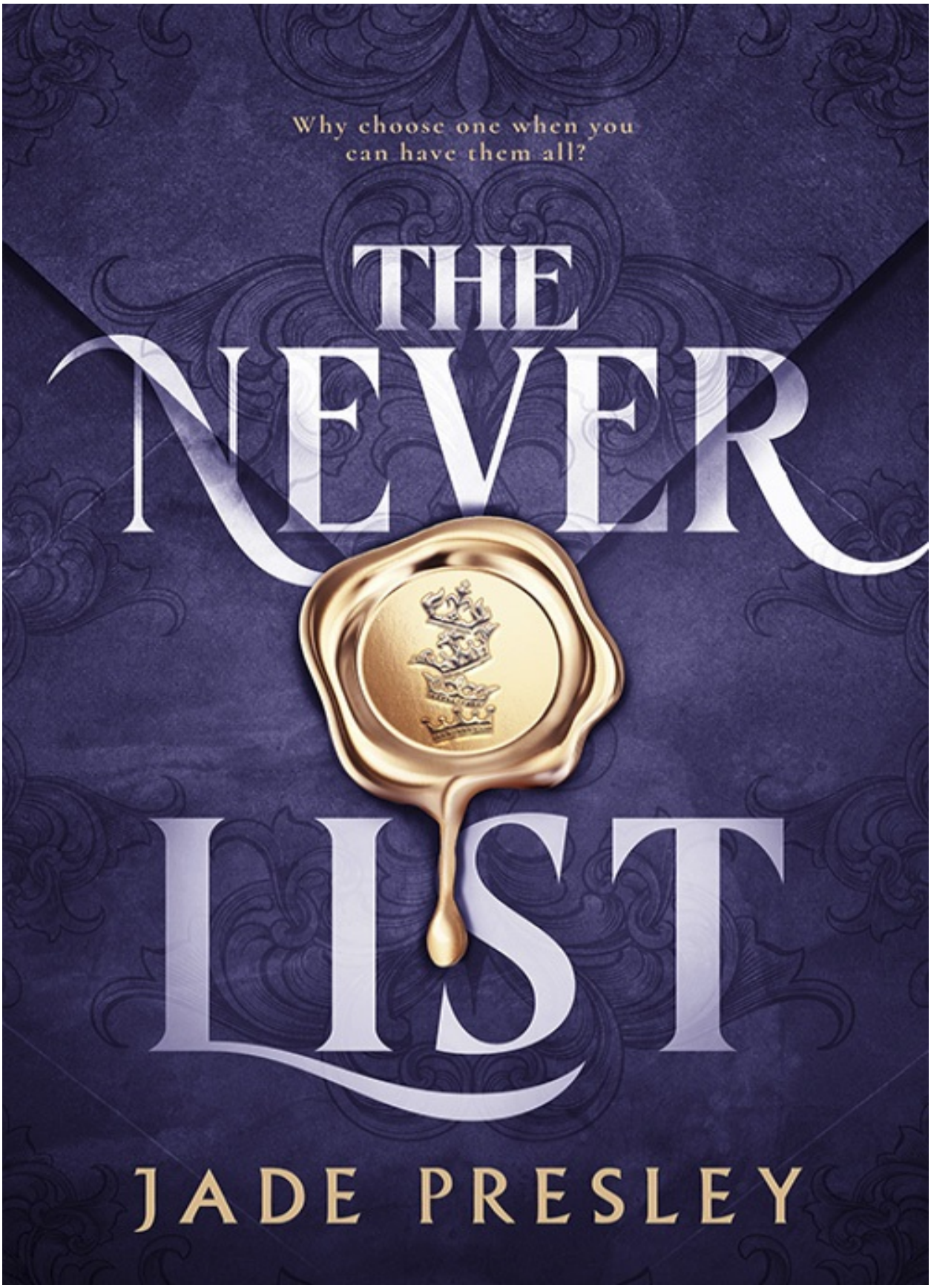
Why choose one when you can have them all?

THE NEVER LIST



JADE PRESLEY


Why choose one when you can have them all?
THE NEVER LIST
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JADE PRESLEY

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Landmarks

1. Cover

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To the readers who always struggle to pick a favorite book boyfriend. Don't worry—here, you'll never have to choose. It's okay to love them all.

The Never List is a spicy fantasy “why choose” romance (and when we say spicy, we mean extra spicy!) that will take your breath away with royal intrigue, searing passion, and four utterly irresistible princes who—each in their own way—will steal your heart. However, the story includes elements that might not be suitable for all readers. Sexually explicit scenes with one or multiple consenting partners, themes of poverty, sexual harassment, death of family members off the page, disappearance of a loved one, death, torture, and violence are all shown in the novel. Readers who may be sensitive to these elements, please take note.


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S
W
Frithmore
Royal City
Obsidian City
Sapphire Cove
Ruby Aire
Emerald Wood
Ashlands
Lumathyst

1

Rylee

“I could arrest you for dressing like that.” A familiar, authoritative voice sounds behind me, sending a chill skating along my spine. “But you know that, don’t you, Rylee?”

I freeze on the cobblestone road. I’ve just crossed the border into Leaf and Claw—a city I’m definitely not allowed to be in.

I *feel* him before he reaches for me, like ice in my veins. Stopping or dodging his touch will only bring me trouble—and on tonight of all nights, trouble is the last thing I need.

Turner’s hand clenches my elbow, and he drags me around the corner of a simple stone tavern into a narrow, deserted alleyway. My heart hammers in my chest. He’s boxed me in, and no one will hear us over the celebrating inside. Unless someone stumbles into the alley to take a leak, I’m entirely on my own.

“I…” I glance down at the muted purple-and-green sheath dress I’ve borrowed from my best friend, Ivy. It’s elegant, even though it’s made from common materials sourced from the city of Cedar and Silk, and it’s long enough to cover my ash-caked shoes.

