don't care that they're watching this play out.

She mumbles something incomprehensible and I'd hazard a guess that she's trying to tell me to let her go. Only, I won't. She wants this. She craves this. She's just too stubborn to admit it.

I pin her down, pin her flat onto the table with one hand, while I tear the clothes from her.

"Little whore," I murmur, undoing my belt, getting my cock out. "I can feel how much you need me right now."

She shakes her head quickly, but I don't care what she has to say, what bullshit she pretends.

I'm hard, so fucking hard. And in truth, I need this as much as she does. I slam into her, feeling how her muscles do their usual attempt at trying to stop me.

"Fuck, malktā" I groan. "You feel even better than an hour ago. Is it the thought of all those men dying, all those people fighting over you that's got you so turned on?"

"No." She gasps.

I let out a laugh, hearing the lie because she did like. She fucking loved it. My little whore loved every second.

I pick her up, manoeuvring her body around so that she's now in front of me, straddling me.

"Ride me." I order. "Roll your hips and ride me like the filthy slut we all know you are."

She lets out a whimper, but she does it all the same, she lifts herself up, she gyrates her body and she works her cunt up and down, taking my cock over and over like she's desperate for it.

All the men stand there, staring, watching as this scene plays out, and in truth, this here is as much for them as it is for Paitlyn. I'm making a point, staking my claim the only way they'll truly understand. They may all have had fun with her before, but she is off-limits now. The most they'll ever get is a glance at her because if they lay one finger on her, I'll carve it off and make them choke on it.

"Show them." I murmur in her ear. "Show all your old guards who this cunt now belongs to."

She tenses as I say that and clearly, she had no idea we were being observed.

I catch her throat with my hand, my fingers tightening enough to ensure she feels it. With my other hand I yank her hair to stop her from hiding her

shame.

“Show them.” I repeat.

She hisses, shaking her head. “I’m not your pet.” She snaps back. “You named me a queen, *your* queen. Is this how you treat royalty?”

My lips curl. Oh, she is learning, isn’t she? I knew she was smart, I knew it.

“You want me to do the worshipping, is that it?” I murmur into her ear.
“You want me to get on my knees for you?”

She shudders, and I feel her insides clench around me, revealing how desperately she desires that.

I let out a laugh. “If that’s what you need, then I’ll do it. I’ll worship you, I’ll fucking kill for you.”

She bucks her hips harder, her movements become far more savage as I say those words, as I promise that. And she’s moaning, crying, sounding like she can’t get enough of this.

A flashback hits me, of her spread out, laying wide open, weeping out as I made her come over and over for me.

Even then, even when I knew I was breaking her, stripping her down to her most based desires, she never sounded like this, she never sounded so...

I shake my head, my eyes fixing on the guards nearest. They’re staring at her, at her cunt, at where my cock is impaling her. I can see the hunger in their eyes, I can see the way they all want her. For a second, I feel like him, like her bastard of a husband. I feel exactly the same, using her, abusing her, shaming her.

Only, she used to cry when he fucked her, she used to cry and beg for him to stop. She hasn’t told me to stop once. She hasn’t said those words.

And yet they’re still watching, still seeing this. *Her*. My bride-to-be.

I narrow my eyes, my hand finding the gun beside us, and I pick it up, pointing it at them. If they think of doing something, if they think of intervening, of trying anything...

One of them shifts, his hand moving to his trousers and I see him grab his cock.

I pull the trigger, blasting his head off and he falls down, his head half missing, dead before he hit the floor.

Paitlyn cries out in shock, her body stills. I lower my head, murmuring into her ear. “You wanted me to kill for you, correct? Can’t now cry over spilt blood, can you?”

She gulps, shaking, and I grab her breast, pinching the nipple to give her a little hit of pain. “Fuck me, Paitlyn,” I tell her. “Show me how happy you are at me already delivering on my part of the bargain.”

She moves her hand to my thigh, digging her nails into me through the fabric. But she’s slowly moving, slowing riding me once more.

I run my nose up her neck, breathing in that sweet scent of hers. She smells so delicate and yet I know that too is a disguise. She isn’t delicate like a flower. She’s delicate like a bomb.

I growl as I realise that fact, as I realise what she could be, what she will be, if I can only get her to embrace that side, embrace those dark fucked up desires within herself.

Sweat starts to bead on her skin, her cries turn more erratic. I can feel how close she is, how close my queen is.

I pinch her nipple again, pinch it hard and just as she shatters entirely, I thrust one last brutal time and empty myself inside her.

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CHAPTER

SEVENTY-NINE



Devin

I carry her into my room. I can't tell if it is her shame or exhaustion that made her slump against me but in truth, I don't have time to analyse it right now.

Fucking her, while fun, was not the right move. If her mother was here, if they could find us, then we're in serious danger. Instead of recognising that fact, I let the adrenaline take over, I let my cock do all the thinking.

Christ, I've barely been back inside her a day and already she's making me lose all rational thoughts.

She sits there, her arms wrapped around herself, and I can't tell if she's shell-shocked from me killing Soren, or she's shell-shocked from the fact she didn't fight me. That she gave in entirely. That she embraced what she is, that she finally let the mask slip.

“Let’s get you dressed.” I say, grabbing one of my t-shirts and a pair of shorts. They absolutely drown her but right now I have no other options.

“Did you mean that?” She says quietly.

“Mean what?” I reply.

She hesitates, pulling a face. “That you would kill for me.”

“I already have.” I state.

She shudders, dropping her face, like she doesn’t know how to take that fact. “You called me queen.” She says. “And yet...” She trails off, turning her head as if she were looking over my shoulder.

I frown, glancing in the same direction and see Jackson stood, glaring at us both. It’s curious that she heard his approach before me. Apparently, her hearing really is that good then.

“What do you want, Jackson?” I ask.

“Why the fuck are we doing all this?” He says loud enough for a few of the others in the hall to stop and listen.

“Doing what exactly?” I reply.

He looks at Paitlyn then back at me. “We should just leave her here, hand her over, and be done with the whole thing.”

“What...” I begin.

“She’s a part of it. Her mother’s Esau.” He snarls cutting across me.

While behind me, Paitlyn gasps. “What did he say?”

I wave my hand to silence her, then remember she won’t see the action, will she?

A few of the others push into the room. Jackson is ahead of them but there’s a good five on one here. Even Malik is stood, on the peripheries, watching this intently.

“How do you know that?” I murmur back to him. That’s a very dangerous thing to know. A very dangerous thing to say out loud too. My hand flexes, my fingers are more than aware that my gun right now is beside Paitlyn and a little too far out of reach. But my dagger, that’s close enough.

“Like you don’t.” He sneers. “Like you didn’t put it all together back in the Palace...”

“The fuck is he talking about?” Malik growls, striding closer to us. “This bitch is Esau?”

“She’s not. Her mother is.” Jackson repeats.

"I thought the Esau were dead, I thought those bastards were long gone." Mace says.

"Nah, mate," Jackson replies. "They've been here all along, lurking, pulling tricks, playing us all for fools."

His hand moves, he tries to be subtle about it, but I see what's there, beneath his fingers, and I hear the tiny click too.

"So, she *was* involved." Cooper cuts in. "It has to be them that killed Gunther."

Maybe it was. Maybe it was the fairies in his head that did it. Right now, I don't give a fuck who was behind it. The fucker was mad. I'm glad he's dead. I'm just pissed that we all got caught up in the aftermath.

"Put it down, Jackson." I order, keeping my eyes on him.

"Not till you listen to us. You've got your head so full of her cunt now, you're as crazy as Gunther was."

"The fuck did you say?" I snarl, taking a step forward, losing what little patience I have left.

He lifts his arm, pointing it not at me, but at her, at Paitlyn. "This bitch is long past her expiry date, I'd say..."

Before he can finish that sentence, before anyone else can react, the sound of a gun going off makes us all freeze.

Jackson groans, grabbing his side, but I can see the shot isn't enough to properly wound.

I pull my dagger, flinging it and as it buries itself in his throat, he falls back, gurgling up blood.

The others stand there, frozen, staring at Jackson like they've never seen a dead man before.

I turn my back on them, deciding the immediate threat is over and look at Paitlyn. She still has the gun in her hand, still has it poised with her finger on the trigger like she's about to take another shot.

I shake my head, smirking. *She really is turning into a firecracker. And all it took was a good fucking from me.*

Stepping up to her, I take the pistol from her and cup her chin. "Your aim is a little off." I murmur.

She scowls at that. "I'm sure you can forgive me, considering I don't have any fucking eyeballs."

I can't help it, I throw my head back and laugh. It feels carefree, it feels like something inside me lightens, some part of me eases for the first time

in my life.

The atmosphere in the room seems to change and as I turn back, I can see Malik is smirking too. He never liked Jackson that much, so I doubt he gives a fuck what happened to him.

“Anyone else have something to say?” I ask.

A few of them shake their heads.

“Fine, this is how it goes. We pack our shit, we move out, and we continue on with the mission.”

“While you get to fuck her?” Mace says.

I meet his gaze, narrowing my eyes. “I get to fuck her. No one else. That woman there is mine, you have a problem with that, you don’t like it, fucking dare to challenge me, otherwise you can shut the hell up and get on with it.”

I don’t wait for a response. I don’t care to hear what they have to say. I grab my shit, quickly stuffing my things into a backpack. I don’t need most of this crap anyway. I just need my guns, my knife, and that most precious of jars.

With my right hand, I grab Paitlyn’s arm and pull her along after me. The others can finish up here, they can clear everything out and then burn the bunker.

If anyone comes looking for us, they’ll find nothing but a pile of ash.

My bike is parked beside the trucks. I pick Paitlyn up, putting her onto it and she gasps as she realises what she’s now sat on. I grab the spare helmet and pop it on her head. It’s a little big but it’ll have to do. I don’t have any leathers that will fit her, so I know I’ll have to be extra careful.

I swing my leg over, putting her between me and the handlebars. It’s not the conventional way of riding but the bike is big enough and this way, she’s shielded. With my foot, I kick the engine to life, and I set off, leaving a trail of dust behind us.

CHAPTER EIGHTY



Pailtyn

I don't know where I am, though that feeling isn't exactly new, now is it?

Devin put me in this room, on this bed, and then strolled out, locked the door and fucked off for what feels like hours.

I need to wash. I need to get whatever that stench is off my skin. I wrinkle my nose, trying to place what it is, and when I realise, my stomach drops.

Blood. I have blood on me. That's what I can smell.

I spread my hands out over the duvet, trying to find the edge of the bed. I don't know how big the room is but based on how much the door echoed when it was slammed shut, I'd say it's big enough to feel like a bloody hall.

My bare feet meet the cool, smooth feeling of wooden floorboards. Wherever we are, this place is definitely an improvement from that concrete dungeon they held me in before.

I take small, gingerly steps, expecting to stub my toes at any minute. I don't even know if there is a bathroom, but I can't sit still any longer, playing the good little blind girl. Besides, the need to pee has been steadily growing and that fact has spurred me on.

When I come into contact with the wall, I feel almost relieved. My fingertips brush against what I'd guess is a silk wallpaper, it's another sign that this place is fancier. I feel my way along, bumping into bits of furniture, a chest of drawers, a stool, something that could be a man's vanity but I'm not so sure. As I make it to the corner, I realise how truly big this space is. It's big enough to rival the Palace, though that thought does not give me any comfort at all.

I fumble my way around and then face plant into something solid, something wooden and big, something unforgiving too. A flash of pain explodes in my head, I step back, then lose my footing and end up colliding with the wall behind me.

"What are you doing?"

Devin's voice makes me shriek. In my concentration, I'd not registered the sound of the door unlocking, or his boots as he stepped inside. It's the same mistake I made earlier, it's the same fuckup that nearly got me taken. I need to pay more attention. I need to learn to listen more consciously, even while I'm focusing on other things.

"Paitlyn?" He continues.

"I need to pee." I say, like that explains why I've now got a mild concussion.

"So you decided to squat in the corner?"

I screw my face up at the amusement in his voice. I'm sure this is all very fucking funny for him, meanwhile, I feel more helpless and stupid than ever.

"I obviously didn't mean to end up here, but you didn't exactly give me a tour before you locked me in." I snap.

There's a moment, a pause you can almost feel, while I guess he's deciding whether to beat me for my insolence or to let it go.

I brace myself, ready for the pain of his fists, but when they don't come, it confuses me more. His hand pulls me out and guides me to what feels like the centre of the room.

"If you're going to be a brat, I'll put you over my knee and spank you." He says, though again, his tone doesn't sound pissed off.

I know I should back down, should smile meekly, and play it safe. But I'm far too wound up for that. "You ditched me here for hours. You didn't even say a word to me, and now you expect me to be polite? I'm covered in dirt, in blood, in God knows what else..." my tirade seems to burn itself out and I realise then how utterly exhausted I am. I haven't eaten a decent meal in forever. All those drinks they forced down my throat may have kept me alive but I'm barely more than a skeleton.

Devin doesn't say anything, he just leads me on, leads me like a pet, and as my feet feel the surface beneath change, as those warm wooden floorboards turn to tile, I realise I'm now in the mythical bathroom.

He starts peeling off my clothes, taking one disgusting layer after another.

I grit my teeth, worried that if I say anything more, he really is going to lose his temper.

Quietly, he guides me across the room, then tells me to take a small step. As I do, I feel the coolness of a ceramic and that tells me I'm now in a shower. I guess that's one small mercy then. He's allowing me to wash.

I hear the twist of something and the clunking of plumbing before hot water is suddenly pouring down on me, on him, on us both.

"Pee." He says.

"In, in here?" I stammer. He wants me to pee in front of him? I guess it's not the worst thing I've been made to do, is it?

"I thought you needed to go." He says simply.

"I would have preferred a damn toilet."

Again, he laughs, as though he finds my irritation to be a form of amusement, a comedy.

"Pee, Paitlyn," He says again.

I hate that I do it. I hate that I can't even hide it from him, but I'm so damn desperate and the sound of this water, the feeling of it trickling down my skin, it's making it so much worse.

It stings a little as it comes out, but then, it always has, ever since Guthrie had my vagina mutilated.

"There, that's better." He murmurs.

I open my mouth to tell him where he can stick it, only his hands move, they cup my face, they raise my head and his lips catch mine, his mouth claims mine and every thought, every angry, nasty, twisted feeling in my head disappears.

He's never kissed me.

No one has kissed me.

No one except Gunther and his kisses were a whole different form of torture, a thing I had to endure and pretend to enjoy.

But there's no pretence here. No anything.

I don't mean to moan, I don't mean to lean into him, to silently beg for more, but I cannot stop myself. How is it possible that a monster as big as him can be capable of kissing like this?

My hands wrap around his neck, my fingers twist in his hair and it's so soft I want to laugh. This man, this beast of a man that I hate so fucking much, suddenly feels so human.

He cup my face, his tongue devours me, and I swear I'm getting drunk on this kiss, drunk on this illogical, ridiculous moment that makes no sense whatsoever.

Who the fuck is Devin right now? Where is the monster, the brute I know?

He breaks us apart and grabs what I think is the soap. "Turn." He says.

I decide not to argue with him, not to be difficult, and I stand still, I stand obediently as he scrubs my skin, as he cleans me, as he shampoos my hair again, just like he did back in that other place.

I know he drops to his knees when his colossal body, his arms, all move down my body. It's clear what he's going to do, that he's going to fuck me again, use me again. No, I don't want him to, but even as I think that thought, some part of me hungers for a touch that might be soft, that might be gentle, hell, that might be even half as good as that kiss was.

I'm fucked in the head. I have to be. To want this, to even consider it.

His fingers trace up my inner thighs. I'm shaking, my breath turns rattled as he gets closer and closer to my core. His fingers brush at the space where my clit should be. There's nothing now, nothing but a scar, and a hollow numbness.

"Does this hurt?" He asks.

I shake my head. I don't have any nerves left to feel pain there.

He grunts, moving them back, feeling where my labia was cut away, where everything was sliced right off.

"And this?" He asks.

Again, I shake my head. Right now, he's being too soft for me to really feel anything.

But the Devin I know, the brute I'm intimately acquainted with doesn't get off on softness, he doesn't enjoy gentle lovemaking.

As his fingers probe my entrance, I grit my teeth and visibly lock up. I don't have to say the words because he can see from my body language.

He's going to thrust them inside me. Any minute, any minute this gentle exploration is going to switch. He's going to brutalise me, he's going to make me bleed, only, he doesn't.

I gasp with relief as he removes his hand.

And then the water goes off. He murmurs something about getting me dry, and I feel the softness of a towel as he wraps it around me and carries me out to the bedroom.

I can feel the water still dripping off him as he holds me against his chest, clearly, he chose not to bother drying himself. He rubs the towel over my skin, before flinging it away, murmuring something so low I don't catch it.

Is this the moment then, is this it? He has me clean, he's got rid of all the grime, I guess I'm more appealing to him now, more fuckable.

"I'd at least appreciate some food before you fuck me." The words leave my mouth before I even register that I've spoken them.

"Food?" Devin repeats, like he hasn't been the one starving me. I feel the air tense, I hear the sound of his knuckles flexing in irritation. "Alright, malktā," He says. "I'll get you some food, and after, you can suck my cock as a thanks."

A thanks? A fucking thanks? I'm so close to throwing something at his stupid head, only I don't know what's in reach and I've no doubt I'd probably miss.

He must take my silence as some form of acquiescence because I hear him walk away, before the door opens and closes in quick succession.

CHAPTER

EIGHTY-ONE



Pailtyn

ye're sat at a small table. Thankfully I didn't trip over that in my explorations.

I've got a bathrobe on and nothing else. I have no idea what Devin is wearing, if he's even dressed.

In my hands I hold a knife and fork made of what feels like actual silver. The weight is comforting, it reminds me of before, when I was home, when I was treated as a person, a human being, at least, that's what I thought, when the reality is I was actually being groomed.

In front of me smells the most incredible damn meal of my life. My mouth waters as I try to scoop something onto the fork. But as I raise it to my mouth, all I get is some sauce, nothing of substance.

I can hear the scraping as Devin cuts his meat, as he shifts his food onto his own fork and as he slowly eats like this is some fine dining event and not technically still a hostage situation.

When he realises I'm struggling, however, he leans over, takes the cutlery from my hand and audibly stabs at the plate before returning it to my now open fingers.

I can feel the weight has changed. I can feel that there's food impaled on the end. I lift the fork up, sliding what I discover to be a bit of carrot into my mouth. The sauce covering it is delicious. It's creamy, rich, too decadent really for my stomach to tolerate, but right now, I don't give a fuck.

As soon as I'm done chewing, Devin takes my fork again and repeats the action. This time it's chicken, perfectly cooked, perfectly moist. I let out a shameful moan as I chew it.

Whatever Devin thinks I don't know, but he continues helping me to eat while feeding himself.

My stomach churns in protest. Maybe all those weeks of starvation have shrunk it, but now I feel so full it almost hurts.