As an Ashlander—the lowest class in Lumathyst—I’m not supposed to wear clothes above my station, let alone travel across borders. But I would stick out in this city if I’d worn my own clothes—brown, threadbare cotton pants and tunic—and I thought Ivy’s dress was safer. Clearly not.

“What trouble are you getting into tonight?” Turner presses, herding me farther into the alleyway. His golden kings’ enforcer uniform almost suffocates his stocky frame, making it look like it’ll pop at the seams. His face is round, that smug, domineering grin transforming him into something I’ve come to fear the past six months.

It hadn’t been like that in the beginning.

In the beginning, he’d been a fun distraction. Seducing a kings’ enforcer is no easy feat for an Ashlander like me, and he seemed like a good ally to have. Kings’ enforcers are the power on the streets, doing the kings’ bidding to keep all of us in line, and being on Turner’s good side has kept me out of prison a time or two.

But it didn’t take me long to figure out who he really is and what he *really*

liked…which is to take and punish and terrorize. He's held me in a trap ever since, using his authority over me as a weapon.

"I'm not getting into any trouble," I finally answer, slipping into an innocent tone. Of all the times for him to be patrolling this border, why now?

I have *one* shot at finding my sister, and tonight is it. Seeing as what I intend to do could land me in prison or *worse*, get me killed, I really don't have time for this.

"That's hard to believe," he says, shoving me back against the wall of the building.

I flinch, then take a deep breath and slip on a mask of indifference with a side of nothing-in-my-brain. He likes it better when I play dumb. Likes it when I pretend that I don't have the strength to put two thoughts together outside of saying *yes*.

He slides his short sword out of its sheath, hovering the tip just in front of my neck. It takes everything I have not to draw away at the sight of that fucking sword—the one he's threatened me with more times than I can count.

"I'm not out to cause any trouble," I reassure him again.

"Then what's an Ashlander like you doing wearing something like this?" He gently taps the thin fabric of my dress with the flat of his blade.

Catching me like this, Turner has grounds to throw me in the royal dungeons or ship me across the seas. Not for the first time, I fall into a well of hate for the kings who, centuries ago, decided to draw lines on a map, ensuring anyone born on the wrong side of them was stripped of rights the wealthy have naturally.

"You're not thinking of trying to sneak into the Choosing, are you?" he asks.

I widen my smile until it hurts and graze my fingers down the hilt of his sword suggestively. "You think I'm foolish enough to do that?"

"I hope not, seeing as it's what killed your sister."

I blink. Slowly. Nothing going on in my mind, indeed. Definitely not thoughts of turning that blade on him. See how he likes it. Definitely not of the argument dancing on my tongue: my sister *isn't* dead.

She's not. She can't be.

"Wait," he says with a hoarse laugh. "Tell me you didn't win one of the lottery invitations and you think *this*"—he drags the tip of his sword down my bodice—"is what royalty wears?"

Another blink. I add a mindless giggle for good measure. "An Ashlander has never won an invitation," I say. I gesture to the wall behind me, toward the sounds of music and merriment. "The taverns. The barkeeps shower girls with free drinks on Choosing night. I just want to have a little fun with my friends," I continue, pursing my lips in a pout. "Can't I have a little fun tonight, Turner?"

I want to vomit from the act, from how I'm forced to behave in the hopes he'll let me go. On any other night, I might've risked at least trying to fight him off, but that takes time I don't have. The Choosing will start soon, and I only have a small window to do what I need to do.

Turner laughs so hard, spit hits my cheek. My eye twitches, but I don't break. I have to get to Ivy's quickly, and I don't have time for a scene, especially not an argument that could lead to him messing up my face. I have to look pristine tonight. No ash, no dirt, and definitely no bruises.

"The things you Ashlanders do for a drink," he says, reeling in his laughter. He looks over my body again, and my skin crawls. He doesn't own me, and I hate…*hate* that I ever let him between my legs. Hate that I ever thought he was decent, kind. It was all a show to ensnare me. *The snake.*

"I suppose I can let you off this one time," he says finally, stepping to the side.

A fraction of breath works its way into my lungs, and I take a step away—

He grips my wrist so hard it stings as he jerks me back. His sword clangs against the stone wall right in front of my face, stopping me dead.

It takes every ounce of willpower I possess to bury the power rising in my veins. It would be so easy to release a sharp blast of wind and toss him into the wall opposite us. I could knock him out and make a break for it.

But then he'd know my secret.

"On one condition," he says.

I reaffix my smile. It's my only armor against him right now, the only thing keeping him from looking deeper at my lies.

"As long as I can see you when you're done leeching the free drinks," Turner says. "I've never been with you when you've been drinking," he continues. "I bet that's all kinds of fun."

Acid claws up my throat, and my cheeks hurt from the effort it takes to keep grinning.

"Midnight," I say, even though I want to tell him *no* for the hundredth time. Tell him to go fuck himself. Tell him he can't keep doing this to me. Can't keep threatening to arrest me if I say no—but he'd just use it as an excuse to take me in right here and now, haul me down to the prison and lock us *both* in a cell.

I can't risk that. I have one shot—

"Midnight," he says, sheathing his sword and releasing my wrist. The blood flows back so quickly it burns. "Right here." He indicates the alley as he takes a step away from me.

I walk as briskly as I dare to the edge of the alleyway.

"Don't be late," he calls from behind me. "You know what happens if you are."

My hands tremble as I glance over my shoulder, nodding at him. I won't be late; I won't be here.

If I'm lucky, I'll find out what happened to my sister. If I'm not lucky?

Then Turner will be the least of my problems.

2

Rylee

I barrel through Ivy's door and slam it closed behind me as if Turner had chased me the entire way here. He hadn't, but *damn* him for rattling me so deeply. I rub at my now sore wrist, sucking in deep breaths to calm my nerves.