Devin barks for someone and I assume it's a servant as our plates are cleared in a hurried, practised fashion before whoever it is makes a quick exit. Based on the movement, I'd say that man is almost as petrified of Devin as I am.

"Where are we?" I ask as soon as the door shuts behind him. The question has been bugging me from the moment we pulled up on his motorbike.

Wherever we were, it had a long drive. I could feel the difference in the surface between the road and this place. This place isn't some dingy dungeon, this place has the air of grandeur. It has that same stuffy feeling my family home had, that the Palace had too.

"Somewhere safe." Devin replies.

"Am I not permitted to know?" I snap.

I hear his elbows plant onto the table. "I will tell you what you need to know and keep out the details you don't."

"And why do you get to decide?" I retort.

I know he smiles. I know him well enough to know that comment garners a reaction.

"We are somewhere they cannot find us."

"Who?"

“Your mother and my brothers.” He says.

So, they are hunting him then. Devin and his brothers are at war. I don’t find that fact reassuring in the slightest.

“And the Esau?” I half-whisper. Like I’d forgotten the fact they were mentioned.

“What do you know of them?” He replies as I hear the sound of metal chinking. I guess he’s putting his cutlery down to really focus on me now.

It feels like a test. It feels like he’s waiting for me to reveal some secret. Some big, dark, dirty secret I’ve been harbouring all these years. Only, sadly, I have no such thing.

I shrug. “I know what most people know.” I say quietly. “That hundreds of years ago, some of us rose up, tried to change the Brethren, tried to change our ways...”

“They slaughtered your ancestors.” He states. “As a Founder, I’d expect you to be more concerned about them then...”

“Then what?” I cut across him. “My mother, your brothers for instance? Everyone is a threat to me. Every living person.”

I don’t know what he thinks to that statement, I wish I could see his face, I wish I could see his expression. All I have to go on is the sound of his breathing, the small audial tells. But so much about his behaviour, about his emotions were always unspoken.

I let out a huff, shaking my head. Why am I even bothering? You can’t reason with madness can you? But then, is Devin actually mad? Gunther was, Gunther was as crazy as they come... Devin, I’m certain he’s not crazy, at least, not in the same manner. He’s not crazy chaotic, he’s calculated, ruthless. I’m also sure of the fact that he has a plan to all of this.

“Why do you want me, surely you could have your pick of the girls, being a Blake?” I say, deciding to try a different angle.

“Maybe there’s something about you that I particularly like.” He says pointedly.

It’s hard not to grimace at that.

“You said you wanted to marry me.” I continue. “Why would you want that? Surely, you’d prefer a nice little virgin?”

He snorts then. “Virgins are boring.”

“And I’m not?”

“No.”

I don't understand why he can say that, it's not like I've done anything close to making him think I've been intentionally entertaining him.

"You know I don't have a fortune anymore, that was stripped of me when I was sent to Oblivion."

I don't care for your money." He says flatly. "You think we Blakes don't have our own?"

Fine, so it's not the wealth. I wring my fingers together, what else could it be?

The only thing I have left, the only thing they haven't taken from me, can't take from me, is my bloodline. "What if I can't have children?" I whisper. I don't know if that's true, but my body has been damaged enough that it might be the case.

"You can." He says so certainly. So confidently.

"You don't know that..."

"Actually, I do." He replies. "We had you checked over. You were out of it at the time, so I doubt you remember it. The doctor gave me a full report, of course, he missed one thing out..."

"That I'm cut?" I guess. I know he didn't have a clue about that until he tried to fuck me, his reaction tells me that's the case.

He grunts. "Clearly, he didn't see the relevance of it. I'll make sure he understands his error."

I shake my head at the threat. This man so easily turns to violence. It's thrilling in a way, and yet, horrifying too.

"What if I asked you to be gentle?" I whisper. "What if, I let you fuck me but..."

I hear the sound of his chair scraping as he shifts position. "Maybe if you beg..." He says quietly.

Beg. I can do that. I mean, it's not like I've not done it before more times than I can count.

I draw in a low breath, pushing my chair back, and I slip to the floor on my knees.

"Please..." I begin trying to emulate that old part of me, that weak part, that part that endured so much.

He tuts, moving to stand and his fingers brush my lips. "I didn't mean with words."

I hear the sound of his belt undoing, I hear the rustle of his trousers as he clearly gets his dick out. He wants me to suck him off? He wants me to

give him a blow job as payment, fine, I can do that. No fucking problem. Though it'll be hard not to be tempted to bite his stupid dick off.

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CHAPTER EIGHTY-TWO



Devin

I slide my cock past those chapped lips and into that deliciously wet mouth of hers.

We may have been here before, may have performed this act before, but tonight it feels different. It feels real. Like all those past moments were more a dream than a reality.

Last time my barbs sliced her mouth open, and while I'd enjoyed the brutality, maybe I'm mellowing in my old age because I want her to enjoy this. For the first time in my life, I want to give pain because it's wanted, craved even, and not because it's necessary.

I just need to teach my little woman here how good it can be. How delightful the feeling of torture is when you're also being rewarded.

She stares up at me with those fake glass eyes and for a moment I can convince myself that that look is real, that she is as hungry for me as I am

for her.

Soon. Really soon. I'll make her desperate for me, I'll turn her into a weeping, desperate little mess, only for me.

She sucks me down, and I feel myself sliding past her tongue, down to that sweet spot right past the back of her throat. I was impressed before at how well she could take me. I know all the Brethren girls take marital classes, that they're well trained in the art of sucking cock by the time their wedding day comes around.

She's showing enough willing for me to relax entirely, to truly enjoy this moment. To revel in it. To feel her complete submission.

I buck my hips, sliding myself back and forth, groaning more as I pick up speed.

I've had enough blowjobs in my life to tell the difference between a woman who does it out of duty and a woman who does it out of pleasure and right now, despite the circumstances, I'd put money on her actually enjoying this. It feels like a stark contrast from that moment back in the barracks, back when I was forcing her to take me.

No, this woman here, she doesn't feel forced. She feels - obliging.

The thought makes me frown, makes me pause for a moment. She stills too, and her body stiffens up as though she thinks I'm going to beat her.

I sweep her hair back from her face and she flinches just a little.

"Do you know how beautiful you look right now?" I ask her.

She gulps, pulling off me. "Beauty is only skin deep." She says back dismissively.

My lips curl into a grin, "Not with you, malktā. With you, it's so much more than that."

Her eyebrows drop, instead of taking this as a compliment I think I've pissed her off. I glance down at my cock, seeing how well she's lubricated it for me.

"Get on the bed." I order. I want to feel something more, something deeper, I want to bury myself in her and not have to be gentle, not have to be careful.

Her cunt can't take that. Not after what Guthrie did.

But her arse. Her arse sure as hell can, that is, if it's prepped right.

Her shoulders drop, she gets to her feet so gracefully and she takes small, measured steps to the bed. As she reaches it, she puts her hands out onto the mattress to feel her way.

“Lose the robe.” I instruct.

Again, I see that reaction, that hesitation, before she does as she’s told. The white towelling robe slips from her shoulders, landing in a heap and I get the best view of her arse as she clammers onto the bed.

I get up, ditching what little I have on, and I grab the lube from my bag. Good thing I got supplies, good thing for her that I want her to enjoy this.

I drop the bottle by her head, then position myself over her, feeling more than ever like a predator devouring their prey.

I expect her to whimper, I expect her to beg, or to say something, to ask me to once more be gentle, only she doesn’t.

Maybe she’s too stubborn for that. Too proud.

My hands run up her body, up her spine. Her skin is so soft, so delicate. All of her is so fucking malleable. I can feel all those scars, I can feel her trembling too. As my fingers move to the curve of her arse she tenses more. I circle her arsehole, and she lets out a gasp of shock that makes my dick harden even more.

“No.” She whispers.

“No?” I repeat.

“No.” She says more firmly.

A low rumble escapes my throat. Does she think she’s in control here? Does she think she gets to make demands?

I work my thumb in past that tight little entrance and she lets out a squeal. “No.”

“I can fuck you anyway I want to.” I state.

“You said you’d be gentle.” She says breathlessly.

“I said I would, if you sucked my cock. You didn’t finish your task...”

“You’re the one who got me to stop.” She retorts. “I can’t help it if you change your mind.”

Another laugh escapes me. She doesn’t sound scared right now, she sounds haughty, petulant even. Like this is a scene we’re playing out. Her pretending she doesn’t want it and me then pretending to force her to submit.

I smirk, moving my other hand, pressing my other thumb in beside it’s brother.

Only, she reacts immediately, bucking her head, trying to throw me off. I land one good slap to her arse and she’s turning, hissing, slamming a fist into my face before she presses something right up against my ribcage.

It's a knife. A sharp one.

Fuck knows where she got it from. Fuck knows where she found it. She must have snuck it under the pillows while I was gone.

"Smart girl." I murmur, feeling as it nicks my skin.

She swallows hard, clenching her jaw, jutting her chin out in defiance as she faces me.

"We've been here before." I say. "Remember how it ended last time?"

Her nostrils flare, she pushes just that little bit harder and I narrow my eyes as I feel my blood start to trickle.

"Maybe this time you'll be the one bleeding out." She spits, with all that hate, all that venom, all that delicious rage I've been yearning for.

I slam my lips into hers, groaning as that blade slips and cuts me deeper. It's not enough to do any real damage but the hit of pain adds an extra delight to all this.

She tries to fight me, she jerks her body more before she gives in and kisses me back, like she's forgotten I'm technically her enemy. I drop my hand to her breast, fondling her nipple, circling it and she arches her back as if she needs more.

"You're a little slut for me." I murmur against her lips. "You pretend you're not. You pretend you don't want it, but I can see it in your face, I can feel it in the way your body leans into my touch."

"Fuck you." She snarls, clenching her fist, trying to slice me up more.

I laugh grabbing hold of her hand, forcing her to fling the thing, and it goes flying, landing upright in the floorboard a good three metres away.

"Nothing to protect you now, Paitlyn." I state. "Nothing to stop me taking that arse either."

I slam her over, yanking her hips up and the movement is so quick she barely has time to register it. She tries to crawl away but a good hard slap to her arse makes her stop.

"Stay still." I order, grabbing the bottle, smearing it over that puckered little hole. "Your husband's cock might have been so shrivelled up he couldn't do any damage, but I'd hate to really fuck up your insides."

"You're a bastard." She replies. "A bastard."

I don't say anything back, I'm too focused on the task at hand, on prepping her adequately enough that I won't split her in half.

She whimpers as I force a finger inside her. Her arse is tight and muscles clench around me. "Relax." I tell her. She rewards me with another

mouthful of cuss words.

I work my digit in and out, slowly building her up. I swear her hips are moving, I swear my little whore is starting to enjoy this.

I smother a good amount of lube on my cock. The barbs may be gone but that doesn't mean I won't still tear her up if I'm not careful.

As I place the tip of myself against her entrance her breathing becomes erratic. I can see the way her body is heaving, the way she's preparing herself for this pain.

“Paitlyn...”

“Just fucking do it.” She spits. “Stop torturing me and get it over with.”

Torturing her? Oh sweetheart, if I was torturing you, you'd know about it.

I slide my cock in, shutting my eyes, delighting in how truly incredible she feels. I may have found my new favourite part of her; I may have found my nirvana.

She doesn't cry out, doesn't do anything but let me have this moment.

And it feels so fucking good.

I throw my head back, I let out a feral growl. *This woman is mine. Every piece of her is mine.*

I slide myself out, before working myself back in again. I know I need to take this slowly, that this is all part of the plan but it's so god damn hard.

“Fuck,” I gasp in equal frustration and bliss. I want to destroy her, a part of me wants to make her scream, and yet she's been so broken already I don't want to push more than she can take.

Only, she's raising her hips, I swear she is. She's rocking back and forth, meeting each thrust like she's trying to encourage me. Is she an idiot, does she not realise she's tempting the very devil?

“You want me to ruin you?” I snarl.

“You already have.” She retorts. “Besides, you think I can't take the pain, is that it? You think I can't handle it? You really think your cock is as big as that?”

No, - no, no, she didn't just say that, she didn't just... but she did. She did.

I slam into her, losing all that careful concern in an instant. She screams out and the sound is electrifying, sending goosebumps up my arms.

“You really are a whore.” I gasp. “A filthy, dirty little whore.”

We're grunting, groaning, both of us bucking together, hate fucking each other. What started off as force has become something else entirely. I reach around, grabbing her breast, grabbing her nipple and I pinch so hard she screams.

"Thought you said you could take the pain?" I sneer.

She somehow manages to slam a fist into my side. It's not hard but I love that her response right now is violence.

I slap her arse, slap her hard, then do it again, leaving a livid mark on both her cheeks.

As I come, it feels like my entire world shifts, like my entire axis has tilted. I growl out, burying myself one final time.

She lays there, her head turned to the side, her face flushed, panting like she can't quite get enough air in. A bead of sweat trickles down her spine and I stay where I am watching it trail over her beautiful skin.

She doesn't move. She lays there, still, like she's in some sort of trance.

"Let's get you washed." I murmur, scooping her up, carrying her back to the shower again.

I've never cared for after-care. I've never bothered with that shit before, but this is different. She is different. I may not have admitted it fully to her when she was questioning me earlier. I may not have admitted it fully to myself but even when I hated her, even when I wanted her dead, a part of me still yearned for her, a part of me still loved her.

I shake my head, not truly understanding it, understanding me. I turn the shower on, washing her quickly and then seeing to myself. She doesn't say a word. She doesn't make a sound. I wonder if she's in shock, if she's somehow got herself lost in the memories, in the past.

I turn the water off, grab a fresh towel and dry her off.

Once she's in the bed, I yank the knife free and place it on the cabinet beside her. She hears the sound of it and looks over at me questioningly while I slip into the bed beside her.

And to my surprise her hands reach for me, she reaches for me. Her nails drag up my chest, leaving faint scratch lines behind. I feel like there's something she wants to say and yet she doesn't say a word. She just rolls over, lets out a deep sigh and slowly falls asleep.



THE FIRST BIT OF SUNLIGHT STREAMS IN THROUGH THE OPEN WINDOW.

It's only just risen, and yet, it's impossibly bright already.

Paitlyn is lying beside me, looking almost ethereal as the light paints her skin in decadent shades of gold and amber.

I've been awake for hours, just watching her breathe, studying every line and curve of her face in the growing light, seeing how she's changed, how she's aged, how her body has altered. My heart is still pounding against my ribs after another nightmare, another flashback to that godforsaken cell where they kept me chained like an animal. The phantom ache of iron shackles burns around my wrists, and I flex my fingers to remind myself I'm free.

But it's her presence that truly pulls me back from that dark place. I don't understand it fully, but I like this, I like the effect she has on me. I like the way she calms me without doing or saying a thing at all.

The bruises covering her skin tell stories I helped write. I should feel guilt. I should feel shame. Instead, there's something else entirely, something that makes my chest tight and my breathing shallow.

She's perfect. Too fucking perfect.

The thought hits me like a physical blow, and I have to close my eyes against the intensity of it. I've never had anything worth keeping in my entire miserable existence. Yes, I've had everything I ever wanted, but what then is anything truly worth when you can simple buy it?

And then she walked into my world and everything changed.

That's why I hated her so much at first. Why I wanted to see her break beneath my hands, wanted to watch that fire in her eyes dim to nothing.

Because she made me feel weak.

Made me want things I couldn't name, things I didn't deserve.

Made me realize there was something more than just surviving from one day to the next.

Only, lying here in the growing light, with her warm body pressed against mine, I don't feel weak anymore. I feel invincible. Like I could take on armies, topple kingdoms, rule the entire fucking world if she stayed right here beside me. The realization is terrifying and exhilarating all at once.

“I love you.” I murmur, before I can stop myself.

Her eyelashes flutter against her cheeks, and I know she’s waking up. I don’t know if she heard me, I don’t know if she was awake enough to realise what I said but before she can talk, before I have to acknowledge any of it, I get out of the bed and get myself dressed.

I have a busy day. A carefully planned day. One that, if it goes right, will give my sweet malktā a little more reason to trust me.

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CHAPTER

EIGHTY-THREE



Devin

She's still in bed when I come back hours later, though I'm not surprised, she's been through hell and that's just the last few weeks. I don't want to think about what Guthrie did to her, what other fucked up things he put her through beyond mutilating her genitals.

I wake her gently, she stirs, then jumps so high she almost hits the roof. Soon, really soon, she's going to understand that she has nothing to fear now, that the only pain she'll experience is when she's begging me for it.

I get her up, get her dressed in some of the fresh clothes I acquired, and lead her from the room. She asks where we're going, and I ignore the question entirely.

Down in the basement we have a special guest waiting for us. One I know will help soothe those old wounds.

We walk past Malik, past Mace and a few others.

None of them comment but they look at her, they watch her all the same.

When we get to our quarry, he's strapped to a chair, just as I left him and he's whimpering behind the gag like a little bitch.

Paitlyn stills as she hears the sound. If she could see, I'm certain she'd gasp in shock.

"Who, who's there?" She asks, as if we've merely stumbled upon some poor unfortunate soul.

I take her hand, leading her forward, and gently I place it on the man's face. I don't want to ruin the surprise by announcing who've I got. No, it's far better if she gets to do the metaphorical unwrapping, after all, where is the fun in opening a present, if you already know what's inside?

Her fingertips brush his stubble, trace that slight wonk in his nose, and as they stop on the deep scar across one side, she stills entirely.

"Per, Pearce?" She half-whispers in horror. "He, what, why is he here?"

"You're not convinced I'm on your side, so I thought a little persuasion was needed."

"How does this prove anything?" She hisses back.

"Think," I growl. "He was the one who colluded with Gunther, he was the one who ensured you'd be picked because he wanted to use your bloodline to further his power."

She draws in a deep rattling breath. "You don't know..."

"Yes, I do," I cut across her. It's more than obvious that that is what happened. Pearce and her mother aren't Founders. Paitlyn is one through her paternal line, they both severely underestimated Gunther's mental capacity because they were obviously convinced they could somehow rule through him, as if that would ever be possible.

She shakes her head as a silent tear streaks down her cheek. I know it's not for him, not for her uncle, and yet it pisses me off all the same.

"Why isn't he talking? Why isn't he saying anything?" She says.

"He's gagged." I point out. "But if you'd prefer to hear him beg, I can fix that for you."

She shudders, taking a step away, only, I grab her back, snatch her back, and hold her so that she's pressed into me. "You're not the weak, docile creature they forced you to be, Paitlyn. I know it and you know it too. How long are you going to allow people to continue to use you before you finally fight back?"

“I, I...” She stammers as her hands clutch at my t-shirt.

“I know inside there’s something dark, something as twisted and fucked up as me, it’s time you embraced that, time you let all that anger and rage out.”

“I can’t.” She snaps.

“Yes, you can.”

She screws her face up, giving me such a look of disdain, “Oh yeah? And how do you think I can when you took my sight? When you took my fucking eyeballs?”