"What happened?" Ivy asks, eyes wide as she rushes across the room toward me.

"Turner," I say, and it's answer enough. My friends know my history with him.

"Asshole," she says, glancing at the fresh dusting of purple on my wrist in the shape of his fingerprints.

"I'm fine," I assure her. "I just need a moment."

Ivy nods, gaze on mine as she inhales, breathing with me until I've found a way to shake off the anxiety.

"Better?" she asks.

"Better," I say on a sigh. "It's a blessing Turner didn't arrest me when he caught me crossing the border."

"Hopefully that's a sign the goddesses are on your side tonight." Ivy grins at me. "Want to see it?"

"Yes, please," I say, relief uncoiling the tension in my body. Distraction is exactly what I need right now.

And then focus. Because Ivy's right: I really do need the goddesses on my side tonight.

"Layce's not here yet?" I ask.

"No, you'll have time to bathe before she brings the rest of our 'disguises.'" Ivy laughs. "But first…" She leads me across the room and stops next to her small vanity. My mouth falls open as I take in the identical invitations laid there, with delicate gold script printed beneath a beautiful illustration of an intricate mask.

The Kings of Lumathyst

Present

The Choosing Ceremony

Hosted for the Legends of Chaos

Exchanging this invitation for an entry pin upon arrival at the royal palace constitutes a binding contract between yourself and the Legends of Chaos. By agreeing to participate in the Choosing, you are giving enthusiastic consent to intimate acts with one or all four of the Legends of Chaos if chosen as a mate. If you aren't comfortable with these terms, do not accept a numbered pin at the gate and enjoy the festivities.

"'Enthusiastic consent,'" Ivy says in a singsong voice.

I run my fingers over the invitation, noting the thickness of the cardstock as I turn it back and forth. The gold-and-black ink glimmers under the lights. It *feels* expensive, like the kings infused it with stardust. With their power and wealth? They probably did.

"Are you going to *enthusiastically consent*?" Ivy asks as she waters the dozen or so plants that fill her small space.

I set the invitation on her vanity and smile at her.

"Absolutely," I say with enough sarcasm to make her laugh. "Who wouldn't leap at the chance to sleep with four men at once?" I stick to teasing despite—or perhaps because of—the truth rattling inside me. I *have* thought about the possibility of having to uphold the contract, allowed the fantasy to play out in my mind. I'm not opposed to the idea. It's likely the *forbiddenness* of it all that intrigues me; it's only innocent daydreaming.

"These aren't just *any* men," Ivy says. "They're the Legends of Chaos. The part-god royal princes of Lumathyst. Letting them have their way with you?" She shudders as she moves on to the next plant.

"Oh, come on," I tease. "Wouldn't you be curious?" I bite my lip, my mind wandering down a delightful path that has nothing to do with what's at stake tonight—my life, my sister's. Thinking about this is easier than all of that.

I've only seen paintings of the Legends and the kings, splashed on posters plastered around the Ashlands to ensure we remember who we bow to. The royal artist painted them as formidable men with mysterious smiles and vibrant eyes. Powerful beings capable of weakening knees and stealing breaths.

Four at once…a warm shiver races across my skin.

"There is a fine line between curiosity and self-destruction," Ivy says, pulling me back to the moment. "You've heard the rumors," she continues. "Just last week, I heard a story about the Dreamer flying a man up to the tallest building in the Ruby Aire because he stole from one of his beloved shops. The enforcers said he dropped him and caught him over and over again before the other Legends joined in." Ivy shudders. "The Mind manipulated the man's reality, making him see nothing but his worst fears, and the Nightmare twisted his

emotions to match."

I swallow hard. "I heard that one, too. They said the Player almost drowned him in a sphere of water he controlled."

"See?" Ivy says, holding her watering can to her chest. "Curiosity and self-destruction," she reiterates. "Not to mention, the stories about the Nightmare's Playroom are renowned. They say he delights in chaining women up for days, playing with them only when he feels like it."

An image takes shape in my mind: me in chains with no purpose other than to be used for pleasure. Social classes don't matter when you're stripped down that bare. A drop of heat lands in my belly at the thought, but I quickly force it away.

Maybe someday, I'll have time to look for the kind of lover who can make me feel safe and excited, understood and destroyed all at once. Someone I can be myself around and trust with all my heart's desires.

A fool's dream, but it's one I can't deny. Add it to the list of dreams that aren't meant to be mine.

Ivy comes to stand next to me and glances down at the invitations on the vanity, a glimmer of pride shining in her eyes.

I motion toward my identical invitation sitting next to her *real* one. "That is some of your best work, Ivy."

She beams at me but shrugs as she reaches out to touch a Strelitzia plant that's drooping in its pot. Her red nails gleam as she twirls her fingers, and the plant perks up like it's taking a much-needed deep breath. The neon orange petals brighten and bloom with restored life.

She lowers her hand. "I would say *that* is some of my best work. But you know I adore compliments, so please, do go on."

I laugh, admiring it. Not the forgery that's her secondary passion but her *actual* goddess-given power.

Power that neither she nor I are supposed to have. Power that could get us arrested if anyone outside our little trusted circle knew about it. But I guess you can say that's what brought us together in the first place.

I met Ivy when I was young. I'd crossed over the Ashland border, sneaking into Leaf and Claw, desperate to breathe air that didn't leave the taste of dust on my tongue. My older sister, Erin, had warned me not to go in broad daylight, but I'd known if I spent another minute carting ore from the Ashlands' mines, I would explode. In that moment, I didn't even care if the kings' enforcers caught me and threw me in the royal prisons. I *needed* something new and vibrant and fresh.