I grin, hearing the fury finally starting to erupt in her. It’s about fucking time.

“You may not wield the blade, malktā, but I’m more than happy to do the dirty work for you. I’ll kill them all, I’ll butcher every last one of them, I’ll leave the world drowning in blood if that’s what it takes for you to be happy for just one moment.”

“That, that’s not happiness.” She replies. “That’s fucked up, that’s...”

“Love. Devotion. The truest form of worship there is.” I growl back. “How many times has God demanded we sacrifice for him? How many wars have been fought in his name? How many people slaughtered, and lands claimed? I will do all that and more, I will be your most loyal follower, your most devoted priest, if you let me.”

I can see the way she’s trembling at those words, the way she’s trying to wrap her head around it.

“And if I do?” She whispers. “If I...” She falters, turning her head in the direction of where her uncle is now starting to twist and jerk and really make some noise. “If I do that, I become like you, I become a monster.”

My lips pull into a grin at those words. “You think being a monster is a bad thing?” I reply. “Would you rather be something everyone feared or something everyone knew they could walk all over; they could easily break?”

She winces as the weight of those words clearly sinks in. “He used to bully me, belittle me, even when I was helpless child.” She states. “He never saw me as a person, he just saw what he could get from me.”

“So, isn’t it time you made him pay for it?” I ask.

She nods, slowly at first, hesitantly too. And that’s all the go-ahead I need. I stride towards him, pulling out a flip knife, and I start cutting, carving, slicing off bits of his flesh.

He screams, of course he screams, pathetic waste of space that he is, he doesn't even try to be brave for a moment.

I rip the gag from his mouth and those pitiful sounds echo around us both, and they sound like a song, like a eulogy to all the pain and suffering Paitlyn has endured because of this waste of space.

I glance back at her, at where she's stood, her expression now one of awe as she hears everything that's going on.

Not for the first time, I wish she could see, I wish she could witness this.

I begin describing each slice, each cut, going into detail about the way his blood trails down, about the way he flinches and recoils and how he begs for mercy.

Oh, I have no intention of giving him it.

No intention of killing him anytime soon.

He's going to endure weeks of this, he's going to bleed and bleed, and only when Paitlyn decides it's been enough, will I finally end it for him.

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CHAPTER EIGHTY-FOUR



Pailtyn

He said *that* word. And not for the first time.

There's a part of me that wants to dismiss it, to pretend that it's bullshit, but the way he reacted, the way he went from a raging inferno to something calm, something still, that can't be denied, can it?

I can hear my uncle's screams. I can hear the way the chair is shifting that every moment of this is pure agony for him. Good, I hope it hurts. I hope he truly suffers, because he made me suffer, he made me endure the worst things imaginable, and even when he saw it with his own eyes, when we were at that party and he couldn't deny what Gunther was doing, he didn't have sympathy for me, he didn't seem to give a shit what I was going through.

I shudder, shaking my head, trying to rid myself of another unwanted flashback.

I know my uncle is still here, tied to the chair, bleeding and whimpering, but right now, I can't think about him, maybe it's bloodlust, maybe it's something else, but I feel like I'm high, possessed, that I'm as much of a psycho as Devin is.

I reach out for him, wrapping my hands around his neck and he lifts me up so that my thighs wrap around his waist.

"Fuck me." I say, though even those words don't sound like me.

Devin growls back, kissing me before I can say anything further and I hear the clang of the knife as it drops to the ground.

I don't care if my uncle sees this, no, I want him to. I want him to realise what he's made of me, that I maybe blind now, but I am not weak. Finally, I have someone to champion my cause, someone who is willing to fight for me, not fight to own me.

Devin's bloodied hands yank up my dress, and I can feel as he fumbles with his belt.

I'm so wet I'm practically dripping and while part of me knows I should feel ashamed to be like this, the other part is so fucking beyond it. Beyond shame, beyond reproach. Beyond it all.

I grab hold of Devin's cock, guiding it where I need it most. It's hard to do, considering the height difference between us and clearly he figures out how to fix that best when he grabs my waist and holds me up so I can sink right onto him.

Fuck.

Fuuuck.

It hurts. It stings and yet, I want this pain. Right now, I want everything this monster – my monster - will give me.

I can hear Pearce making more noise, clearly disgusted by the performance he's witnessing. Well, fuck him, he didn't give two hoots all those years ago, when I was naked, when I was on my knees, when Gunther had me licking up spilt fucking whisky like a beast.

I roll my hips, trying to adjust, and as I do, that pain turns not to pleasure exactly, but to something in between.

Devin groans, evidently appreciating how my inner muscles are clinging to him. "That's my queen." He says almost breathlessly.

He's thrusting into me, fucking me, while I brace my hands on his shoulders and try to take every bit of him.

I bury my head in the gap between his shoulder and neck. That smell of him engulfs me and somehow it makes me relax, makes my entire body relax.

"So fucking perfect." Devin growls. "Too fucking perfect. Like a little flower waiting for me to come along and crush you."

"You can't crush me," I gasp back. "Not when I want your pain, not when I need it."

I feel like those words set him alight. I feel like the man inside me becomes the raging monster I know so well, only he's not raging at me, he's raging for me.

He wants me, he needs me, he's as desperate to have me as I am him.

And best of all, right now, I've set him free. All but given him a free pass.

Fear tinges my peripheries. There's a voice in my head screaming about what he did before, how he hurt me, how he broke me, how he stole my eyes. Could he mistake my words? Could he think that that is what I'm asking for, that I want him to cut out more parts of me? Remove more pieces?

I tremble, feeling that old familiar fear and I hate it. I fucking hate it. I hate the reminder that I was weak, I was pathetic. I allowed those men to use me, I allowed everyone to use me and all I could do was cry and plead and pray that something would save me because I didn't have the strength to save myself.

Well, I do now. I have that. I am strong enough now, brave enough, hell, crazy enough too.

I'm as strong as any of these men, stronger even. I just need them to realise it. Starting with my monster.

I pull my lips back and plant my teeth as hard as I can into the soft bit of his muscle above his clavicle. Hard enough that I draw blood. Devin groans, gasping, leaning into it like he craves the pain too.

He drags his hands over the back of my dress, practically ripping it off, and the cool air turns that furnace in me into an inferno.

And then he's pulling me off, turning me, rearranging us so that I'm now bent over a table of some sort.

I arch my back, needing him to be in me, to be filling me.

He kicks my legs apart, then fists my hair with one of his hands.

He slides himself into my arse and it's so much deeper from this angle. So much better too.

My hands claw at the wooden desk, my nails fracture as he starts thrusting away, using my body while I scream out, while I moan over and over.

“Harder.” I gasp. “Harder.”

“With pleasure.” Devin says in a way that makes me feel like I’m actually in control. That I’m in charge.

God, I’m a whore. I have to be for the way I feel right now. For the way I so badly want this, no, need this, even with my uncle watching, especially with my uncle watching.

I want him to see.

I want him to realise.

I have won this. I have fucking won.

I cry out, gasping, feeling like I’m right back there, all those years ago. That me and Devin are in that room and I can look at him, I can see him, I can feel all those twisted moments and instead of being horrified by it all, I’m entranced, I’m mystified, I’m lost to it.

“Mine.” Devin says, “My woman, mine.”

I roll my hips, I writhe against him, demanding in every way I can that he prove those words, that he proves them right here.

My climax races so fast. My whole body tightens with anticipation, and I feel as Devin’s thrusts change, as his movements alter. He’s close too. He must be.

His fingers dig into my flesh, pinching in a delicious hit of pain as I topple over, as I lose myself, as I drown in the undeniable, unbelievable, unimaginable ecstasy of his touch.

CHAPTER EIGHTY-FIVE



Pailtyn

Am I mad? I think I must be. No, I have to be.

We're back in the room, the bedroom. I let him carry me back up like I'm so sort of invalid, some helpless princess once more.

His hands tangle in my hair, and he breaks free from kissing me to make a comment about how he should brush the knots out.

It sounds so ridiculous, it sounds so out of place, coming from his mouth that I can't help but laugh at the absurdity.

"You think it's funny that I want to take care of you?" He snaps.

"You're not the caring type." I reply.

He stills, his hands tightening enough to make me realise I've pissed him off and I chastise myself for being so careless with my words.

He may say he loves me, but that doesn't mean shit when it comes down to it.

“I can be.” He states. “I can be caring, and I will be. I’ll keep you safe, Paitlyn, no one now will ever hurt you.”

Lies. I know they are. But right now, they’re sugar coated, almost soothing, and I’m too used to the darkness to want to disregard a tiny bit of kindness, even if it is make-believe.

He traces my face with his still bloodied fingertips. “Go lie on the bed.” He says.

The words catch me off guard. Does he really want more already?

I let out a low breath as I take unsteady steps over to where the bed is. I clamber on, laying on my back and effectively stare at the ceiling, though I’m met with that same dark emptiness as always.

The shift in weight on the mattress tells me that Devin is there, by my feet.

“Spread your legs.” He says.

I wince, but I do it all the same, and I feel him move, feel him adjust to settle his colossal size right between them.

His hands reach up between my thighs, his touch feels gentle and, as he slides one finger inside me, I clench my jaw. I’m still wet but it stings all the same.

“I’ve been doing some research.” He says quietly, as he starts working the digit in and out so fucking slowly.

“A, about what?” I whisper. When does the man have time to research shit when he’s busy murdering half the country?

“About your cunt. About why it’s so damned tight.” He says so matter of fact.

I don’t know what to say to that, how to reply. I blink back tears as he keeps up his exploration, only, it doesn’t feel quite as brutal as it first started.

“Turns out you really do have a magic cunt.” He says, before he curls his finger inside me and I swear something snaps, something in me shifts and it feels like the entire universe shifts, it almost explodes in my head.

God, it feels so good. It actually feels good.

I arch my back, I lose all sense of reason and I’m moaning, gasping, grabbing at the bed sheets like a thing possessed.

My feet kick out, my body physically begs for more and, as he relaxes the movement, I know he must look so smug.

“Want to know what it is?” He asks.

"Wha, what, what what is?" I stammer. I feel like I've lost track of the conversation, lost track of everything beyond that one, incredible moment.

"You have a condition. It's called vaginismus. It means your cunt physically locks up when someone tries to fuck you."

I don't know what I'm meant to say to that. What reply I can give. I've never heard of such a thing. Does that mean I'm broken, *more* broken?

"Gunther probably caused it after the first time he fucked you." Devin continues. "He almost killed you that day, so it wouldn't be surprising if it left some permanent trauma. Of course, it doesn't help that he continued to fuck you the way he did, continued to let his friends fuck you..."

"Stop." I whisper, bringing my hands up to hide my face, to hide my shame. It might have been years ago now, but those memories still feel so raw, those moments still in so many ways feel like they happened only yesterday. I wish they were gone. I wish all of it were erased from my memory. I'd rather have great big gaps, great big moments of nothing than be living with all the still in my head.

I can feel Devin watching me, I can feel his eyes on me. "It can be fixed." He says softly, more softly than it feels is possible from a brute like him. "Want to know how?"

I shake my head, feeling like the walls are collapsing in on me, that all of this is suddenly too much. This entire conversation is too intimate, too personal, Devin, in so many ways, still feels like the enemy.

And then a wave of something, a tsunami of pure pleasure explodes inside me. I know he's doing it, I know he's found that spot, whatever it is, and I'm rolling, writhing, losing what little control I have as he plays my body exactly the way he wants.

"That's how." He says, as his fingers still, as I lay there, panting, heaving, beside him.

"Ho, how?" I breathe.

He plants what feels like a soft kiss on my forehead before he answers. "I just have to ease you into it, ensure you're properly warmed up and ready for my cock."

I don't know what to say to that, I don't know how I'm meant to respond.

He starts peppering my body with kisses and then he slides his finger out before he pushes himself into me, and I'll admit, it doesn't burn, it doesn't hurt, it doesn't feel *anything*.

"Fuck," He groans. "It feels even better to have your cunt dripping."

I let out a deep moan, all but agreeing with him. He's right, it does feel better. It feels incredible.

My legs instinctively wrap around his waist, and for the first time in my life I don't feel out of my depth, I don't feel out of control. I feel wanted, I feel desirable in a way that isn't shameful, that isn't degrading.

Maybe it's the afterglow, the effects of already coming on his fingers too. Whatever it is, I'm a desperate, needy whore for him, just as he says I am.

Devin leans over, peppering my skin, peppering my scars with the lightest of kisses. But I swear he's holding back, that he's still treating me like I'm fragile, like I'm breakable, like I'm a victim he has to manage with kid-gloves.

"Bite them," I gasp.

He stills, and I'm certain those deadly eyes fix on my face. "You don't mean that." He replies.

I let out a laugh that sounds as desperate as I feel. "Yes, I do." I state. "I'm not that scared girl I was before. It's been five years, Devin, five fucking years. You think I haven't learnt since then, you think I haven't realised..."

"Realised what?" He half-snarls, like I've insulted him.

"That the pain is good, the pain is necessary."

"Paitlyn..."

I grit my teeth because this is not the kind of conversation I want to have right now, not while his dick is still buried in me, and yet, I'm done hiding, done swallowing my words, done being used by people too.

I want my needs to be met. I want my wants to be granted. I deserve it, by God, I bloody well deserve it.

"I learnt, Devin." I snap back. "I evolved, I twisted. Guthrie thought he was beating me, thought all that torture would ruin me. Only, I learnt to take it, to crave it, to turn what he wanted to be a punishment into the complete opposite. That bastard was never going to beat me. I made sure of it."

"You like the pain?" He says, sounding still so disbelieving.

"I like it." I say. "I want it. I need it. When all you have is darkness, the pain proves you're alive. The pain proves you're still human."

As if in answer he rolls his hips and he slams himself into me.

My hand finds his throat, I squeeze enough to ensure he feels it. "You like it too, Devin. You like delivering pain, inflicting it. So don't hold back

on me, give me everything you have, every fucked-up part of you. I can handle it. I can take it. And I know you want it as much as me.”

It feels like I’ve lit a match, like I’ve finally set this man free, undone his chains and ordered him to do his very worst. His hands tighten around my body, his mouth captures mine and he kisses me more savagely than I thought could be possible. I can taste my blood as my lip splits, I can taste it on my tongue, on his, on both of ours. It feels so decadent, it feels like the finest champagne that we’re both savouring together.

I arch my back, taking each brutal thrust as he fucks me mercilessly and the pain and pleasure mingle together in such a way that I swear I’m hallucinating.

“Devin,” I scream into his mouth, I cry out, I sing.

I feel like I’m on fire, I feel like I’m combusting, burning in sin, burning in the very depths of hell, and Devin is my very own demon, spurring me on, ensuring all of my damnation is complete.

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CHAPTER EIGHTY-SIX



Devin

She's fast asleep, curled up, safe in my arms. Everything in the world feels right for the first time in my entire life, and then I hear it.

That fucking noise.

It's distant, far enough away for me to dismiss as my imagination. But I'm not an idiot, not a fool.

I spring up, waking her in the process and she cries out, before I wrap my hand around her mouth. I don't know if it's my brother or someone else, but it's clear the place has been rumbled.

I scoop her up, barricade her in the wardrobe, then barricade the door to the room from the hallway so no one can get inside.

I'm naked, exposed, my dick is waggly from side to fucking side as I prowl through the house, with the assault rifle now in my hands.

I can hear the sound of gunshots, of a battle going off in the lower levels. Have they come for Paitlyn or for me? Perhaps it's both, but either way, they're going to end up dead.

I meet Malik on the second floor. He's got someone pinned down behind a cabinet, and they keep taking potshots at him every few seconds.

He grunts when he sees me, but beyond that, the bastard doesn't look phased.

"Can you hold it down?" I ask.

He grunts again so I turn, leaving him to it, and make my way back down the hall, back to the second stairwell. Someone is coming up it. Racing up it. They sound like an elephant, stomping away as they take each step. Stupid fuck, don't they know that's how you get killed?

I take aim, waiting until his leg comes into view through the banisters, and I pop one bullet into his shin. He screams, falling backwards and I land a second, blowing his head off.

Another comes right after, he's just as easy to deal with.

The next few put up a half-decent fight. A bullet streaks past my thigh, giving me a delicious hit of both pain and adrenaline. I shoot my way down the first floor and to the basement.

As I reach the cupboard where we stashed Titus, I can see Mace, crouched, keeping him secure. The stupid fuck is moaning behind his gag, drawing enough attention, as though he wants to be killed.

I stick my head around the threshold and peer down to where Pearce's makeshift cell is. When I see Elijah coming out, I feel a flash of relief, only, he doesn't head back to what would be safety, instead, he's flapping his hand, beckoning someone.

"What the fuck?" Mace murmurs suddenly beside me.

"I think we found our fucking mole." I snarl, taking aim.

Elijah ducks down, keeping low, as Pearce is brought out between two other men.

I narrow my eyes, pulling the trigger, and hit right on target. Elijah's head jerks back, his neck practically snaps in half as he hits the floor.

The other two men make a rush for it, dragging a clearly unconscious Pearce between them.

"Shoot them. Kill the fuckers." I snarl, realising I'm out of ammo.

Mace lets out a hail of bullets. I reload, then join in and we see one of them go down, but the other manages to haul Pearce out the door, manages

to shove him off to the waiting hands of someone on the outside.

I take a step forward, determined to kill every single one of them only I'm hit with a wall of flames.

"They set the fucking building on fire." Mace states.

It's a smart tactic. No way will I go after Pearce when Paitlyn is upstairs and could burn to death if I leave her.

"Get Titus, get him out to the van. I'll get Malik and Paitlyn, and we'll meet you there." I order.

He nods back, moving quickly to do as he's told. I don't know where anyone else is, I don't know if they're alive or dead. And more importantly, I don't know if I can trust them.

Elijah betrayed us. Who's to say no one else is working for them?



PAITLYN IS STILL WHERE I LEFT HER. STILL HUDDLED UP IN THE WARDROBE, though she looks far more pissed now than she did before.

I pull her out, grab hold of her and my mouth is claiming hers before I can stop myself. She's hesitant at first but I feel her melt into me, melt into this kiss.

When I pull apart, I swear she looks a little disappointed, although that could just be me imagining it. Wishful thinking and all that.

I scoop her up as she starts to ask a barrage of questions, and I throw her over my shoulder, before grabbing my bag, stuffing that precious jar into it, and racing out the door.

There's a slow, steady stream of smoke. I don't know how long it'll be before the house is completely engulfed but I plan to be well away before that happens.

When we get to the van, I shove her in, shove her down onto the floor. Titus is there, laying like a dead weight. Malik is up front, Mace is clearly on guard, waiting for someone to attack.

"Let's go." I say, slamming the door shuts.

Malik hits the gas, and we speed off. Paitlyn tries to sit up, but I push my hand onto her, keeping her down. If there's an ambush, if someone is

ahead, waiting for us, then I want to ensure she doesn't end up with a shit ton of bullets in her.

She shakes her head, clearly furious, and then she reaches out, her hand skimming my body.

“You’re injured.” She whispers.

I glance down, seeing that graze from where the bullet missed me.

“It’s a flesh wound.” I murmur, and only then do I realise, I’m still starker bollock naked.

I throw my head back and laugh. What Malik and Mace think I don’t know, but Paitlyn seems to be relieved by the sound, her features relax, her whole body seems to deflate as if the tension has gone.

“Where are we going?” She asks.

I don’t reply. I just stroke her cheek, reassuring her, reassuring myself too, that in this moment she is safe.

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CHAPTER EIGHTY-SEVEN



Pailtyn

We're lying on a mattress on the floor, having fallen asleep here not long after we arrived.

I thought I'd have nightmares, I thought my sleep would be broken with the terror that someone was coming to get us, but somehow, I slept the entire night through and now, I feel almost rested.

I don't know where Malik and the other guard is, where the tied-up man is either, but I know better than to ask.

This house feels different, musty, like it hasn't been cleaned in years. The one we fled felt regal, it smelt of mahogany furniture and oil paintings. This place smells more like I'd imagine a drug den would.

Devin's arms are wrapped around me, I'm curled up into his chest as if he's a place of safety. Of comfort.

I don't want to move. I know that's irrational, that right now I should be trying to flee, should be pushing this man off me, but for the first time, with his arms around me, I feel truly safe.

All my life I've had people looking at me for what I could give them, what they could take from me. Devin may have taken more than anyone else has, and yet, when it matters, he has also protected me, he fights for me, he wants me.

Not for my bloodline.

Not for some bullshit Brethren reasons, but for me, the broken, scarred, fucked person that I am now.

It feels crazy, it *is* crazy, and yet, I realise that I want this. Truly, I want him. And not just for one moment, not just for now. I want him to worship me, to fight for me, to do all those things he declared back before torturing my uncle.

I want there to be blood.

I want there to be pain.

I want there to be just as much horror inflicted on every single person who hurt me, and I know Devin is the man to do it, Devin is the monster at my back, Devin is the one to save me, to revenge me, to love me and to devour me completely and utterly.

Devin is mine.

My beast. My vengeance. All fucking mine.

His fingers trace down my arm. They trace over those scars that he created so long ago.

God, I'd love to see what they look like now, how they've healed. Are they as pretty as he imagined them to be?

"Why did you do it?" I whisper.

"Do what?" He replies.

"Cut out my eyes."

Out of all the awful things he's done to me, that has been the one that made no sense.

He stills, his fingertips suddenly feel so heavy on my skin, and I wonder if I've fucked up. If I'd have been better to keep my mouth shut and just cherish the peace while I had it.

"Gunther wanted it." Devin says, breaking the silence that suddenly feels so weighted. "He said you saw too much."

"What does that mean?" I ask.

He shrugs. “The man was crazy, but I knew if I didn’t do it, he’d get someone else to. And they’d do a shit job of it, they’d butcher your face, they’d destroy your beauty, they’d hurt you more.”

“You hurt me,” I snarl.

He brushes the bits of my hair that are splayed over the pillow. “I know I hurt you but this way, I ensured you wouldn’t suffer. And this way, I got to keep your eyes.”

“What?” I gasp, trying to fathom what on earth that even means.

His hands tighten just enough to stop me from recoiling. “Eyes are the window to a person’s soul. No way was I going to destroy that.”

“What the fuck are you talking about?” I say.

“Your soul, Paitlyn. I wanted that piece of you. I wasn’t going to let anyone else claim it. Anyone else steal it.”

I gulp, struggling to wrap my head around what he’s just said. He thinks he owns a piece of my soul? What the fuck?

He lets out a sigh, pulling me in so that my body leans more onto his, so that I’m sprawled over his chest.

“In another life, you wouldn’t have gone through all that shit, I would have realised sooner, I would have acted sooner.”

“Realised what?” I ask.

“That you were meant for me, created for me, God or the devil, or someone, intended for you to be mine.”

His hand cups my cheek, and it’s so easy to believe this, to believe his sweet words and his softness and forget the monster he was before, the man who brutalised me just as much as my husband did.

“We can leave.” He says quietly. “We could do what I wanted to all those years ago, we could disappear, start over, go somewhere they won’t find us...”

“They’ll find us.” I reply. I’m not so stupid to believe there would be any other outcome. Not so naïve now. “Besides, your brothers are reapers, you think they’d just stop looking for you?”

He doesn’t say anything to that.

“It’s not the life you want, not the life I want.” I continue. “I don’t want to be looking over my shoulder, constantly fearful that I might get caught.”

“Then what do you want, Paitlyn?”

I draw in a deep breath. No one has ever asked me that. No one has ever cared for my wants. But the ironic truth is, I won’t get what I want now. I’ll

never get it now. I'm too far gone, too lost, too damaged. I had such dreams of outliving Gunther, of leaving, of travelling, but none of that can happen now.

I run my hands over my face, realising that there are no good options here. We've been backed into a corner and there's only one realistic way out.

"We have to go to your brother." I state, hardly believing the words coming out of my mouth.

"What?" He snarls, and his entire body language changes.

"Listen," I say quickly. "He's the one with the power here, he can protect us, we just have to have something worth bargaining with him. Something that makes it worth his while."

The seems to tense. Silence hangs between us, and then Devin says in such a tone. "Oh, I have something."

"What?"

"Titus Ratcliffe."

"Who?" Who the fuck is that? The name means nothing to me, but I'm guessing that's the man who was bundled into the van beside me.

"He's the other candidate for Chapter Lord. Magnus can't be anointed without him there to concede." Devin explains.

"Magnus is going for Chapter Lord?" I hiss while my mind does somersaults. Since when would the Brethren accept a Blake as Chapter Lord? God, so much has changed, so much has shifted, since I was locked away.

"I can't trust him." Devin states, breaking through my thoughts. "He locked me away, had me institutionalised. He'd sooner stab me in the back than let me into the fold again."

"Then let me try." I say.

He scoffs, "No, malktā," He says. "My brother is not the kind of person to listen to reason, especially not from a woman."

"That's not what I meant." I reply, as a grin creeps across my face.

Magnus may be unapproachable, but if he's going for Chapter Lord, then I know who will be behind it, who will help us. Who *has* to help us.

CHAPTER EIGHTY-EIGHT



Devin

W^{ater trickles down the wall.}
We're meeting in a cave, as if this couldn't be anymore clandestine.
Paitlyn's hand is firmly clasped in mine, and I'll admit, I get a thrill from the feeling of her fingers digging into my flesh.

Something has changed with her. Something tangible. She no longer flinches when I touch her, she no longer hides herself from me when she thinks I won't notice.

She is mine. Wholeheartedly mine. I can feel it. She's not just given in, not just accepted this as some form of submission, but she's mine, heart, body, fucking soul too. I own her in a way no one has ever had.

I want to shout it from the rooftops. I want to scream it loud enough that all of heaven knows it. I feel like a boy, a child caught in his first throws of love. In truth, I feel free, I feel finally like I know what it is to be alive.

The sound of gravel crunching brings me out of those thoughts. I still, staring at where I'm certain the man will appear and when I see his outline, it's hard not to snarl.

It's the same fucker I was going to kill all those years ago, that same fucker Gunther gave a night with his wife to. My head snaps to stare at Paitlyn, not that she can see the pissed off look I have. *What the fuck is going on here?*

"Antonio." Paitlyn says warily, like she can sense how close to a bloodbath this could become.

"Jesus," The man murmurs, stepping close, staring at her in disbelief. "I thought you were dead. I thought this had to be some sick joke, I thought..." He falls silent when he spots me.

I glower back at him. He's only alive now, by the grace of God himself and we both know it.

"Devin Blake." He says, realising who I am, not that it was such a great secret.

I grunt back.

Antonio looks between us, at where our hands are clasped together. "You're with him?" He says.

"Yes." Paitlyn replies.

"By choice or by force?" He continues.

And that question gets my back up, makes me snarl, makes me take a step forward. I'll fucking gut him for that.

Paitlyn places her other hand on my arm, "It's okay." She whispers, like I'm a wild dog that needs placating. "We're together." She says firmly to him. "Devin rescued me, he saved me from Guthrie. He..." She shakes her head slightly and I know it's the memories, the confusion.

She thinks I'm the one who tried to rescue her, when the reality was, I was going to kill her that day back in Oblivion. Not that she needs to know it. Better in fact, that she doesn't.

"Guthrie?" Antonio repeats, sounding confused. "What does he have to do with any of this?"

"So my brother didn't tell you." I sneer. "He didn't let you in on the secret deal he made?"

For once the man looks like he's on the backfoot. "What deal?" He snaps.

"He sold us out. Both of us." I reply. "He thought I killed Gunther, so he did a deal with Guthrie to cover it up. Guthrie got to keep Paitlyn, had her locked away in Oblivion and had me thrown into an asylum."

I'll admit there's some satisfaction to see the way my words register with him. To see the flash of fury. Whoever the fuck he is, whatever influence he has over my brother, he clearly didn't realise Magnus was a slippery as he is.

How I'd love for that to put a cat among the pigeons. How I'd love for that to rip the wind right out of my brother's sails. To destroy all that he's trying to build.

"Antonio," Paitlyn murmurs, sounding more pleading than I would like. "You can help us; you can help me."

"What is it you want?" He asks, his voice sounding suddenly emotionless, suddenly so cold.

"Freedom, restoration." She states. "You were my Guardian, you know everything that happened, you can speak with Magnus, you can get everything put to rights."

He was her Guardian? He's a fucking Guardian? I run my eyes back over him. It explains everything, it explains why she went to him, why Gunther tried to appease him, why he's so involved in ensuring my brother becomes Chapter Lord.

He shakes his head. "It's not that simple, Paitlyn. Not now. It's been too long; it's gotten too complicated. Everyone thinks you're dead. You can't simply pop back up, alive and well, after all this time..."

I can feel Paitlyn react to that, feel her shoulders slump.

"Why? Would it be too hard for you to manage it?" I snap. He was meant to protect her, shit job he did, just like everyone else in her life.

He fixes his gaze on me. "It's not that, and you know it. You grew up in the shadow of your parents' misdeeds, you know as well as I that these things don't just simply go away with time. The Brethren don't forget, the Brethren don't forgive, remember?"

"But..." Paitlyn begins, only, I pull on her arm to silence her. If I had my way, we wouldn't still be here, I'd have gutted him and left him for dead, and we'd be long gone.

But that's not what she wants. Not what she asked for.

“What if we have something that makes it worth your while?” I reply.

He shifts just a little, and that tells me everything I need to know, that he didn’t come here for Paitlyn, he didn’t come here to help her, he came here to help Magnus.

“You want him to be Chapter Lord,” I continue, “You can’t do that without a certain someone, can you?”

“Titus.” He confirms, like he doesn’t know I have him. Like he and my brother haven’t spent many a dark night whispering about it, trying to figure out where I’m holding him.

“You want him, then you give Paitlyn what she wants.” I declare.

He opens his mouth, but at the same time, we all see the movement at the entrance to the cave. More people are approaching, and I’d put money on that being my brother’s doing. Does he think I’d be so stupid as to drag Titus here? That I’d use him as a physical bargaining chip?

I let out a laugh, even as Paitlyn reacts, as she steps closer into me.

“You can’t do shit, Antonio.” I state. “You think we’d tell you anything? Paitlyn’s blind, she can’t tell you a thing, and me, by the time you’d got anything of worth from me, the Brethren would have realised what was happening and Magnus would no longer be your prized candidate, and you yourself would be fucked.”

Antonio huffs, glaring at me before he turns his head. “I told you to stay back.” He snaps over his shoulder.

None of the men reply, but I can see them now, I can see all ten of them. They may have guns and body armour, but I know I could still take them in a fight if that’s what this comes down to.

“Antonio, we don’t want to fight.” Paitlyn says so earnestly. “We want to fix this. We want to work with you.”

He bristles, running his eyes over her in a way that makes me want to smash his skull in. When he looks across at me, his expression hardens. “And what do you want, Devin? You’ve destroyed enough of your family’s empire. I doubt you’re suing for peace.”

I hear Paitlyn gasp in shock, and I grin again. Yeah, I have destroyed it, I’ve revelled in fucking up as much as I can for Magnus. He’s always been such an arrogant fuck; it’s been a delight to bring him down a peg or two. Question is, did he put it together about the Turner girl? Did he realise it was me who let Anthony Wallis into his grounds, who ensured he made it past his guards, just so he could fuck with Magnus’s little pet? He thinks I

was locked in that asylum all this time, he doesn't realise I was running the place by the end of it. That all the staff, all the doctors and nurses were dead by my hand, as were any patients that couldn't be controlled.

Magnus thought all of it was the Esau, he had no idea his own brother was the one sowing the seeds for his destruction.

But sadly now, that time is over. Paitlyn is right, we cannot live outside the Brethren, and right now, we cannot exist within it, unless we have my brother's help.

"I'll play ball." I growl. "You get me a meeting with my brother, and if he agrees to our demands, then I'll give you Titus."

"Alright," Antonio says, though he doesn't look convinced. "I'll speak to Magnus. We'll find somewhere suitable..."

"No," I snap, cutting across him. "There's only one place we'll agree on, one place I'll agree on. Oblivion."

Antonio frowns more, clearly confused. Stupid fuck, he doesn't know what Oblivion is, he just sees the high walls and the slaves, he doesn't realise that to me, it's not a prison, it's a paradise, it's my childhood home, my sanctuary. If this thing goes tits up, then I can ensure Paitlyn and I are away before they even know what's happening.

"Oblivion?" Paitlyn repeats with such a look of horror.

"It's not the risk you think it is." I whisper into her ear, "I know that place far better than either of my brothers. I spent my entire childhood learning all the secret passages, hiding away from them."

She doesn't look convinced. Not for a second. "What if it's not the same, what if your brother has changed things? He's been in charge long enough." She murmurs.

"He hasn't." I say.

"How can you be so sure?"

"Because I was there, only a few months ago."

"What?"

"I'm the only person capable of getting in and out of Oblivion without getting caught."

"When you two have quite finished." Antonio snaps, bringing our attention back to him.

"Oblivion." I repeat. "Magnus wants a face-to-face, then that's where it will be."

Antonio gives a curt nod. “As you wish.” He says, in such a tone I want to punch him.

But instead, I tighten my hold of Paitlyn’s hand and lead her out past all those waiting men. I know they won’t do shit now I’ve played my trump card and there’s a part of me that wants to prove it, wants to rub it in their faces.

Because I have the power here. Me.

We may be negotiating a truce, but it not from a position of weakness.

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CHAPTER

EIGHTY-NINE



Pailtyn

The wind is absolutely freezing. I huddle into Devin, using his body warmth to try to stop me from shivering, not that it does any good.

We didn't go back to the bedsit, we're somewhere else entirely.

I can hear the sounds of twigs snapping, I can feel them under the soles of my boots as I take each step. All around are the sounds of rustling leaves. It feels like we're in a forest, in the middle of nowhere.

Maybe I'm imagining it, but Devin seems nervous, excited even. He feels like a psycho puppy about to go off on a rampage.

My boots find the flat, hardness of a flagstone, I realise I'm now on a path.

"Small step up." Devin murmurs.

I raise my foot, cautiously bringing it down a few inches higher than where I thought the ground was. As my second foot follows, I realise we're

in a building now. Somewhere spacious, somewhere hollow, almost devoid of life.

“Where are we?” I murmur.

It feels haunting, creepy even.

“A church.” Devin replies.

A church? I raise an eyebrow, what the fuck are we doing in a church?

“A Brethren church.” He adds, and that puts the fear of God into me.

I swear I can hear them, the rustle of robes, the heavy breathing, all of it. I could be surrounded right now, trapped by a dozen masked men, all determined to bring me down, to make me pay.

I can’t hide the whimper, I can’t keep the panic inside, and I stumble back, though Devin is quick to catch me before I can go anywhere. Before I can escape.

“Did you think I was lying when I said I wanted to make you my wife?” He asks.

I freeze, wondering if I’d heard him correctly. Surely not? “I thought...” My cheeks burn with shame as I speak the last of what feels like a confession. “I thought you were handing me over to them.”

His whole body seems to shift. “You thought I was giving you up?” He snarls. “You thought I’d betray you so easily?”

“Everyone else has.” I state.

His hand cups my cheek, his touch is so soft, so gentle. “They’d have to prise you out of my dead rotting hands.”

I laugh. I can’t help it. It comes out like a half-choked sob. “That is not romantic.” I murmur.

“It’s as romantic as I get.”

I don’t know what to say to that, how to reply. He clearly takes that as some form of invitation to continue because he tucks my hand into his arm, and he leads me down what I assume to be the aisle.

I can hear the faint sound of someone breathing, I can hear the slight crackle of candles. This place feels old, disused. I don’t know how Devin managed to bribe a priest but then, I’m not surprised. He seems to have the ability to get whatever he wants, whenever he wants it.

As we come to a stop, it hits me that I’m still wearing the jumper dress and knee-high boots I put on this morning. I glance down, even though I can’t see, and I wince at what I must look like. It’s hardly the outfit someone wants to wear on their wedding day.

“What is it?” Devin asks, clearly seeing I’m uncomfortable.

“I’m not wearing a wedding dress.” I reply.

“You could be wearing a sack for all I care.” He states. “It’s not about the dress, it’s about us, tying ourselves together, binding ourselves for life.”

I gulp at those words. At the tone. He’s right. That’s exactly what this will do. I’m not sure I’m ready for this, ready for this step, but Devin isn’t giving me much of a choice, is he?

I don’t hear the words the Priest says. I zone out, disassociate, as the vows are spoken, and if I say my own, it’s not done consciously on my part. I feel like I’m suddenly drowning, that I’m lost, spiralling into a memory so dark and horrific that I can’t claw my way out.

I can see all those masked faces, I can smell that incense, and I’m back on that stone crucifix, laid out like a literal sacrifice.

Devin takes my hand, I know it’s him who makes the cut, who drags the knife across my palm, right next to that old scar, before he does the same to his own and he clasps it so tightly, combining our blood, mixing it together. Silk is then wrapped around us both, entwining our hands.

Blake and Heseltine. Now bound for life.

There’s no escaping this, no denying it. It can’t be undone. Only death can separate us now.

Death... that word lingers in my head, it taunts me.

He murmurs something into my ear, something I’m sure he thinks is reassuring, but it does nothing to help me.

All I can see is *that* moment, so long ago. I can see me, that innocent, helpless, naïve idiot that I was. And I can see him too, my husband, my *dead* husband. I can feel his hands over me, I can feel his body *in* me, I can taste his foul breath on my tongue, and it feels like all the air is being forced from my lungs, that I’m choking again. That I’m once more caught in his grasp and all this history is repeating itself.

I hear a swish of fabric, the sound of something being placed down on top of something else and I know what it means, what it is. A pretty white silk sheet, even though I’m not a virgin anymore. I guess the symbolism remains then, the ritual must be completed, right?