And that's exactly what I got. I ran into a secluded little glen and saw a girl my age surrounded by wildflowers. I stopped at the tree line, thinking I'd been

caught, but she didn't notice me at first. As I watched, I realized the wildflowers were *growing* before my eyes—the girl was making them bloom and spread with magic. I still remember how wide her eyes had gone when she heard my gasp of surprise, how quickly she'd leaped atop me, ready to pummel me if I threatened to expose her secret. Little did she know, I was hiding the same one: we were both demis.

The demis—descendants of those blessed by the goddesses—had fallen out of favor with the kings centuries ago, back when they'd each ruled over their own territories, like the Legends do now. The brief era of peace ended quickly when the vicious infighting among demis mounted. Soon, demis were known only for bloodshed and greed, said to be corrupted by their goddess-granted powers. The kings stepped in before any of the factions could overthrow them and the goddesses and take full control of Lumathyst.

Against the combined power of the goddesses and their kings, the demis didn't stand a chance. Most of the rebels were killed, but others were given the option to live. Their ancestral surnames were placed on the Never List, ensuring no one from that lineage could ever rise to high status again, despite the fact that the power in their lines dwindled over time and only randomly appeared in one generation or the next. Like mine. Like Ivy's and Layce's. Power our non-magical parents managed to keep secret because our marks didn't show on our skin until we were ten.

Over the years, the Never List evolved to include anyone charged with a treasonous crime or really anyone the kings deemed a threat. And when the entire kingdom strives for the noble status the kings dangle in front of their people—should they only work *hard* enough—no one ever wants to be on that damned list.

Being on the list means you'll never achieve a higher social status than the one placed on you at birth.

Being on that list means, if called upon, you're required to serve in royal assignments overseas, where you're not protected by the goddesses' wards.

Being on that list is almost always a death sentence.

There are demis who live openly in Lumathyst, but they're forced to work for scraps and are regarded by nobility with intense suspicion. They often find themselves arrested for things nobility gets away with on a daily basis, like traveling across city borders and trying to purchase goods or marrying whoever they wish—luxuries Ashlanders aren't afforded, either.

Which is why those like me and my friends keep our powers a secret.

The second I'd sent a blistering wind at Ivy, tossing her little body off me and across her patch of wildflowers, we became best friends. And sneaking across

invisible lines that separated the *haves* from the *have-nots* became one of my favorite and most dangerous pastimes. It's a risk to cross borders to see my friends, but I've done it so many times now, I barely register the danger. Likely why Turner spotted me tonight—I've gotten too casual about breaking laws.

I trail my finger over the invitation once more.

"Enthusiastic consent." I repeat the words, then laugh at the binding contract. Every noblewoman in Lumathyst who received a legitimate invitation will have trained for this moment the entire year; some, their entire lives. Lying in their rich feather beds, dreaming about the chance to be the Legends of Chaos's mate. Anyone selected as a potential earns a higher social class after the event, whether they decide to choose the Legends or not.

"You're serious? Despite all the stories we've heard about the Legends," Ivy says, turning me to face her. "I'd wager you'd actually enjoy being with all four of them. I'd bet my entire flat that you'd leave them all *panting* for more." She laughs. "You're always seeking that next rush. I swear on the goddesses above, it's going to bite you in your pretty little ass one day."

"At least if I were chosen as their mate, I'd be able to make a difference for the Ashlanders," I say.

"No potential has ever made it longer than a month," Ivy counters. "The past six left the second they could. Took their elevated-social-status prize and ran in the opposite direction. Vying to be the future queen of Lumathyst is no small feat."

"And yet wouldn't it be worth it if it meant one of us could bring about change?"

Ivy looks at me more seriously. "What of the Athanry? Does that not frighten you? The process of becoming immortal? The stories say it nearly killed the kings when the goddesses chose them centuries ago. That's likely what sent half the potentials running the past six Choosings, alongside the Legends' chaotic nature."

She's not wrong, but I laugh at the concern in her eyes. "Relax, Ivy. I would never put myself up as a potential mate," I assure her softly. "Contrary to my daily complaints, I like my life. Dying in the name of being the queen of Lumathyst is the last thing on my mind.

"And besides, Ashlanders are forbidden from the Choosing. If they somehow picked me? I'd be dead the second they realized where I'm from." The truth of that statement settles like a stone in my stomach. "You know the reason I'm sneaking into this event, and it's most certainly not for the princes…or the drinks," I add with a laugh.

"Hey," Ivy chides. "The drinks are worth the risk." She grins at me, but there

is a sincerity in her eyes that doesn't match her playful tone. "Do you need to look at the palace map again?"

I swallow around the nerves tangling in my throat. "No," I say, tapping my temple. "I have it all up here."

"You paid half a year's wages for it," she says. "You better have it memorized."

"I just hope it's accurate."

"I told you," she says. "My friend works in the palace. You can trust them."

I purse my lips. I rarely trust anyone anymore, but Ivy has more access to the royal cities than I do. She's from the city of Leaf and Claw, which makes her an Ari, a middle class that has privileges Ashlanders don't. She can own her accommodations, rather than renting, and can shop in the royal cities. Aris can't request an audience with the Legends, like nobility can, but Aris don't live in squalor and can move freely about Lumathyst without fear of being imprisoned.

And as much as the kings claim anyone (as long as their name isn't on the Never List) can elevate their social class by working hard enough and earning a royal blessing, it's a rarity to see an Ashlander rise in rank. Marriages between classes have to be approved by the kings, and since Ashlanders are mostly descendants of demis or recently freed criminals, they rarely receive a blessing. Not that I would ever be allowed to try, since my family name has been on the Never List since my ancestors took up arms against the kings centuries ago.

Still, Ivy's Ari status gives her access to connections I never would've secured on my own, and getting this map for me is one of those perks.

I'll never be able to repay her for tonight.

"You really think you'll find answers?"