There may not be a crucifix in front of me, but the expectation is the same. Any minute now I’m going to be pinned down, I’m going to be stripped, and fucked, and used, just like last time.

Only, Devin must realise that I'm falling apart, that all of this is too much. Our hands are still joined, but with he quickly gets his free and then he scoops me up and begins to carry me out.

"Wait, you need to consummate the marriage." The Priest calls from behind us.

And that sends another wave of something awful through me. I screw my face up, trying desperately not to crumble entirely and I hear what sounds like a scuffle.

Devin moves, he jerks, and it feels like his shoulder becomes a battering ram. Something falls back; a piece of furniture scrapes across the floor, and I hear the clatter of the candlesticks toppling over.

"The fuck I will." Devin growls. "I'll fuck my wife however I choose, and I won't have a damned priest have any say in it."

I don't say a word; I don't dare even breathe as he carries me out into that freezing cold night.



WE'RE BACK IN THE BEDSIT.

I can hear the sound of a shitty TV downstairs. I can hear the sounds of Mace laughing at whatever he and Malik are watching.

I don't know if they know what we did. If they realise that we're now husband and wife.

Fuck, husband and wife. Devin is my husband.

I shake my head, trying to understand why I was so messed up back in the church, and yet now, the concept doesn't faze me.

We stopped at a fast-food restaurant on the way back. A hamburger and chips was my wedding feast. The old me, the young me, would have turned her nose up at such food. But as we sat in the van, I devoured it like it was the finest thing I'd ever eaten.

My fingers fiddle with my wedding band. My wedding mark still stings a little under the bandage, but it feels like Devin only cut as deeply as he had to and no further.

I can hear him moving about, rifling through things while I'm sat here, waiting.

But as the springs dip, as I hear the soft sound of his knees shuffling along the mattress towards me, my heart skips a beat.

“Husband,” I say, practising the term, trying to get myself used to saying that word without flinching or feeling utterly repulsed.

His hand cups my cheek, he gives me what feels like a chaste kiss and then he’s pulling the woollen dress up over my head, making my hair go static in the process.

I’m not wearing a bra, not wearing any underwear and as I shiver in the cool air, he starts running his hands over my body. He circles my nipples, teases them in a way that feels too delicate, too soft for me.

I whimper, begging for more, begging for the monster I know, not this calm gentle beast.

He lets out a rumble, then moves to grab something and he fixes them to one of my nipples and then the other. I gasp as he does it. I wince, feeling whatever it is tightening and tightening until there’s a searing pain coming from both of them. Jesus it hurts.

“What, what is it?” I breathe.

“Nipple clamps.” Devin replies. “Diamond encrusted nipple clamps. Only the best for my wife.”

I raise my hands, tentatively feeling where they are. My flesh feels so sensitive already, I can feel my heart rate pulsing as my blood is trapped by the pressure.

“How do I look?” I ask. “Am I beautiful?”

His hand yanks my hair back, yanks my head back so that my neck snaps and my face stares up at him. “You look more than that, Paitlyn. You look majestic. You look like a goddess, an angel about to commit her first sin.”

Something inside me coils tighter, I rock my hips before I can stop myself and with my right hand I slap my breasts, slap them hard. The pain makes me hiss, it makes me cry out, but I can tell my husband can’t get enough of it.

“You’re a little masochist.” He comments.

“For you.” I reply. “Only you can make the pain feel this good.”

He kisses me so desperately. His hands dig into my waist and I’m grinding against his cock, silently begging for him to fuck me into oblivion.

He slips something into me, something that feels solid and yet so good. Within seconds the thing is vibrating enough that if I still had my eyes, I

know they'd be rolling back in my head with the ecstasy.

He drops his hold, shifts backs and I know he's watching me as I arch over, as I ride this thing like my life depends upon it.

"Such a filthy little whore." He comments, though the words only make me more desperate.

"I need your cock." I hiss. "I need you, my husband. I need you to consummate our marriage, to properly claim me as your wife."

He grabs my body, twists me around, and then he slides himself in past my arsehole. With the toy still buried in my pussy it's a damn tight fit but it feels so so good. His hand reaches up, supporting me by my poor breasts, as he starts driving his cock into me over and over.

It's too good. It's too...

I writhe, fucking him just as hard as he's fucking me. The thing inside me pulses more and more and it feels like I've lost all sense of reason, all ability to speak.

Yes. Yes. Yes.

I'm no longer a person. I'm no longer human. I'm exactly what he named me as; a fallen angel, a thing now lost to both sin and damnation.

His hands capture my face, he holds my head in such a way that I think he's studying me, trying to prove to himself that I really am as lost to the world as he is.

"I'm so close," I gasp and it comes out as a sob. Pleasure coils tighter and tighter and I start thrashing, wailing, screaming like a thing possessed as my climax takes me.

He doesn't give me a moment to catch my breath, a moment to even breathe before he's pulling that thing out of me and he's shoving something else into me, something hard, something more rectangle shaped, something definitely not designed to be *there*.

He grips hold of the end and starts fucking me with it, thrusting in perfect coordination with his cock.

"Oh God," I groan, slumping against him. It's too much. It's too much to take, too much pleasure, too much pain too.

I dig my hands into his bare thighs, I impale him with my nails, and he rewards me by biting my shoulder hard.

"Fuck, Devin," I scream as that extra pain only makes everything even better.

"Do you know what's in your cunt right now?" He asks.

I shake my head. In truth I don't care what it is. He could shove his entire fist in me and right now, I'd still thank him for it.

"My knife," He says. "I'm fucking you with my knife."

I gulp, wondering why it's not slicing me up, and then I realise, it has to be the handle inside me, only, that means he's holding onto the sharp end.

I shudder, imagining the scene, imagining what we both look like, me with my diamond encrusted nipples that have to be turning purple by now and Devin with his bloodied hand wrapped around the blade as he fucks me over and over with it.

A giggle escapes me. How my mother would be horrified at what her perfect, pure little daughter turned into. How the Brethren would condemn me for this. I've become everything I'm not meant to be. Everything I was carefully conditioned not to become.

I realise there's a weightlessness that comes with surrendering to the darkness, to the parts of yourself you've been taught to fear and deny. In this moment with Devin, there's no longer any room for fear. There's only acceptance. Only love, in its most primal and unrefined form.

"You said I was an angel, Devin," I whisper. "And if that's true, then you're the devil come to drag me to hell."

He growls in ascent, twisting the hilt against that delicious part of me that makes me feel otherworldly.

"Do it, Devin," I scream. "Drag me down, drag me with you. I'm your wife now, the bride of the very devil himself. Mark me with your blood, let me drink it, cover me with it, claim me with it."

I know he's as turned on by my words as I am. I can feel the way his body is moving differently, the way his breath has altered.

My devil. My actual devil of a husband.

I feel him drop the blade, feel his hand move up my body and, as that warm, wetness spreads, I know what it is, what he's smearing all over my body. He brings his fingers to my mouth and I moan, sucking them in, sucking the blood off - his blood.

He tastes like me, he tastes of copper and darkness and every fucked up thing imaginable. I don't know what I expected but I didn't expect that.

He's still driving his cock in and out of me, but the movement has slowed. I can hear the sounds of his flesh slapping into me. I can hear the squelching of my body as he penetrates me.

"Cut me." I beg. "Make me bleed too."

He doesn't need asking twice. He grabs the knife, pulling it free from my cunt and he places the hilt against my lips. I suck it in, suck all my arousal from the blade before he pulls it free.

I hiss as he drags the very tip down, between my breasts, down to the bottom of my ribcage and to almost where my bellybutton is.

It's not a deep cut but it's enough. He's quick to fling the knife and then he's laying me down, spreading my legs so wide, and his tongue is working its way up, lapping at my blood, lapping at my body, devouring every piece of me.

I move my hands to cup my breasts and I arch my back, increasing that pressure on them while also making my pussy as wide as possible for him.

He sashays his tongue down, and I know he's smearing my blood all over me. Baptising me with it.

I'm being reborn, in act that feels like both an exorcism and a communion.

Devin growls out, turning manic as he starts tongue fucking me and I can feel his hand working away, feel him jerking himself off.

I writhe and I moan, and I wait for the moment that I know is coming, the moment where he's going to cover me, and as his hot come spurts out, I open my mouth, I spread my pussy with my fingers, and I welcome him in both my holes.

He moves to lay beside me. His breath is ragged against my neck, his heart pounding in rhythm with mine.

We are one now. Both of us, joined, united, equally as fucked in the head.

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CHAPTER

NINETY



Devin

I can tell Paitlyn is on edge.

From the moment we got in the van, she's not said a word, she just keeps biting her lower lip, chewing it, like she's convinced this is all some horrible mistake but she's too afraid to say it out loud and make it come true.

"Trust me." I say, reaching across, gripping her tiny hand in mine.

She looks up at me, with those big fake doe eyes, but she doesn't say the words, she doesn't nod, or smile, or do anything to tell me I've reassured her.

When we pull off the road and down the gravel track, I swear you can see the pulse in her neck beating more and more. I can't blame her. She's spent the last few years locked in this prison, trapped in the darkness, forced to endure everything Guthrie's fucked up mind could imagine. Coming

back here must have an effect, even if she can't see this place, she can feel what it is, she can hear those same sounds, can smell that same distinctive stench of human suffering.

I tell Malik to pull over, to park the van in a discreet spot. As much as I don't want either of them to learn about this entrance, I think the benefits far outweigh the risks. I don't think this is a trap, but I'd rather have some backup if it is. Worst case scenario, I can always eliminate them if they prove to be untrustworthy.

We then make our way in silence, me and Paitlyn up front, and them behind, echoing our steps, shadowing us.

Paitlyn sticks close to me, partly because she's blind and has no idea where to go, and partly because she's petrified. Once we're up over the rocks and into the lower chamber I stop for a moment and try to reassure her, only it does little to help.

"Here," I say, pulling out my dagger and fixing it into her palm. "No one is going to touch you but if it makes you feel better then you can keep this."

She nods, before pulling a face, "What if I accidentally stab you?"

I let out a chuckle, "If that's the risk I have to take to ensure you're comfortable, then it's worth it."

She mutters back about me becoming "soft", but I see her tuck the blade into her waistband, concealing it from view.

And I also see the way her shoulders drop, the way the tension in her bones seems to ease. I doubt in all honesty the dagger will do much but if it keeps her happy then that alone is a good job.

We walk past those same bones, past my old friend, Jefferson. I don't comment, I don't point them out, I just say a silent word in my head, a silent acknowledgement, imagining that he's watching us now, watching me and my new wife as we make our way. Paitlyn doesn't realise, she carries on oblivious.

It's when we get up past the service way that the fun begins. Antonio told us to meet my brothers in the ante chamber, that Oblivion has been shut down entirely for the few hours that this meeting will last.

It's eerie to walk through this place and see no one. All the slaves must be locked away, crammed into the nether regions of this prison.

Behind me, Mace and Malik stare down the vast corridors as we pass each one. I know neither of them have been here before, they're not high

enough in the pecking order to be granted playtime.

When we get to our destination, I stare up at all those skulls for a moment. There must be thousands here, thousands of skulls, some are encrusted in gold, some are crumbling away on their plinths. In the middle column, I can see all the ones that belong to my family, to the skulls of my parents.

As a child, this place fascinated me. I used to spend hours here, climbing from alcove to alcove. I even smashed a few skulls by accident and had to switch them out with higher up ones so no one would notice and beat me for it.

Knowing this was where I'd end up always used to leave me with a sense of belonging. A sense of pride, purpose even.

But now, it's not pride I feel, it's derision. It's like my eyes are finally open. We Blakes are nothing more than puppets for the Brethren, nothing but soldiers, keeping everyone else in check.

But if my brother makes Chapter Lord... I shake my head. Even if Magnus does become our great leader, it doesn't alter some facts. It's not a hereditary title; it won't stay in our family once he dies. Yes, it will elevate our status, but ultimately, we will all still end up here, just the same.

Ahead, someone lightly coughs. It's a woman. I look over, narrowing my eyes, recognising the outline of my oldest brother's wife. She's put on weight since the last time I spied her. She looks better now, less gaunt. That brand on her chest has completely healed, it gleams almost iridescent in the light. I'll admit I'm curious about her, curious about their relationship. She's not Brethren and yet my brother still married her. I heard enough of the rumours to know how they started off, and I don't believe my brother is anywhere near capable of feelings like love.

So why did he do it? What possible prize could she offer him that made it worth such an offence?

Beside her, Magnus stands, looking his usual irritated self. My other brother is murmuring something into his ear, and I can see it's pissing him off. Clearly, Conrad has fully recovered from the shooting, but then I did shoot to maim, not to kill. Conrad has one hand placed on his wife's head, as if he's controlling where she looks, as if she's not allowed to even turn without permission.

God, what a pair they make. But then, the apple doesn't fall so far from the tree, I may be soft with Paitlyn, but I will also dominate her when it's

necessary. And if she thinks to disobey me, if she thinks to try and run... well, it's a good thing she doesn't have her sight, and such a thing can't happen. Because I'd hate to break her more if I had to.

"I see this is a proper family reunion." I say, stepping closer to them all.
"How charming."

Magnus's eyes flash, he glances at Mace and Malik, and I can see he's pissed I've brought backup. As if I'd be so stupid as to come alone.

His wife looks like all the colour drains from her face as she runs her eyes over me, I guess he neglected to mention my physical size then.

Conrad smirks, like he's here for the sheer fun of this and nothing more, and honestly, I don't blame him. If I were him, I'd happily watch the entire thing play out with a bowl of popcorn.

His young wife rocks gently beside him, one foot dangling out of the gold-plated wheelchair, dragging on the floor slightly as she moves. On her chest is a similar brand to Magnus's wife, only hers looks red raw, like she's clawed at it recently. Her belly is swollen enough to make it more than apparent she's pregnant. She makes a strange gurgling noise when she spots me, and he lifts his hand, placing it on top of hers, and the action renders her silent.

"You're late." Magnus says.

"Bullshit." I reply. If anything, we're five minutes early.

Paitlyn tenses more at the sound of his voice and I can see from the way my brother's eyes sparkle that he enjoys the effect he has on her.

My fingers flex, I'm itching to pull out my gun and put a bullet in his thick fucking skull. I know it's irrational, but I hate the fact that he of all people can get a response from her.

Paitlyn squeezes my arm, like she understands I'm so close to going on a damn rampage.

"Play nice." She whispers low enough for only me to hear.

I grunt back. She's right. The more we drag this out, the more bullshit we'll have to put up with.

I take another step closer, spotting Antonio lurking off to the side. Sneaky bastard, of course he'd be here. He wants to make sure all of this falls into place, that I do my part and settle this feud.

"You know our demands?" I say to Magnus, ignoring Conrad entirely.

Magnus fixes that gaze on me; one I know so well. One of contempt, one of derision, but also one that underneath shows that he's not fully in

control and he knows it.

“You want a truce?” Magnus snarls. “A fucking truce?”

He moves fast, grabbing hold of Paitlyn, yanking her by her hair. His wife calls out, as if she’s stupid enough to try and admonish him.

But before I can step in and beat the bastard to a pulp, he hisses, falling backwards slightly and Paitlyn slips free from his grip.

“Your fucking whore stabbed me.” He spits, touching his side, where the obvious patch of blood is now appearing on his shirt.

I yank Paitlyn back behind me as she slips that same dagger back securely into her waist. So much for playing nice then.

“She’s not a whore.” I reply. “She’s my wife. And she’s a Founder. That makes her better than you, better than all of us. Touch her again and I’ll gut you.”

“My wife is a Founder too.” Conrad states.

I glance at her, at the woman in the wheelchair. She’s got a strange goofy grin on her face now and she’s rocking the chair back and forth slightly, the way a child might when they’re getting fidgety.

“I see we both married well.” I comment, before fixing my gaze back on Magnus. “Apparently you’re the only one who disappointed in that respect.”

His wife doesn’t react at all to my insult, but he snarls. “My wife is loyal to me. My wife would die for me. Neither of you can say that for a fact.”

“Paitlyn was willing to.” I retort, pointing my finger at him as I lose my temper. “Paitlyn let herself be locked away for what she thought was my sins. And you, you knew she was innocent.”

“This isn’t helping.” Conrad sighs. “You want a truce, then we all need to let the past go.”

“Easy for you to say.” I snap. He’s been free the entire time, he’s been gallivanting about, drinking and fucking, while I was locked up and forgotten about.

“Conrad is right.” Antonio says, stepping between all of us. “None of this is helping.”

“Then what do you suggest?” I sneer.

“You have Titus, if you hand him over to us, then Magnus is willing to be amenable.” The way he says it, the way his voice goes so silky smooth. No wonder Paitlyn saw him as some sort of hero.

“Meaning?” I retort.

“Meaning, I forget your offences, I even let your whore remain with you...” My brother says.

“Call her a whore again, I fucking dare you.” I spit, taking a step forward. Magnus may think he can throw his weight around, but he has nothing on me, and he knows it.

“Magnus.” Antonio mutters almost as an admonishment.

My brother turns his head, looking at him like he’s ready to throw it all in.

“Paitlyn will never be back to Oblivion after today.” I state, looking between the pair of them, my brother, and the man who failed her, the man who was put in place to keep her safe, her fucking guardian. “She should never have been here in the first place.”

Antonio once more looks across at Magnus and I wonder then what conversations they’ve had, how their relationship might have altered now that he’s aware of my brother’s part in Paitlyn’s betrayal.

“You want a pardon?” Magnus says suddenly. “You want me to wipe the slate clean, is that it? She was hardly the model wife; she was fucking everyone in that palace.”

“Not through my own choosing.” Paitlyn cries.

Magnus grins, “No? I’m sure I saw you eagerly sucking on a cock or two at his little parties.”

I lose it then. I lose what little control I have left. My body barrels into his. His wife screams, stepping back, and I slam one fist into his smug fucking face.

Antonio, Conrad, and Magnus’s wife pull me off. Behind me, I can hear Paitlyn starting to panic because she has no idea what the fuck is going on.

I shove them off, get back to my feet and pull her into my side. “He won’t say shit like that again,” I tell her.

She shakes her head, whispering that it doesn’t matter, only, it does. No one is going to insult my wife, and especially not within my earshot.

Magnus jerks his arm, sitting on the floor, pinching the bridge of his nose as the crimson blood streams down his crisp white shirt. “Fuck me,” He gasps. “You finally learnt how to hit.”

It’s Conrad who laughs first. I join in with him and even Magnus eventually lets out a snigger.

“I can’t give you a pardon.” Magnus says once we fall to silence. “No Chapter Lord can. And besides, she’s meant to be dead.”

“So, it’s pointless?” Paitlyn whispers.

“Not necessarily.” Antonio replies before anyone else can say anything. “Let me speak to our Grand Master, let me see what we can do. Perhaps it won’t be a pardon you get, but a new identity.”

I raise an eyebrow questioningly. Is one measly Founder really worth that much to the Brethren?

“I still need Titus.” Magnus states. “And none of us can afford for me not to become Chapter Lord.”

“I’m not giving you anything till I get what I want.” I say.

“Leave it with me.” Antonio says far more confidently than I expect.

“The Ritual is in five days.” Magnus snaps.

So soon? No wonder my brother looks stressed, I’m about to ruin all his perfectly laid plans. I fight the urge to rub my hands together with glee and really rub it in.

“Trust me, Magnus, I haven’t let you down yet.” Antonio states.

“And what about us, you expect us just to trust you on this?” I half-snarl.

Antonio gives me such a withering look as he walks up to Paitlyn, as he takes her hand. “I promised you before I would keep you safe, remember?”

“And then you left me for the wolves.” Paitlyn says.

“Let me make it up to you this time. Let me fix this.” He sounds almost pleading. I look between them and once more, that jealousy rages.

“If you let her down this time, I’ll ensure you’ll live to regret it.” I say.

He raises his brown eyes to look at me but whatever he wants to say, he clearly thinks better of it. Smart man, he’s finally learning then.

“Five days.” He says as he walks away. “Bring Titus to the Cathedral in five days’ time, and I’ll do what is necessary on my end.”

CHAPTER

NINETY-ONE



Pailtyn

I don't say a word for the entire drive home. My hands are flexing, itching, I feel like I'm one of those clockwork dolls that's been wound up so tightly, but someone is holding my legs, preventing me from going off.

And I need to. I need to so desperately.

I can hear Mace and Malik chattering away in lowered voices, talking about *them*, Conrad and Magnus's wives. I wish I could see what they look like, I wish I could see how they were with their husbands. I don't even know why it matters, but somehow it does.

When we come to a stop, the two guards get out and for a moment we sit there in silence, just me and Devin, waiting.

I know they're doing a sweep, checking the place is clear, checking that no one is there, waiting for us. God knows what we'd do if this was an

ambush, it'd certainly be a smart time to do it.

I guess we get the all-clear because Devin gets out, walking around to open my door as if he's the perfect gentleman. Perfect monster more like. I take his hand, and my own is still shaking.

He doesn't comment as he leads me inside but as the doors shut, as the outside is finally locked out, I swear something inside me explodes. I can't keep it in. I can't keep quiet. And I lack the finesse, the skills to do it any other way.

"I want one too." I blurt out.

I hear the way he stops and turns like he has no idea what I'm talking about, and in truth, I can't exactly blame him.

"Want what?" He asks.

"A brand, a mark. That's what they said, the guards, that both your brother's wives have them for everyone to see. Your family crest, burnt into their skin. I want one too. I want everyone to look at me and know who I belong to."

I hear the sharp breath he draws in. "No." He says, before turning on his heel and walking on like this entire conversation is done with that one syllable.

What the fuck? I storm after him, reaching out to grab at where I think his arm is, and I wrench him around as best I can, as best any person can when they're grappling a giant while they're also blind.

"Devin," I begin.

He grunts out, pushing me off but I refuse to let him dismiss this so easily.

"Devin, please..."

"You have no idea what you're asking for." He says, like I'm still some silly little girl. Some naïve fool.

"That's not true." I state. "I want to show the world, I want to show everyone who I am now. I want this, and I know on some level, you want it too."

He lets out a huff so deep, I know I've hit a nerve.

"Devin..."

His hand closes around my face, around my cheeks, pinching them together so my lips pout out. "You've had enough pain." He says, cutting across me. "Enough hurt to last a lifetime, why would you ask for more, why would you want more?"

My lips curl at such a silly question, and in truth, I know now that I've won, that I'm getting what I want.

"Because," I say, placing my own shaky hand on his chest, feeling the way his heart is beating, the way it's pounding. "I like the pain when you're the one inflicting it on me."

Yeah, that does it. That seals it.

I know then that my monster will give me what I want. What I need.

His hand scoops under my legs so suddenly I flail back, crying out. He scoops me up, tosses me over his shoulder and carries me through like an actual neanderthal.



I'M UNCELEBRATORIOUSLY DUMPED ON THE BED AND MY BODY BOUNCES SO much as it hits the mattress.

Devin clatters about, grabbing things and, as I hear all the noise, I realise that he's doing it now. Right fucking now.

For a second, I feel a flash of regret. I know it's going to hurt like hell, that for days after I'm going to be in so much pain.

But this will also be a win. It will bind me more to him, to my husband. While our vows said for life, if I don't get a pardon, the reality is, they mean fuck all. I'm a Founder, my marriage has to be sanctified – that can't happen if I'm not pardoned.

Besides, I know Devin says he loves me, but I also know he's not one hundred percent convinced of my feelings.

Doing this will convince him. Doing this will ensure he really is bound to me.

Do I love him? Yes, on some fucked up level, I think do. Despite what he's done, despite everything. I love him because he's a monster, because he will protect me, because he will *kill* for me.

And what greater act can any man do for another?

I hear the sound of something whooshing and I realise it's a flame. Does he have a little gas camp fire thing or is it a blowtorch that he's using? I decide that in this instance, it's better not to know.

"Lie on the bed." He says.

Butterflies erupt in my belly as I do it. I'm not sure how I imagined this playing out but in my mind, this wouldn't be done here. It feels too messy, too dangerous to do in a bedroom, what if the sheets catch fire? Where did he even get the brand from? Do these damned Blake's just carry them around with them?

I feel the peppering of his lips on my lower leg, I feel the way his fingers rumble with my dress to unbutton it and get it off.

I'm shaking from both nerves and excitement. I don't know where the brand is, I don't know why he's kissing me right now when he should be maiming me, but the distraction is nice, the distraction is working.

He pulls my leg up and out, and then his hot breath hits my core and all I can think about, all that consumes me, is his mouth, his tongue, him. I can't think, can't move, can't do anything but simply lay here and take each incredible moment he gives me.

I lock my legs around his head, I latch my body onto him, demanding more, more, more.

He growls out, pinning me down and I realise how all his brute strength now turns me on, when before, so long ago, it used to utterly terrify me.

"My monster." I gasp. "All mine."

Whatever Devin thinks, I don't know. He's too busy eating me out like this one act might be his last, that he'll never get another taste, never be granted another feast quite as decadent as the one I'm offering.

He slides his fingers inside me, teasing that part that makes me see stars and within seconds I come so hard I swear the entire room spins on its axis. I know I'm screaming, flailing, becoming a feral beast, that's entirely lost to lust.

I arch my back, giving in entirely to it and just as I do I feel his body twist, his body move.

I register it a millisecond before it happens; the heat, the pain, the metal brand being pushed into my chest.

I scream and entirely different scream as he presses it into me.

It hurts. It hurts so fucking much.

Oh, I knew it would. I knew it would be agony and yet, as the brand is removed, the pain continues, the searing, white-hot agonising pain persists.

My body slumps, I shake uncontrollably as adrenaline and shock take over in equal measure.

Devin gets up, no doubt puts the thing safely out of the way, and then he's back, holding me, soothing me, putting something onto the wound while telling me what a good girl I am now, how I took it so well, how he's so proud of me.

I lay there, feeling half-dazed, feeling that awful pain on my chest that hurts so much I think I might pass out.

I take low, laboured breaths but it feels too much, all of this is too much.

"Devin," I whisper.

"Yeah?" He says back.

"I hope I'm worth it now." Somehow I had to say those words, had to get that thought out. He tenses like I've pissed him off and his fingers dig into my arms just a little.

"You were always worth it, Paitlyn. That's the point."

I open my mouth to reply but his lips are claiming mine, and, as he kisses me, I let myself go, let myself slip under, knowing tomorrow, he'll take care of me, he'll protect me, and if God is kind, then in a few days, we'll get everything we ever wanted. Everything I know we both deserve.

CHAPTER

NINETY-TWO



Devin

ye're barely out of the van when Titus is manhandled away from us. Malik and Mace try to step in, but I'm quick to stop them. There's little point in wasting our energy considering this was the deal.

Conrad mutters his thanks before he clicks his fingers to have the man dragged away.

I don't give two fucks what becomes of him. I don't really care about anything beyond ensuring I get my end of the bargain.

Paitlyn sticks to my side and Antonio gestures for us to follow him in through a side entrance. I guess we're not good enough to be walking in the main doors, wouldn't want to create any unnecessary drama, now would

we? We're both wearing robes, we both have masks on to hide our faces but apparently Antonio doesn't want to take any risks.

I can hear the crowd, I can feel the excitement as they chatter away, waiting for the fun to begin. For most of them, this is a once in a lifetime's moment, at least, it's meant to be. Three Chapter Lords in less than a decade is definitely testing the limits of how much the Brethren are willing to endure.

The sea of masked faces is a blur as we're ushered into a quiet corridor and to a winding stone staircase.

"Where the fuck are we going?" I ask, as my skin prickles, and my head starts to whisper that this is a neat little trick to play, right when they've gotten what they need.

Antonio pauses, looking for the first time like he's a little flustered. "He wants a word."

"Who?" I ask, only Paitlyn stills, gasping a little.

"He, he's here?" She whispers, clearly understanding something I don't. She's holding her mask up in front of her face instead of with her mouth, which allows her to speak.

"He is." Antonio confirms, beckoning us to walk on.

As we get to the very top, I can see we're in the Gallery. Far below us, that sea of masks looks almost like a mirage, a thing of fantasy. I can see the golden altar at the very top of the nave, I can see all of the Senate, in their rich, red robes.

But my attention switches to the solitary figure standing, staring down, a few metres from where we are.

The stained-glass light filters through, creating almost a halo around his head. He doesn't even turn as he hears us, he just continues to stare as if he finds all of this is amusing.

Instinctively, I move my hand to grasp my pistol. I don't know who this fucker is but I'm not taking any chances.

"Relax, Devin," he says, his voice carrying the unmistakable lilt of an American accent. "I'm not here to harm you."

I bristle at his casual familiarity, but there's something in his tone that stays my hand. I pull my mask off, wanting to see him fully, wanting the use of my peripheries too, if he thinks to try anything.

He continues, almost to himself, "look at them down there, doing exactly as they're told. So obedient, like perfect little ants in their colony,

all following orders without question.”

He pauses, then adds, “You, on the other hand, aren’t so obedient, are you? It’s remarkable, really, that you’re still alive, considering all the chaos you’ve stirred.”

My anger flares, and I’m about to tell this stranger where he can shove his observations when it hits me who he is.

He chooses that exact moment to turn, to grace us with his face and I swear his eyes sparkle with amusement.

“Grand Master.” I almost spit the name.

His nostrils flare, he looks at me, then looks at Paitlyn, and as he does, his features soften. She’s dropped her mask too. She’s got it in her hand, like it’s a deadweight and she lets, it drop to the floor with a clang as if she’s awestruck.

He has jet black hair, he must be mid-forties, more my brother Magnus’s age, and he seems to have all the same arrogance, the same entitlement.

Beside me, Paitlyn seems to be aware of his attention and she curls her hands into fists. “You...” She begins, only he cuts across her.

“You’ve changed, grown, although that’s not surprising. The last time we met you were a child.”

“I,” she stammers, frowning. “How have we met? When?”

He chuckles, taking a small, measured step forward. “Your father brought you to me, slipped you away from your mother’s ever watchful gaze.”

She gulps, paling more, trembling too. “Who am I to you?”

The question catches me off guard, I narrow my eyes, looking between them, trying to figure out what the fuck this is.

“Your father was my uncle,” the Grand Master replies, “Our bloodline is the original founding bloodline of this order. It’s why your mother tried to use you, why your uncle did too.”

Paitlyn shakes her head, frowning even more. “I, I don’t believe it,” she whispers.

“You should do. And you should be grateful for it, it’s what will save you now, save your husband too.” He replies, looking across at me.

“I don’t need your favour.” I snarl back. I won’t be tied to him now. I’ll be damned if I owe him anything.

He laughs loud enough that it echoes around us, though it quickly gets lost in the noise of the congregation below.

“So prideful, just like all the Blakes. It was a reason I chose your brother as Chapter Lord, why I supported his interests.”

“So what do you want?” I reply.

He pauses, looking back at Paitlyn. “You asked for things, things only I can give. I’m willing to provide, but I want something in exchange.”

“And what is that?” I don’t know if it’s me or her who asks it.

The Grand Master clicks his neck, like he’s got a crick in it, and then he fixes his gaze back on me.

“Your time here is over, Devin. Your time in England is done. You married a ghost, a woman who was declared dead and buried. That cannot be undone, cannot be rectified...”

“Meaning what, exactly?” I snarl, losing my temper. Did he not just say that her bloodline is what spares me? Did he not just all but promise her a pardon? What the fuck is he going on about now?

He smiles. “Impatient too, I see.” He mutters before glancing once more at the people far below us. “I will give you what you ask, but not in the manner you ask for it. Both of you will relocate, you will leave this miserable country, and you will move to America.”

“What?” Paitlyn gasps.

The Grand Master takes a step forward, reaching for her hand and though every cell in my body screams at me to stop it, she must sense it, must sense the movement or something because she’s reaching out, letting his fingers glide over hers.

“You will be safe there. You will have a new identity, a new life.”

“And Devin?” She says quietly. “What will he do? He’s a Reaper...”

“He will work for me.” The Grand Master states. “A man such as him, a man with those talents...”

“Will you not ask me, instead of simply telling my wife?” I snarl.

He smirks. “Seeing as it’s your wife who gets to make the decision, she is the only one to ask.”

“What decision?” She breathes.

He draws himself up, glancing at me for what feels like the umpteenth time. “You may be married to him, but it does not have to be forever. It can be undone. You do not have to stay with him if you would rather be free.”

I don't think, I don't even register I'm doing it, but I take a step forward and the bastard pulls his gun, a Desert Eagle no less, pointing it right at my face.

"Say the word, Paitlyn, say what you want, and you shall have it."

Her lip trembles, she looks like she's suddenly torn and though hours ago I was convinced this woman was all mine, now we're standing on this precipice, I'm not so sure.

"He is a monster." Paitlyn says so fiercely. "But he is mine. My monster."

Relief, joy, I don't know what I feel as those words pass her pretty lips. I know she chose me before, I know she's chosen me a few times now, but all of those have been more out of necessity, more because she had no other good options.

Today, she proved this marriage is more than that. That she is as committed as I am.

The Grand Master almost looks relieved at her words. He inclines his head. "As you wish. Antonio will see to the details."

He releases her hand, and she steps back, instinctively finding where I'm stood. Her hand curls around the muscle of my arm, and she clings to me in a way that doesn't feel desperate, it feels dominant.

Below us, the sound of something, some haunting tune picks up. We can see the priests all starting to roll out, looking more like they're floating on air than actually using their feet.

"Stay," The Grand Master says, as he retreats back to the shadows. "Watch the ritual from above. It's not often one gets to witness the elevation of a Chapter Lord from such a vantage point."

CHAPTER

NINETY-THREE



Devin

As I hear him walking down the staircase, it feels like there is a million questions whirling around in my head.

We got our pardon.

We're leaving England.

And though we're not done with the Brethren, I'm at least done with this particular Chapter of it. And more importantly, done with my brothers too.

I can feel Paitlyn beside me, I can feel her excitement. She's clearly happy to be finally leaving and though I have some concerns around the details, I don't voice them right now.

Below, I can see Magnus appearing. He has a crown of thorns on his head and his great purple robe cascades behind him, making him look like he's some sort of emperor. He's wearing nothing underneath, he's

completely starkers, and his toned body looks more muscular than I remember. Maybe the fucker's been working out this entire time, building himself up and that's half the reason he's so stressed. I wouldn't put it past him, he's certainly vain enough.

The Senate start chanting louder, all of them holding a black candle that flickers in the limited light, reflecting off all of those golden masks.

I squeeze Paitlyn's hand, murmuring each new detail. She may not be able to watch it with her own eyes, but I know she wants to know what's going on. Afterall, it's not every day that we get a new Chapter Lord.

When Conrad appears, he too is wearing a nice thick robe, only his is black, like the ones me and Paitlyn are wearing. In his hand is a heavy, gold chain and he keeps the links taunt, pulling it enough that the naked man on the other end stumbles and falls.

Titus has a thick, heavy collar around his neck, the kind you see in Oblivion. Only, this one is jewel encrusted, and it sparkles, catching the light as he jerks and twists.

He's laid out on that same crucifix that Paitlyn was fucked on, so many years ago. He fights more as his limbs are tied down and the Senate moves to surround him.

Magnus stands at his feet, staring at his body.

Titus is the final sacrifice in this ritual. But he will not be the first.

A softer, lighter chant carries to where we're stood. We see the three women, as they walk out, as they dance, as they laugh like this is the greatest moment of their lives.

Each of them is wearing a sheer, silver fabric that gives glimpses of their breasts and bodies as they dance. One woman is so young she reminds me of Paitlyn when I first saw her, she's meant to represent the virgin in this performance. The second is a woman in her forties. Her body still looks in good shape, but you can see she's had children, that she's grown soft. She represents the mother. The third woman has long flowing grey hair, her body is wrinkled, and her back is slightly arched. She plays the crone, the last part of womanhood before death.

If Magnus were adhering to the rules, then his precious wife would be one of them. Whether willing or not, she'd be stood there, ready to make her sacrifice while all these eager eyes watched on.

I glance around, spotting her right at the back, almost obscured by the shadows. She's wearing a white dress, a silk, slinky thing, and in her hands

are three golden daggers all neatly piled up.

My lips curl as I realise the part she'll play, the way Magnus has twisted this ritual to ensure no one can condemn her anymore. He's turned her into a saint. He's made her beyond reproach.

She steps forward, moving more gracefully than I could imagine. Her features reveal nothing about the thoughts that must be spinning in that head. She looks calm, resolute, as if she was born to play this role, even though everyone here knows she wasn't.

Magnus turns his head, watching her approach with an obvious approval. She drops to her knees before him, holding up the daggers and he quickly takes them from her hands.

She shifts around, out of the way, but keeps herself in a position of subjugation with her back arched over in a bowing position.

The three dancing women spin around Magnus once, twice, three times before they come to a stop, facing him. One by one they drop to their knees with their hands held up high above their heads.

“Chapter Lord.” They call, and their voices sound breathless.

Magnus places a dagger in each of their hands. I narrow my eyes, trying to see if they're trembling at all, if there's any show of fear in their bodies. It's an honour to be where they are, one of the greatest honours a Brethren Lady can ever wish for. I know their families will be rewarded with more than just gold. And yet, I'm almost certain these women are drugged up to their eyeballs. They look too happy to be here, too happy to die.

The first woman, the youngest, lowers her dagger, lining it up with her cunt and she impales herself on it quickly, hissing as the blood immediately spurts out.

“Blood of the first, pure as dawn, open the gate, let the veil be gone.”
The Senate chant in unison.

She pulls the dagger out, then waits, clearly struggling now, as the next woman follows.

“Blood of the womb, river of years, feed the earth with love and tears.”
The Senate chant.