The hollow space in my chest twinges as Erin's face fills my mind. "It's been a year, Ivy." A year since my sister also snuck into the Choosing and never came back. "We know she wasn't chosen as a potential, and she didn't come home. That means someone had to have found out she was an Ashlander and shipped her off on a mission overseas or threw her in the prisons. I have to know what happened. I have to find her."

The Choosing is my only shot at getting into the palace and searching for answers. I've spent the entire year planning for this moment, all the while desperately wishing she'd walk back through our door, telling me she simply lost track of time. She's done that before. Erin loves to go wherever her instincts take her, and she's run off on monthlong adventures before.

But never this long. And never without letting me know she was leaving first.

Ivy wraps her arms around me and pulls me into a warm embrace. Her crisp scent of orchids and pine envelops me, filling those empty spaces inside me with

memories. “I know,” she says. “I’m sorry I ever forged her an invitation—”

“Don’t do that,” I say as we break apart. “Don’t blame yourself. It could’ve been any of us.” Ivy has been to the Choosing the past six years and has never once come close to being chosen as a potential mate. Her invitation is always legitimate, but she’s never had any real interest in becoming the Legends’ mate—thanks to the stories we’ve heard about them—so she’s kept to the shadows, enjoying the luxuries of the event without drawing attention to herself.

I’d thought Erin would do the same. The goddesses blessed her with the unique ability to get out of tight places, assess danger in a blink, and thieve anything she wants even if her target is staring her straight in the face.

So, what happened that night? What happened that meant she couldn’t escape, couldn’t charm or seduce her way out? She may enjoy disappearing on adventures, but she wouldn’t have run away without telling me. Wouldn’t have left me to rot in the Ashlands. Not when we’re the only family we have left.

Once again, I curse myself for not going with her. Erin always asked me to come, but the idea of mingling with the royals of Lumathyst, who would rather watch Ashlanders starve to death than offer a helping hand, always turned my stomach. An arrogant pride that quite possibly lost me my sister.

And I’ve hated myself for it ever since.

3

Rylee

“I know, I know, I’m late!” Layce’s voice fills the room as she bursts through Ivy’s door, fumbling with three large silk sacks.

I’ve just dried off from a quick bath. After washing the dust from working in the quarry this morning off my shoulders, I’d lingered in the lukewarm water for a few minutes longer than necessary, mentally preparing for tonight.

“You would not believe the crowds on the main crossings between the cities today! I had to take four different shortcuts just to get here.” She heaves the colorful bags onto Ivy’s small bed tucked in a corner across the room, then spins to face us. “What’d I miss?”

Ivy flashes me a conspiratorial look. “Just listening to Rylee talk about what she’ll do to the Legends of Chaos if they *choose* her,” she says, miming a vulgar gesture with her mouth that sends us all laughing.

Layce’s eyes sparkle as she grips her side. “If they choose you, will you promote us?” she asks, catching her breath. “I can be your royal bodyguard.” She snaps her fingers so blue-and-white lightning dances on the tips momentarily before she makes a fist to snuff it out. Then she points at Ivy. “And she can be your royal gardener.”

Ivy gapes in mock shock, still giggling. “Better than the job I have now.”

“It’s a deal,” I say. “All I have to do is have the Legends choose me—an Ashlander at their prestigious event *illegally*—and not arrest me; sleep with each of them; learn the functions and politics of their cities for months; *and* survive the Athanry, becoming immortal.” I list each task on my fingers. “Oh wait,” I say, and they both roll their eyes. “I’ll also have to enjoy them enough to *choose* an eternity with them and risk death to get it.” I tap my finger on my chin. “Remind me how many times that’s happened, again?”

“You’re a brat,” Ivy teases.

“None.” I answer my own question, ignoring her. “The Legends have tried for a mate for the past six years and are still mateless. I wouldn’t start packing your bags just yet.” If the Legends weren’t wealthy pricks who delighted in chaos, I might feel bad for them.

“Way to suck the fun out of the night,” Layce chides. “Jokes aside, getting a pin is a treat. And it’ll be your first one!”

“Wait, what?” I ask, looking from Layce to Ivy. “I’m not taking a pin.” I’d assumed we would use our invitations to gain entry but not exchange them for a numbered pin to participate in the actual Choosing. After all, you’re not required to.

“We always take pins.” Layce glances at Ivy in confusion.

“Jewelers pay top dollar for them because the gems are the highest quality,” Ivy adds.

That notion *is* tempting. “But the risk…” I bite my bottom lip, contemplating. “Haven’t you two ever been afraid of getting chosen?”

“Not even a little bit,” Layce says on a laugh.

Ivy shakes her head. “We always clock the Legends first thing and then subtly stay away from them the entire night.”

“Oh,” I say, nodding. “That makes sense.” But still, the risk…

“Since when have you ever taken the safe route?” Layce asks.

I snort. She’s not wrong.

Ivy flashes me a supportive smile. “It’s your choice. We’d never force you to take one.”

“Of course not,” Layce adds.

“We just want you to know the perks,” Ivy continues. “You could do a lot with the money from selling one.”

“And a woman from the high nobility is always chosen anyway,” Layce says with a shrug. “We’ll keep a low profile.”

“But no pressure,” Ivy says.

“Thanks for the heads-up,” I say, truly meaning it. I have the best friends in the world, and I honestly don’t know if I would’ve survived this year without them.

“Okay, come here.” Layce waves me over excitedly as she turns back toward Ivy’s bed and the pile of silk atop it. “Now, it took me six months and a ton of careful planning to sneak each of these out of Mistress Mardone’s shop, so if you don’t like the colors, keep it to yourselves.”