As the final woman, the crone, raises her dagger, you can see her hesitate for the tiniest of moments before she draws in a deep breath, and she plunges the dagger in between her thighs.

“Blood of the last, black as night, seal the oath in shadow's sight.” The Senate say.

Around the entire crowd is silent, as if they're collectively holding their breath.

Magnus takes a step closer to the now heavily bleeding women.

"A woman sacrificed herself to bring our saviour into this world." Magnus says. "These women here have sacrificed themselves as an offering to me as your new Chapter Lord."

The women bow their heads, and the movement is so quick you almost miss it. A flash of gold, a flash of candlelight on those bright red, saturated blades.

In one quick motion they force the blades into their chests, burying them right up to the hilt.

Magnus drops to his knees, cradling each as they topple over, as they fall into a heap of pretty silk and rapidly flowing blood.

Any normal man would be squeamish at the sight, but we're not normal, we never have been.

Magnus stays where he is, kneeling in their blood, as they draw their last ragged, pained breaths.

When he gets to his feet, he spreads his hands wide, as the crowd join in with the chanting. The sound of it makes my hair stand on end, sends goosebumps up my arms. It's moments like this when I realise the might of the Brethren, the power that our leaders have, all of it.

Titus starts to struggle more and as Magnus is given one last dagger, we all know why.

My brother kisses the blade, murmuring words that none of us are meant to hear. Words precious to this sacred ritual.

He straddles Titus's body, with his legs either side of the man's waist. Titus tries to buck him off and I wonder then why they didn't drug him too. He'd be far more compliant, far easier to handle.

But that's it, isn't it? Magnus doesn't want it easy. He's like me, he relishes the fight. He enjoys proving his superiority, and what better way to do it, than right here, in the Cathedral, with all of us watching on.

Magnus plunges the blade into Titus's chest. Titus cries out, his feet kicking against the golden chains.

Bit by bit, Magnus starts to carve through the flesh, carve through the bone. Bits of it flicker off, bits of body mass, slices of peeled skin and muscle. Magnus seems to have some sort of superhuman strength as he

tosses the blade and claws at the gaping wound he's made with his bare hands.

He pulls out Titus's still beating heart. It's so red, it's dripping with blood. Unfortunately for the man, he's still alive. He stares at it, gasping his last few breaths.

Magnus gives him a sickening grin before he lowers his face and tears a huge chunk out of it with his teeth.

"Fuck," I growl, even though I knew it was coming. Most Chapter Lords take a chaste bite out of their rivals, but not Magnus. No, he's all about the theatrics. About making a statement.

I've seen enough horror in Oblivion, I've seen almost every fucked-up thing imaginable and yet, this moment here, it feels like it's seared into my eyeballs, seared into my brain.

The Senate lift their arms, raising them to the high heavens, as they declare Magnus is now our Chapter Lord.

But the minute they do, the minute those church bells start ringing out, it feels like all hell erupts.

Bullets start ricocheting off the stone walls, people scream as they duck for cover, the crowd beneath up becomes a mass of jumbling bodies, trying to get out.

I toss my mask and grab Paitlyn, throwing her over my shoulder. I know I should fight, I know I should help my brothers and yet, my main concern is her. I need to get her to safety, need to ensure she's protected before I can do anything else.

I rush down the stairwell. Damned medieval thing is so old my feet stumble on the stupidly narrow triangle stone steps.

I barely get halfway when I collide with something.

I blink, seeing the barrel, seeing who is stood there, holding it, pointing it right at me.

"Give me, my daughter." She hisses. "Give me. Paitlyn."

CHAPTER

NINETY-FOUR



Pailtyn

My mother's words ring out in my head.

Devin shifts, as if he wants to try to outrun her, only, I'm certain there's nowhere for us to go.

"Put me down." I whisper.

He does it reluctantly, and I squeeze his hand, trying to give him a silent message that I've got this, even though I'm not so certain I have.

I know she has a gun. She has to. It's the only reason Devin hasn't launched himself at her already.

I turn to face her, and she grabs hold of my arm, wrenching it quickly so I lurch forward.

Devin is quick to move, to grab my other arm and I feel like I'm in some sort of tug-of-war with me as the rope.

"I swear to god," My mother hisses over my head.

“You really think a bullet would stop me?” Devin laughs back.

I can tell it unnerves her. He must be three times her size. Did she really think that waving around some pistol would be enough to make him backoff?

“We can talk about this.” I say, trying to take control. I’m certain if it escalates, she will pull the trigger and while Devin is many things, he is not bulletproof.

Her laugh is a bitter thing, devoid of the warmth I remember from my childhood. “It’s too late for talking, Paitlyn. Besides, you never wanted to listen before.”

Rage and hurt twist inside me, like a tempest I suddenly can no longer contain. “You’re wrong,” I spit out, trying to yank my arm back, only it just makes me stumble and I nearly fall over, down these stupid stairs. “I listened. I listened to every twisted word you said, every lie you whispered. You pretended to help me, but you were just like Pearce. You saw my bloodline as a thing to use, a thing to profit from.”

“That’s a lie.” She snaps back. “I always protected you; I always had your best interests at heart. And I never lied to you, even when I knew I should have done, that it would have been safer for you...”

“You knew who my father was.” I scream back. “You knew his real identity. You kept that from me, you kept it all from me. You ensured I was ignorant because it made me easier to control.”

She stills, dropping her hold just a little and I swear I can hear the sound of her blackened heart thumping in her chest, the sound of those clogs turning in her head too.

“Who told you?” She says.

“Does it matter?” I retort. “I heard you and Pearce talking before the wedding. It all makes sense now. What you said, what you were planning. You wanted to use my bloodline, to control Gunther, to take over this whole Chapter through me and separate from the rest of the Brethren.”

She doesn’t say anything and not for the first time, I wish I had my sight back. I wish I could see her face, see the expression on it as she realises I know everything now.

“You’re not my mother.” I hiss. “Nothing you’ve done for me is what a real mother would do for their child.”

Her hand strikes before I can react, the slap echoing in the silence that follows. “Shut up, Paitlyn.” She screams. “Just shut up.”

Behind me, Devin explodes.

I hear the gun go off, I duck with no clue as to where the barrel is even pointing at, and I end up falling down a stair and have to dig my hands into the stone wall to keep myself from tumbling further.

I can hear my mother's screams. I can hear the sound of someone landing punches.

Is he hitting her? Beating her? God, I want to see this, to see her pay.

“That’s enough.”

Antonio’s voice echoes up the stairwell. He must be a few more steps down. How Devin reacts, I don’t know, but I hear the scramble of my mother’s shoes as she tries to get to her feet.

Strong arms wrap around me, the smell of something cold, of oud and tobacco fills my nose and I know it’s Devin how has me. That I’m safe.

“What’s happening?” I murmur.

“Just wait.” Devin says quietly back.

I hear my mother scream, I hear other people scream, and then I hear the sound of a gun going off.

I huddle into Devin more as my mother’s voice rings out. “Fuck you, Antonio, fuck you.”

Antonio laughs back, “Wouldn’t if you were the last wretched whore in Oblivion.” He spits.

“What’s going on?” I repeat. Does my mother still have that gun, are we still in danger?

All I can hear is the sound of people somewhere screaming, of what feels like a battle playing out.

“She’s disarmed. Antonio has her.” Devin says almost disappointingly.

“So, she’s going to Oblivion?” I reply. God, what a good punishment that would be. What a nice piece of divine justice.

“Not Oblivion.” Antonio says. “This bitch is going somewhere far worse.”

Worse? Where on earth is worse than Oblivion? I stammer, trying to argue and Devin places a finger over my mouth. What the fuck is going on here?

I hear my mother being dragged away. I hear the sounds of something breaking, something shattering down in the belly of the building. Smoke reaches my nose, and I realise the Cathedral must be on fire.

“Devin?” I gasp.

“It’s alright.” He growls back. “We’re getting out of here.”

“What about your brothers? What about the ritual?” I know Magnus was declared Chapter Lord, but the Senate didn’t officially anoint him. Does it still count?

“He’s a big boy. He can look after himself.” Devin mutters before carrying me safely out.

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CHAPTER

NINETY-FIVE



Devin

I watched as the scene played out before me. As my brothers and their men fought what must have been only a handful of men. Did they think their bombs would be enough? Did they think that enough of the Brethren would be against my family and that they'd what, rise up, take up arms? As if they've not been taught the meaning of obedience from the moment they drew breath.

I saw Magnus grappling with one man after another, I saw Conrad, gutting someone with one of the ceremonial blades, and while a voice told me that I should be down there, that I should be alongside them, protecting the great Blake name, I knew Paitlyn was in more danger than either of them were.

It's been hours since the chaos. Hours of silence. Of waiting.

And now my brother has invited us here, to no doubt celebrate his ascension and his victory.

I glance around, noting how the décor has changed. How it feels even more oppressive now. Perhaps that's my brother's doing, or perhaps it's because I can no longer deny what we are, what all three of us are.

My father was so concerned that we might turn out to be like her, like our mother, and while there are times when I know her madness is in me, I also know that the darkness, the demons, all of that is his doing, not hers.

Conrad greets us in the entrance hall. He leads us through, barely glancing at Paitlyn.

The rest of the family are sat at the grand dining table. Silver cutlery gleams under those crystal chandeliers.

Liliana looks at me, then quickly looks away. She's out of her white satin now. She's wearing a turquoise dress that twists around her neck like a knot, hiding the brand my brother burnt into her skin. She's sat to the right of Magnus, who sits at the very head.

Conrad takes his place beside his own wife, and we quickly sit opposite them.

Magnus and I engage in a silent staring contest, our eyes locked in a battle of wills that neither of us want to break. So much for a truce then.

Across the room, Titus's wife and daughter are in giant gilded cages. Trapped like songbirds, if you will. They watch us, watch me in particular, with wide, fearful eyes.

The sound of footsteps echoes through the austere room as Antonio enters with the Grand Master by his side. The Grand Master extends his hand to Magnus, a cold smile playing on his lips as he declares, "It's all done."

Magnus nods back, acting the part of Chapter Lord as if he'd been one his entire life.

"Everything is in place for the cull." The Grand Master declares in a voice low enough to make me believe we are not all meant to hear those words.

Antonio leans in, murmuring something in the Grand Master's ear. His gaze flickers across the room to where Paitlyn is sat before settling on me. The Grand Master's eyes narrow, his expression is almost certainly a veiled threat. But he doesn't say anything further, he just turns to leave, his footsteps echoing through the room as he exits.

Antonio takes a set at the other end, and I see how his eyes flicker towards those cages, towards Grace in particular. There's a softness there that seems out of place for this room of cold calculation. Maybe I've found his weakness, maybe this woman is it. My lips pull into a smirk. He notices it immediately but doesn't react beyond pouring out some wine.

"What did he mean by a cull?" Paitlyn says, her voice barely above a whisper.

Magnus leans back in his chair, his eyes never leaving mine. "Our dear Grand Master has given me a list of names. Brethren identified as Esau."

"And?" Conrad says, like it's not fucking obvious.

"The Grand Master has ordered that everyone associated with these people, all their families, all of them will be eliminated."

A gasp echoes beside me. Paitlyn's face pales, her expression one of shock and fear. She leans into me, her voice barely a whisper, "Devin, my mother and uncle, they're almost certainly Esau."

Before I can speak, Antonio does.

"It doesn't include you, Paitlyn. You've been pardoned of everything."

Magnus shakes his head, clearly looking pissed about that, "Your wife is excused." He says, half-spitting the word 'wife' as if he wants to replace it with the word 'whore'. "As are you. Looks like you've done something right for the first time in your entire life."

I stiffen, as that old resentment flares up. But Paitlyn's hand squeezes mine, her touch grounding me, her voice a soft plea, "Let it go."

I grit my teeth, glaring back, daring my brother to say *that* word again.

"Come now," Conrad says quickly. "Is this not meant to be a celebration? Magnus is Chapter Lord. Our family is the most powerful family in the country."

Magnus inclines his head, like he doesn't need the commendations, like all of this was a walk in the park.

The servants begin to file in, their silver platters gleaming under the chandelier light. They set down dishes laden with food, and it's clear it's a feast fit for a king.

Magnus raises his glass, "a celebration feast." he declares, "The Blakes have risen higher than any can hope to reach now."

I frown, hearing the words, not understanding the meaning. What the fuck does that mean?

Beside me, Paitlyn lightly pats at the tablecloth, feeling for where her cutlery is. I can tell she's starving. The ritual was hours ago, and we haven't had anything since breakfast and she barely managed a few mouthfuls then. I take her hand, guiding it to the fork, then pierce a piece of potato small enough for her to manage.

Magnus watches, clearly amused and I'm itching to tell him where to fucking stick it.

Only, he turns his gaze, looking from Paitlyn to Conrad's wife, sizing her up the way a vulture does a rotting corpse.

"How is Brynn's pregnancy progressing?" he asks.

Conrad preens like this is his greatest achievement in life. "It's doing well. The last scan was good."

Magnus grunts, reaching out for his wife's hand. His grip is firm, possessive.

"Good." He replies. "We need a strong heir, a Blake boy. There is a new order rising. The Brethren is changing. The Esau tried to fuck everything, but now, we should be grateful to them. Our Grand Master has decided that no new Chapter Lords will be chosen moving forward. They too will run through bloodlines."

The entire room falls silent as the weight of his words settles over us.

Fuck me. That's what he meant, what he's been after this entire time. How long has he known? How long has Magnus been aware of this change?

I glance at Paitlyn and her expression is far less concerned than I imagined it to be.

"Good." She whispers.

"So, what?" Conrad says, looking around the room. "You're the last? What will happen when you're old and dead then, who will be in charge then?"

Fuck me, the man is dense. I shake my head, catching Magnus's wife's eye and I know she's not stupid. I know she understands. I'm curious as to why Magnus hasn't bred her. Surely, he'd prefer an heir from his own direct line?

"Not the last." Antonio says, as if he's grown used to my brother's lack of understanding. "Your child, if it is born a boy, will be the next Chapter Lord."

Conrad blinks, staring between Antonio and Magnus as if this is some sort of joke. "My child?" He repeats. "My son?"

“If you have one.” I murmur. There’s every possibility that baby in his wife’s belly is a girl. What will Magnus do then? And what will he say if my wife is the one to produce a boy first?

Magnus looks down that long table at me and I can tell he has the same thoughts. I reach over, squeezing my wife’s hand, taunting my brother that little bit more.

He glares back, taking a deep sip of his impeccable wine.

It’s a good thing we’re moving to America. A good thing we will be far from his reach. If my wife gets pregnant, I’ll need to watch her far more than I already do. She might be related to the Grand Master but I know even that won’t be enough. I’ll need to ensure Magnus doesn’t choose to fix the situation to his advantage.

As soon as it’s possible to do so, as soon as the first plates are cleared, I’m up, and I’m pulling Paitlyn to her feet.

“Leaving so soon, brother?” Magnus says, as his wife side-eyes him.

“We have things to do. Things to pack.” I reply, “You might not have heard, brother,” I say in the same tone he uses, “...but we’re leaving these shores.”

He sinks back in his chair. “I heard.” He says. “And I wish you well over there. Both you and your wife.” It’s the first time he’s said it without disdain. He glances at her, running his eyes over her and then his own wife squeezes his hand like she’s had some sort of influence in this.

“Goodbye Magnus.” I say as I reach him. “I know you’ll make an excellent Chapter Lord, you were born to play such a part.”

He grins at me then, that sinister one he gets when he’s about to do something truly horrific. “Oh I will be.” He replies. “We are Blakes were destined for it. And you’ll be back before you know it. Brynn’s baby will be born in the Cathedral, for everyone to witness. We’ll need to put on a full family show for it.”

Of course we will. He wouldn’t want to miss an opportunity to wave his metaphorical dick around.

I nod back, leading Paitlyn out, feeling as the air physically changes, feeling as I can actually breathe again.

CHAPTER

NINETY-SIX



*Pailtyn
Two Months Later*

I can smell the salt of the ocean. I can feel the spray as the wind carries it up over the rocks and peppers my skin.

This place feels like a dream. A figment of my imagination almost. It feels so far from the life I've lived up until now.

We moved here not long after Magnus started the cull. Our house is big, luxurious, but it also lacks the stuffiness of all those old blue-blooded monstrosities I knew so well. Devin got an interior designer to make sure everything was minimalist and laid out in a way that was as accessible as possible for me.

I've never felt so at peace. So at home.

The pathway down to the cliffs is a gravel one. It's easy for me to walk, easy for me to know where I am, and most days I stand here,

metaphorically staring out, revelling in the fact that no one is watching me, no one is hunting me.

I'm free. Finally, I'm fucking free.

Devin works for our Grand Master now. I don't ask what he does. In truth, I don't want to know. Some weeks he comes home stinking of blood and dirt and God knows what else, and some weeks, he doesn't come home at all, though he always lets me know when that's the case. I know this is part of what grants us our safety, what provides our new path in the Brethren, so I do better than to complain.

Besides, I now have Calix, my Spanish mastiff. He's by my side like an almost permanent feature, giving me company but providing me with protection. He's big enough that he comes up past my waist and his fur is so ridiculously soft it's hard not to be constantly stroking him.

I lower my hand, scrunching his ears and he leans into me, playing the big softy. But we both know what he's here for. He's trained as a guard dog. And the fact that he's capable of ripping out a man's throat with very little effort definitely gives me comfort when I'm alone. It's like having a mini Devin, a mini monster, our very own hell-hound, if you will.

Not long after we arrived here, Devin sought out a doctor to 'fix me'. It took me a good while to recover but now, I'm so much better for it. He couldn't reverse what Guthrie had done to me, but he could repair some of the damage and I at least have feeling now.

Antonio still has my mother. My uncle, Pearce, is still MIA and I know there are enough men hunting him to ensure he'll be looking over his shoulder for the rest of his life.

Devin has turned the perimeter of this place into a fortress. No one gets in or out without his knowledge.

I'm safe here. I know my uncle won't come for me, but it still scares me to think about the fact that he is out there. He has nothing to lose now, surely, that makes him even more dangerous than ever?

I shudder, wrapping the shawl around my body at the thought. It's getting late, the heat of the sun is ebbing away, and I turn, slowly making my way back up. Calix walks silently beside me like he's on patrol, his footsteps barely audible as he moves his massive weight.

As I get halfway, I hear the crunch of gravel telling me someone else is here. I pause, listening, wondering if it's one of the few servants we have. Only, I know that stride. I know that arrogant swagger.

“Devin,” I breathe while Calix wags his tail in excitement.

His arms grab me before I can say anything more. His tongue delves into my mouth and he’s devouring me like he needs to taste my very soul.

He’s been gone a few days this time, not long, and yet, it feels like forever.

As I break away, I can smell something, something that makes me nose wrinkle, that makes me pause. But before I can say anything he’s pulling me down and he manhandles me until I’m on top of him, until I’m straddling his face.

“Devin,” I gasp as he pulls my underwear aside and starts tongue up and along me.

I throw my head back, grinding against him, feeling as brings me closer and closer to climax.

My knees dig into the gravel, my thighs scream in protest as I ride his face like the filthy whore I am.

He groans, sliding his hand around under my thigh before he slips a long finger into my arsehole.

“Oh fuck.” I scream, half in shock, half in pleasure.

He growls out, starting to thrust into me as I continue to grind my pussy against his mouth. No matter how many times he tongue fucks me, it’s not enough. It will never be enough.

And then suddenly, I’m tipped over the edge, I’m climaxing so hard I’m certain I’m practically drowning him.

He grips my thighs, holding me in place and then slowly, let’s me move to lay beside him.

I curl up into his chest, but instead of feeling his usual calm, he feels tense. He feels like a raging beast about to go off.

“Devin?”

He lets out a low breath, “I just needed a moment.” He says gruffly.

“A moment for what?”

He lets out a deep sigh, one that feels so weighted. “She’s dead. Ines is dead.”

“What?” I gasp in shock. My body trembles as I realise some serious shit must have gone down. And here I was, blissfully unaware, thinking everything was all sunshine and roses. “What happened?”

“They got in while we were away. I don’t know how. We came back to find a massacre.”

I gulp, trying not to imagine how horrific that must have been for her, how scared she must have been. Ines is our Grand Master's wife – was our Grand Master's wife. He loved her, adored her. And now she's dead.

"You don't think...?"

"It was them." Devin confirms. "The Esau. I know they were behind it. We caught one of them and they all but confirmed it before we executed him."

I knew they weren't all gone. I knew the conspiracy stretched further than just Britain, but still, they got into *his* home, the Grand Master's actual villa.

"What does it mean?" I whisper. But I know what it means, what this is, it's war. More war.

"Antonio is already hunting them." He replies. "I was granted a few days to come here and ensure your security before I joined him."

I shudder, looking around, and though I obviously can't see a damn thing, it's hard not to imagine the sound of cracking twigs, of people sneaking up, making their way to come and murder us both. But Calix would alert us to that, Calix would already be growling if that was the case.

"I thought we were safe here." I murmur with a shudder.

"You are safe." He says. "I cherry-picked every single guard. I've done everything imaginable to ensure no one will get anywhere near you."

"But they got to Ines..." My voice trails off.

He cups my face. "Have I ever let you down? Ever not kept my promises?" He asks.

No, no he hasn't. If there's one thing I can say about my husband, it's he's true to his word, no matter how fucked up it is.

I plant a soft kiss on his lips. "If you're leaving soon, then we'd better get back to the house."

He nods, scooping me up while I lean into his chest, lean into his body and breathe in his delicious, dangerous smell. Only, there's something else there, lingering – blood. He's got blood on him.

Did he come straight from a fight? Did he race all the way here to find me?

"Don't worry, malkta," He says as we make our way back up. "Nothing is going to happen to you. No one is going to hurt you."

"And what about you?" I ask. I might be as safe as houses here, but what about him? What do I do if he gets injured, or worse, if he gets killed?

I hear his devilish chuckle. "Nothing's happening to me either." He replies. "I'm the devil, remember. And the devil can't be killed."

He is the devil. He is a monster. But he's my monster. *Mine.*

I grab his shirt collar, pulling him in for a kiss him as desperately as I can. If he has to leave soon then I want every second of him I can get. I want every piece of his body, every delicious moment of his pain too.

Behind us I can hear Calix walking, and I can't help but laugh at what a sight we must be. Me and my devil. And our hell-hound just behind. We're the perfect family now. And perhaps soon, if we're lucky, God will grant us with our own baby, a little demon we can raise that is both Heseltine and Blake.

The End

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CHAPTER

NINETY-SEVEN



*Devin
Five Months Later*

Her wails ring out against the cold stone wall.

I'm stood beside my brother, Magnus, watching as this scene plays out. Every seat in the Cathedral is filled. All those masked faces stare down at where the woman is splayed out, half dangling off the altar.

I can see my wife, on her knees, holding her hand, trying to soothe her. I can see Liliana on the other side too, wiping her brow, murmuring something into her ear that I'm sure is comforting.

Priests keep circling them, circling the altar that has been brought right into the middle of the giganteum space. They're waving their little incense burners, filling the air with a sickly-sweet smell that is almost suffocating.

It's a bold move of Magnus to have orchestrated all of this. Especially when everything still feels so uncertain after the cull. When the Brethren are still on edge from Ines's murder.

Brynn's mangled cry pierces the air, and the white silk beneath her has already begun to show stains of blood and sweat and God only knows what other bodily fluids.

Conrad steps forward, his hands steady despite what must be tremendous emotion coursing through him.

"Push," Liliana whispers, her voice carrying in the cathedral's acoustics. "You have to push now."

I watch as Brynn's body convulses with effort, her back arching against the silk-covered stone. I can't help but wonder if she's capable of it. Does she have the ability to physically give birth after what my brother did to her spine? I guess she must, or we wouldn't all be here. Magnus would certainly have checked that little detail out, he wouldn't have wanted to create such a gathering only to then present a disaster. No, he's too good at this already, too good at control.

My eyes travel back to my wife. Witnessing this scene here solidifies what I'd already been contemplating. That she will not give birth like this. She will never be reduced to a vessel for public ceremony, never have her most vulnerable moments transformed into theatre for the Brethren's entertainment again.

Conrad moves between his wife's splayed legs, kneeling down at the altar she's laid out on to receive what will be his legacy. And it feels like the moment stretches, like it's suspended in time, while Brynn's screams become more ragged.

Suddenly there is a rush of fluid and flesh, and Conrad's hands move quickly to catch the baby before it slams onto the stone floor.

The baby lays slick and red and utterly silent for a heartbeat that seems to last an eternity, before finally a cry comes out so shrill it makes me wince.

I see Conrad's shoulders relax with relief. "A daughter," He announces, his voice wavering with an emotion I'd never of thought he was ever capable of.

I narrow my eyes, surreptitiously glancing from one brother to the other. Magnus keeps his face impassive, but I don't miss the micro expression of disappointment.

But Conrad, he doesn't seem unhappy. If anything, he looks relieved, as if he knows something we all don't.

His hands are gentle as he cradles the infant, protective in a way that speaks more to genuine paternal love rather than mere duty.

But why would Conrad be happy with a daughter?

I lean forward slightly, trying to get a better view as Conrad hurriedly cuts the chord and wraps the child in prepared swaddling clothes. His movements are swift, almost furtive, as though he wishes to keep the baby from our collective gaze. But in that brief moment, before the cloth obscures my view, I catch sight of the infant's features.

The realization strikes me with stunning clarity. Her tiny features, her colouring, none of it matches our family's distinctive characteristics. This baby bears no resemblance to her supposed father. The red hair where Conrad's is dark, the delicate bone structure that speaks to entirely different ancestry.

This child is not his. And more importantly, Conrad knows it.

But of course he knows it. His joy makes perfect sense now, he is not disappointed because he never expected this child to be his heir in the first place. The fact that she is a girl makes that issue far easier to manage. He can marry the girl off when she comes of age, but at least this way, an imposter will not take away our family's hard-earned heritage.

Brynn cries out again, getting everyone's attention as she gives birth to the placenta. Liliana is quick to catch it in a golden bowl and she passes it over to a waiting servant who will prepare it properly so that Brynn can digest all its holy qualities in a few days.

Magnus walks silently up to where a priest is waiting, and he takes the great jug from his hands. He approaches the altar where Brynn still lies, exhausted but alert, never taking her eyes off her husband as he holds their supposed daughter. She looks more alert, more lucid than I've ever seen her before.

"Brynn Blake," Magnus intones, his voice echoing off the stone walls that had to be scrubbed clean from all the smoke damage. "You have fulfilled your sacred duty as a woman and brought forth new life for our holy Brethren. May this child grow strong in our traditions and pure in our faith."

He raises the vessel high, allowing the holy water to catch the candlelight before pouring it over Brynn's forehead. She gasps at the cold

touch, but her expression remains serene, accepting. The water runs down her face and onto the altar before dripping down onto the floor.

“May the sins of conception be washed away.” Magnus continues, his words following the prescribed ritual exactly. “May the pain of birth be transformed into the joy of new beginning. May this mother be restored to purity and this child be welcomed into our eternal brotherhood.”

As the other Brethren murmur their approval, I cast my eyes around, studying them, anticipating something, another attack, a sign of dissent? I’m not sure exactly, but this would be a perfect chance for the Esau to strike. A perfect moment to rid themselves of all the Blakes in one foul swoop.

But they’re gone. Gone from here. At least, they should be.

Time will tell how well the cull actually went; how effective it was.

I look over at my wife, seeing as she walks slowly towards me and, as she clasps my hand, I pull her that bit tighter.

No one here knows our secret. No one here has guessed it.

She goes to lift her hand, to instinctively cup her belly and I murmur ‘no’ as quietly as I can. She’s grown careless, not intentionally so, but she’s forgotten all these little tells, all these little cues we give away about ourselves. Being blind has stripped her of that awareness.

I don’t want anyone to know, I don’t want anyone to realise.

We need to get back to America, get my wife safely home. We both know now that she’s not just carrying our own family’s future but the entire Brethren’s future too. Because Paitlyn is pregnant with my son. Paitlyn is pregnant with our future Chapter Lord.

As the mass of people start to walk out, we slowly shuffle behind them. I can’t help thinking as I leave this cathedral that the game has changed, though even Magnus doesn’t yet realize it.

They say the future belongs to those bold enough to seize it, and my son will be raised with that boldness in his blood. When he comes of age, when he returns to claim his birthright, these old stones will witness a new kind of ceremony, not the blessing of tradition, but the coronation of revolution.

The brotherhood’s future has been born tonight, though not in the way any of them realised.

~~SNEAK PEAK AT~~ ~~DEPRIVATION~~



Deprivation

CAPTURED, AUCTIONED, AND CLAIMED. BUT I WILL NEVER SURRENDER, NO MATTER THE COST...

I'm a prize. A treasure for the taking. A gift to be given to the highest bidder by our new Chapter Lord.

For two years, I've been locked away. Sequestered. They tell me it's for my protection, but I know better. They're waiting—waiting for me to be of age.

And on my twenty first birthday, they hold an auction, not just for my virginity, but for me, all of me. When I'm paraded before them, I see all the men who once kissed my father's boots, all hoping to claim me.

But as the gavel falls, it's not one of them who wins me. It's someone far worse. Antonio.

My father's best friend. No, *ex*-best friend. He's spent two years checking on me, comforting me, and now I finally understand why.

I belong to him now. His to do with as he pleases. But I won't make it easy. I won't simply surrender and let this monster devour me...

WHAT TO EXPECT:

- Pitch black plot
- Virgin FMC
- Serious on page NC / Group NC
- Forced sharing

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DEPRIVATION



Grace being auctioned. Her perspective. Antonio winning the bid and her horror as she realises she's been played.

Two years. That's how long I've been waiting. How long I've been kept, sequestered, neatly packaged up like a little treat for them all.

You'd think it would be enough to reconcile me to all this, to help me make peace with my fate, but as I'm literally carted out before all these hundreds of baying men, I know an entire lifetime could never prepare me for what tonight's horror will be, and what tomorrow's torture will become.

I'm dressed in a sheer, silk shift. It's silvery white, the fabric so fine it feels like it's kissing me. I know it'll be the only tenderness I feel, the only tenderness I get. Underneath, there is nothing. I'm as naked as the day I was born and every single one of these arseholes can see it.

I grit my teeth, tightening my grip on this ridiculous thing I'm being transported in and I can see my knuckles are going white.

I told myself I'd be brave. I told myself that I'd be courageous, that they wouldn't see me crumble, that I would face my fate the way my father did.

Only, now I'm here, now I'm literally looking these bastards in the eyes, all that bravado is rapidly crumbling to dust.

"Make way," Someone yells as the cart comes to a stop.

Who's stupid idea was this? To haul me out, to bring me from the back of the crowd? I narrow my eyes and I see exactly who, standing on the big stage, watching me.

Magnus Blake. Our new Chapter Lord. Not so new now though. He's had a few years to settle in, to make his mark, to cull half my family too, to butcher and murder and kill my friends, my acquaintances, anyone who dared support my father in his attempt to beat him.

I let out a huff as our eyes meet.

They say he's the devil. They say he's as ruthless as they come. That he always wins, always gets whatever he wants. I guess it must be true considering I'm the one in chains and he's the victor.

Hands suddenly grab at me, someone tries to pull me over and I scream out before one of the two guards beside me beat the person back.

The cart jerks once more and we continue on, continue through like a little victory procession. I feel like Cleopatra, I feel like a barbarian queen, caught, captured, being dragged through the streets of Rome and about to be devoured by the lions while everyone enjoys the sport.

As we reach the stage, it is his brother Conrad who takes my arm, who pulls me out in a manner that tells me he expects me to fight.

He's twice my size, at least twice my strength. I know I shouldn't do it, but the moment presents itself to perfectly to resist and I curl my fist, landing a good punch to his smug fucking face.

He groans, stumbling slightly, and the crowd jeers louder.

"Fucking bitch." He says, wrenching me by my hair.

I kick out, I buck my body as I'm manhandled onto a giant wheel. My arms and legs are stretched wide, I'm now spreadeagle and the dress I have on is riding dangerously high.

I gulp back, fighting down the tears. I knew this place was an abomination but nothing could ever prepare me for this level of barbarity.

"Take it off. Take it off. Take it off." The crowd chant, louder and louder.

My eyes snap to my right, to the man responsible for all of this. Magnus prowls towards me, his eyes fixed on my face like he wants to savour every moment of my torment. In his hand he has a tiny golden blade and as he

moves close enough that I can feel his breath on my skin, I can't help but whimper.

I know it's no good begging. I know it's no good wasting my breath. But he pauses, as if he thinks I'm stupid enough to do it anyway. Well, fuck you, Magnus Blake. I won't give you that.

He grabs my dress by the collar, pulling it far enough from my skin so he can slice it open without carving me up.

Freezing cold air rushes to meet me. I shut my eyes, as my body is exposed, and those awful cheers reach a fever pitch.

"May I present to you all, Grace Ratcliffe." He says so silkily, so damn smug as he spreads his hands wide.

I shudder, trying to pull myself free but the rope is far too strong for that and all I do is make myself look like a desperate, weak little fool.

I glance down, stupidly I glance down and I can see myself laid out, looking like Christ himself, ready to be sacrificed. Only, he got the promise of an after-life. He got to die knowing he would be reborn in a few days.

"She's pierced." Someone shouts, pointing at my breasts that are heaving because I can't get my ragged breathing under control.

I grit my teeth, shooting a look of pure venom at my captors.

Magnus smiles more. Conrad actually laughs as he steps forward. "We thought we'd add a little extra sparkle to our prize." He says, before leaning right over, pulling my labia back, showing them all the other horrific things they did to me.

"Fuck me." Someone close to me groans, like he's never seen anything as good in his life.

"Piercings take a while to heal." Conrad says almost bored. "We decided to be efficient and use the two years we had, waiting for her to come to age, to our advantage."

"Bastards," I hiss under my breath.

"What's that?" Conrad says, grabbing my face, forcing me to face him.

I shut my eyes, I shudder as that awful memory hits me, as that flashback of him and Magnus holding me down as they shoved those needles into me, as they mutilated me and turned me into a whore-in-waiting.

He flicks the diamond encrusted bar that goes through my right nipple, then flicks the left straight after. "Be grateful, Grace." He murmurs. "We didn't have to auction you at all. Me and Magnus could have simply kept

you here, kept you in locked away in Oblivion and used you as our own personal slave.”

I know he’s trying to scare me, trying to intimidate me, but it won’t work. They’ve already done their worst in killing my father, in killing my aunts, and uncles, and my baby cousin too. Selling my virginity, selling me, is just the last insult in a list of so many.

I throw my head back, spitting right into his face and it lands on his cheek as a white foamy mess.

He wipes it clean with the cuff of his shirt, laughing.

“Let the bidding begin,” He says, turning his back on me. “We’ll start at fifty million...”

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Ellie Sanders lives in rural Hampshire, in the U.K. with her partner and two troublesome dogs.

She has a BA Hons degree in English and American Literature with Creative Writing and enjoys spending her time, when not endlessly writing, exploring the countryside around her home.

She is best known for her duet, 'Downfall' and 'Uprising', as well as standalone novels including 'Good Girl', and 'Vendetta: A Mafia Romance'.

For updates including new books, please follow her Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter @hotsteamywriter.

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AFTERNORM



If you've made it to the end, thank you for walking through the shadows with me.

This book was never meant to offer a true redemption, only to explore the raw edges of obsession, cruelty, and survival. Devin is not a man to be admired; he is a monster by design. Paitlyn endured because that is what the story demanded of her, but no one should ever have to endure such torment in real life.

As always, I had to do a lot of research for this book and some of the things I now know I wish I could erase from my memory.

I know their story lands a little differently at the end and in a way, they get a far truer happy ever after than Liliana and indeed, Brynn, will ever have. I would still hesitate to class it as a true HEA, because the things Devin does to her are inexcusable. I will die on the hill that if Paitlyn hadn't been so abused and tortured in Oblivion during the years in between, then she would not have fallen for him. She would not have twisted, and she would not have trauma-bonded with a person more monster than man.

There are in total, five books in this series. Depravity and Decimation will be the worst (according to my plan) in terms of darkness. This one might just be the lightest, but you'll have to wait and see for certain.

Dark romance, and indeed, Pitch Black Romance is getting a particularly nasty spotlight right now by people who clearly don't read it or understand the genre. What they fail to understand is that this is fiction, and fiction allows us to step into impossible, terrifying spaces and walk back out again. That's the point of these books, to explore these themes, to explore our own trauma and abuse in an environment we can absolutely walk away from. We shouldn't have to justify how we heal, we shouldn't have to justify how we put the broken pieces of ourselves back together. I'm just growing exhausted by the pearl clutchers, who've never had to face true horror and feel their self-anointed position as morality queens means they get to dictate what others can and cannot read. You people need to grow up. You people need to stick to your happy books and your cute romcoms and leave us to the darkness. We don't judge you, so stop judging us. Take your hate, and your misconstrued anger, and focus it on where it should be. At the real-life abusers, at the real life rapi.sts.

Annnd rant over

On a nicer note, I never want to be the kind of author who hides away and isn't accessible. If you have any comments about my books and you message me, I will always endeavour to come back to you, even if it takes a few days because I'm in an ADHD headspin.

If you enjoyed this book, why not subscribe to my newsletter where you'll be the first to hear about new releases and any giveaways I'm running. There will also be lots of ARC opportunities coming up so watch out for these...

I would also be eternally grateful if after reading this you left a review.

Reviews really are an author's lifeblood, not just because it helps beat back the crazy amount of imposter syndrome we all have but because it helps us get noticed / builds our community on places like amazon and ensures we can continue creating more stories for you to read and indulge in.