Layce is an Ari, too, residing in Cedar and Silk, but even our combined income would never be able to buy three dresses of this caliber. Her position at Mistress Mardone’s shop gave her an opportunity she couldn’t pass up, and I’m beyond grateful for her willingness to swipe me a gown. And with the way Mardone gouges her prices for the middle and lower classes, I don’t feel bad about it.

Ivy squeals as Layce carefully slides the dresses out of the bags.

“This one is for you,” she says, handing Ivy a forest green gown. “And this one,” she says, handing me a pile of black silk and lace and leather, “is for you.”

My lips part as I fumble with all the fabric in my arms.

"Go," she says, motioning toward the wooden screen in the corner of Ivy's room. "Masks will come after makeup and hair."

I stand there for a moment, unable to express my gratitude at all they've done for me, all the risks they've taken to ensure I get my shot at finding my sister.

Layce waves at me impatiently. "We don't have much time," she says. "Hurry up."

I blink out of the moment and rush behind the separator, grateful for the time to collect myself. I don't think I could ever find the right words to thank them, anyway. By the time I have the dress on and buttoned, Layce has placed a pair of black boots at the edge of the screen. The spike of the heel is bloodred.

I step out, and Ivy pauses, one slipper on and one in her hand as she gapes at me.

"I knew you needed the black!" Layce exclaims. "No one ever wears black to the Choosing."

My eyes go wide. "What? Then why—"

"Because black looks amazing on you." She shushes me, moving me into the chair in front of Ivy's vanity. "Relax, Rylee. Your mask is gorgeous, too. You'll look exactly like you belong there, but no one will have a clue who you are."

I try to relax my face as she gets to work on my makeup. She uses all manner of brushes and tints on me. She spends a long time on my eyes, considering I'm about to put a mask over them, but I don't complain. How can I? Makeup is another luxury I can't afford, one not even worth stealing. It's not like I can wear it in the Ashlands without having the kings' enforcers down my throat, asking where I got it. I'm so far outside my comfort zone tonight. How am I ever going to pull this off?

Funny how a set of invisible lines between cities can change so much. My friends have never gone hungry or almost been arrested for wearing lipstick. Neither of them knows what it's like to not eat, to not know where your next meal is coming from. And it's not their fault, either, just a privilege of being born in the right spot on the map with the right familial titles, too. Just like it's not my fault Erin and I were born in the wrong one.

It's the kings' fault.

The way they hoard their wealth, the way they tax the Ashlanders to the point of starvation and then expect us to bow and kiss their feet whenever they appear, all under the pretense that their protection is worth the cost. Protection from realms across the sea, threats that haven't set foot here in two decades. As if they were the ones who created the magical wards around our continent and not the goddesses whose sacrifice keeps our land safe. A sharp gust of wind picks up in

the room, and Ivy's plants tremble.

"Hey," Layce says, drawing my attention as she slides the mask over my face. "You're not alone in this."

I blow out a breath, leashing my power. "Thank you," I say to both of them as I slide out of the chair and turn toward them. "You two look stunning."

Ivy's rich brown skin looks luminescent beneath the green gown that hangs off one shoulder, tightening around her waist and draping elegantly over her long legs. A deep slit climbs up her thigh, and the straps of her shoes wind their way up her calves in thin black crisscrosses. The mask hiding the top half of her face is made of dozens of gold and hunter green ivy leaves, her full lips on display beneath it.

Layce's crimson dress hugs her body and stops just above her knees, the color making her skin look rosy. Her mask is a slash of red feathers that flares out on the left side of her face.

"Turn around," Layce demands with a smile.

I turn, finally looking at myself in the full-length mirror, and an aching lump forms in my throat. I'm not sure if it's shock or gratitude or appreciation or a combination of all three. Because Layce is right—no one will ever recognize me in these clothes. I've never had anything as expensive touch my skin, and I'm suddenly sure I never want to wear anything else.

Lace sleeves hang off my shoulders, exposing my collarbones, while black leather clings to my upper torso, lifting my breasts and cinching tight around my stomach. Layers of silk and lace fan out from my waist, draping to the floor in elegant tiers that hiss when I move. The dark-red stain on my lips stands out against my pale skin, and my blue eyes are almost searing behind the dark mask that covers half my face.

I step closer to the mirror, touching the delicate mask comprised of hundreds of miniature fabric butterflies.

"Are you ready?" Ivy asks from behind me, a makeup brush in hand.

I nod, gathering my long blond hair over one shoulder, off my neck. Ivy quickly dabs the brush against the spot at the base of my skull, covering the light, silvery mark that showed up when I was ten. The one that looks like a tiny cloud.

The mark of a demi blessed by the goddess Neph.

Ivy moves to my wrist, silently covering up the light-purple bruises Turner left. My chest squeezes.

When she's finished, Ivy passes the brush to Layce, who hurries to cover the mark on the inside of her wrist—a cloud matching mine. Ivy hikes up her left leg, shifting her gown higher to expose her inner thigh.

“Who wants the honors?” she asks.

I grab a different brush and dip it into her compact. I lean down and stroke the bristles over her mark—a light-green spot in the shape of a leaf. We’ve done this so many times now, we could probably hide one another’s marks in our sleep.

I take a step back to double-check my work. “Nothing stopping us now,” I say.

“Then what are we waiting for?” Ivy asks.

4

Jax

"You summoned me," I say, dragging out the words as I stride into my father's ornate office.

The walls of the great and powerful Baydel Lavine are lined with books I'm sure he's never actually read, and a monstrosity of a marble desk is centered against a floor-to-ceiling window overlooking the royal city. The sky is ink black, but gold sparks flicker and burst around the outer gates far below—the magical lights beckoning the Choosing guests into the palace.

"You could've come more quickly," my father says. He stands on a raised step in front of a gilded trifold mirror, admiring himself as his tailor fusses around his ankles.

"I've heard that's an ailment for some." I cock an eyebrow at him. "Old age getting to you?"

He's almost as old as Lumathyst itself, though he doesn't look it. All people in Lumathyst age slowly after reaching maturity, thanks to magic the goddesses flooded the lands with when they first claimed Lumathyst as their own. But when my mother, the goddess Evaluna, chose my father as her mate, she bestowed him with a drop of her power and made him *immortal*. His face only shows minimal signs of aging—a few wrinkles around his green eyes and snow-white hair that he keeps short.

He glares at me in the mirror, unamused.

I slide my hands into my pockets, leaning against a pillar and propping one boot behind me. "You're going with gold again, I see." I motion to his suit. It's clean, simple, not unlike mine, but the color is unspeakably garish.

"And you went with black," he says with a condescending sneer. *"Shocking."*

Irritation rolls off him in waves. I can taste it on my tongue. The power in my blood rises, begging me to alter his mood. I quash the urge. Anytime I've even attempted it, he's checked me with his power—which is still infinitely more potent than mine.

"Dark and foreboding certainly attracts a mate," he continues sarcastically.

Maybe this year will be different, a traitorous voice whispers in my ear. I bury it along with any hope I've ever had of outpowering my father.

The tailor finishes, and Baydel dismisses him with a flick of his wrist. The

man practically runs from the room, skittish as a mouse. My father gives himself an approving look in the mirror before crossing to his desk. He scoops up his mask—made entirely of diamonds—and slides it over his eyes.

"If you called me up here for compliments on your outfit, you're wasting your time, old man."

"Watch your mouth."

I smile—a sardonic, overstretched smile. The same smile that has been the last thing so many have seen before their deaths. The smile that earned me my nickname, the Nightmare.

He has the decency to look unnerved. "I called you up here to discuss tonight's event—"

"Been to six of these Choosings," I cut him off. "Nothing new to discuss."

"You and the other Legends have *failed* for six years." He stalks over to me. We're eye to eye in height, but I can feel his power rising in the room.

I shrug. "I don't see your mate anywhere," I say.

He raises a hand but stops before he lands the blow. "If it was any other night than the Choosing, I'd slap that smile right off your face."

I laugh, slow and frigid. If my mother were truly here, she'd never allow him to harm me. She wouldn't have allowed him to turn into the bastard he has, either. But she abandoned us long ago, along with my friends' mothers, the goddesses Tareena, Eirdis, and Neph.

"It's your year," Baydel says after a breath. He straightens his gold jacket, the shimmering fabric hanging well past his hips. "Your turn to choose one for the Legends. Try to pick one who will actually make it past a month this time."

"It's not our fault they get squeamish once two or more of us take her to bed at the same time," I argue, ignoring the sting in my gut. Not from any scorned affections I had for the previous potentials, but from the sheer terror that's overcome them all after barely getting to know us.

"It *is* your fault," he says. "You could tamp down your powers when all four of you are together with the potential."

"Why should we change who we are? The potential mate won't survive the Athanry if she can't even handle our collective powers, in or out of the bedroom."

Baydel steps closer, and I shift off the pillar to meet him.

"You need to take this more seriously," he says. "Now more than ever."

Curious, I tilt my head. "What are you keeping from me?" Besides everything, the bastard.

"You know the stakes," he grumbles. "The goddesses in stasis can only remain and act as powerful wards while you and the Legends offer them drops of your

powers yearly. Those are the terms they set when they went to sleep decades ago to protect us. They wanted connection to their only sons to assure them that Lumathyst is still worthy of their protection. Among the other important reasons to find a mate, they *created* the Choosing for you four to find one and prove the royal traditions will hold."

Guilt gnaws at my chest like a trapped rat. The last thing any of us want to do is let down our mothers. The Legends, including myself, have been doing our duty to them since we came of age and into our own powers, years ago; before then, our fathers handled the offerings. But Baydel's sense of urgency raises my hackles. He's never been fully honest with me. I can taste the calculated lies he weaves daily. But what exactly he's lying about, I don't know.

"It's more important than ever that you find your mate," he continues. "Especially with the significant threat across the seas. You know how Erithmore hates us. And do you think your people will continue to serve you if they know their rulers can't appease their goddesses? The people will turn on you the second they aren't being provided for, and then we'll have another rebellion on our hands. Erithmore would love the opportunity to ally with rebels. The people can smell weakness—"

"Lumathyst is not weak. Our mothers made sure of it," I snap.

"If your mothers hadn't written the rules of the Choosing, I would simply audition girls until I found one who could actually tolerate the lot of you," he snaps, shaking his head. "Lumathyst may be strong, but you *Legends* are making a mockery of our royal line."

The power in my veins rumbles, demanding to be unleashed. I could make him terrified, make him believe his worst nightmares are tapping on his shoulder, sliding their fingers around his throat—

My father smiles knowingly and flicks his hand. In an instant, I'm immobilized. My body is entirely under his control.

"*You* are weak," he whispers. "Just because you and the other Legends take care of the traitorous filth littering our streets doesn't make you powerful men."

He releases me, tipping his chin, waiting. He *wants* a reaction, wants a fight.

So, I don't give him one.

"Has Erithmore been mobilizing?" I ask as if he didn't just violate me again. Didn't just use his power against his own son.

Baydel smirks as if he's impressed. I know he isn't.

Lumathyst is the largest kingdom in the Crescent Sea. Vleyica and Cardrayton are our allies to the south, and our biggest threat is Erithmore to the north. We've had a tentative peace with Erithmore for decades, but as the second-largest realm, they are always in competition with us.

They hate our monopoly on trade from Vleyica and Cardrayton. If Erithmore's armies ever outmatched ours, they wouldn't hesitate to try to conquer us. Luckily, the goddesses' dormant powers offer protection within our borders, making the idea of conquering us a fool's dream.

"Nothing concrete yet," Baydel says. "You know how they envy us. We need to keep it at envy and not ambition. Plus, there is always a concern of demis organizing—"

"You and the other kings either banished the ancestral demis to the Ashlands, stripping them of all wealth and privilege and hope, or work them within an inch of their lives. Most demi lines have been diluted to minimal powers, if *any*. There hasn't been a whisper of them scheming against the royals in centuries. You can't honestly view them as a threat?"

"We intend to keep their loyalty and submission," he says, "so another uprising doesn't happen." He motions toward the door. "Finish getting dressed. I'll see you up there. Watch for my cues on who to pick. If you listen this time, perhaps you'll actually choose someone correctly."

I give him an acidic smile and stride from the room, taking the golden elevator up to Axl's floor. We always meet in his rooms when we stay in the palace. I use the ride up to steel my nerves, but it does nothing to quell the restless energy inside me. Thanks to my father's power move, I want to break something. Or better yet, cut into someone. My fingers itch as I trail them over the hilts of the blades strapped beneath my jacket.

"How is your old man?" Axl asks as I enter his room.

I plop down on one of his leather sofas, kicking my feet up on a glass table. "Prickish. Yours?"

"Same," Axl says, adjusting his tie in front of the mirror across the room.

"Did you comb your beard?" I tease. His long black hair is secured with a leather tie, his full beard trimmed and immaculate. Normally he looks as wild as the sea he loves so much.

"Choosing night," he says, a wide grin stretching his lips.

I shake my head, but I feel the corner of my mouth tug up slightly, unable to stop the effect his adventurous energy has on me. It's better than the rage my father invoked.

"Aren't you even a little excited?" he asks, sinking onto the couch opposite me. He reaches for the decanter in the middle of the table and pours two glasses of amber liquid, sliding one toward me. "It's your year to pick."

I take the glass, clinking it against his before throwing back the contents in one gulp. The burn is just what I need, so I pour myself another. "About that…"

"You two about ready?" Kal calls, sauntering into the room, his dark-brown

hair perfectly combed, his face clean-shaven, looking every inch the part of the golden boy. If we hadn't grown up together, I'd probably hate him for his ability to make calm, collected, and confident look effortless. Lucky for him, I love him like he's blood.

"We're waiting on you and Pierce," Axl says, pouring himself another drink. "It doesn't take much to make me look this damn good." He stretches his arm over the back of the couch, crossing an ankle over his knee.

Kal laughs, straightening his red suit jacket. "My father held me up," he says. "Pierce's, too—"

"I'm here," Pierce interrupts, joining us. "Did each of your fathers express the urgency of selecting correctly this year? Or just mine?"

Kal nods. Axl groans and drops his head back dramatically. I can only smile bitterly.

"They've never been quite this invested in our pursuits," Pierce continues. His dark-brown eyes go distant in that way they do when he's analyzing a situation. His nickname is "the Mind" for a reason—he sees angles others don't and has more knowledge rattling around up there than a hundred Lumathyst historians. "Why do you suppose that is?"

I set down my empty glass, and the crystal clinks against the table. "Baydel mentioned appeasing our mothers' wishes." I sigh. "And a threat from Erithmore."

"My father mentioned the offerings, too," Axl says.

"Did Baydel refer to a particular group in Erithmore?" Pierce asks.

"No," I answer.

"How vague," Pierce says, brows pinched.

Axl grips the back of the couch a bit harder. "What fools would have the courage to threaten the kings?"

"That's the question," I say. We fall silent, and I immediately feel restless. "But about tonight. Axl, why don't you take my pick?"

"Why would I do that?" Axl shrugs. "It's your turn."

Kal rounds the sofa, sitting in the armchair next to me. Pierce smoothly leans against the armrest of Axl's sofa.

"You know me," I say, as if that's explanation enough. "I don't care either way."

"But if we pick right…" Axl's voice trails off. "Imagine," he continues. "A mate strong enough to handle all of us? It'd be—"

"A fairy tale," I cut him off. Not that I haven't thought about the benefits of having a mate before—having someone who understood us in a way only a mate could. Someone who could take on all of us and beg for more, someone who

wouldn’t cower in fear beneath us…

Again, a fantasy.

There hasn’t been a potential yet who could handle each of us on our own, and not *one* has ever actually enjoyed our company enough to choose us. None earned our tokens—our sacred items that we’d award the potential at the end of our individual months with her, a symbol of our promise to her. We tried, though. We always *try*.

A fuck is easy to find, but a mate?

Not that I’ve ever fucked any of the potentials before. I left that to Axl, Pierce, and Kal. Sure, I watched, but not one of the potentials has ever been brave enough to try to seduce the Nightmare. Not when they know what I can do, what I’ve done to anyone who has crossed me.

“You don’t think this year will be any different,” Kal says, not asking. He presses his lips together, his blue eyes going all *broken heart* on me.

I glare at him. “Maybe I’m not excited to select another potential only for them to reject us before reaching the Athanry.”

Kal’s shoulders drop, and I instantly regret the outburst. He’s chosen twice, and both of them left the instant they could. Our mothers made the contract magically binding but would never force anyone to love us, so they included the option to leave after a month. So many have left us then, taking their compensation and never looking back.

Kal takes it the hardest out of all of us—not that we don’t all feel the sting of rejection—but that’s Kal, the Dreamer. His heart is his weakness, though it’s about the only one he has.

“I haven’t lost hope,” he says, but a muscle in his jaw ticks.

I hit a nerve, but let’s face it—that’s what I do.

“I don’t want your choice,” Axl says, shaking his head. “You should at least see who’s out there.” He leans forward with his elbows on his knees and grins. “You never know. This year could be different.” Axl’s excited energy is contagious; it’s one of my favorite things about him. He’s rarely ever dismayed by obstacles and is always down for anything—especially all my bad ideas.

“Come on,” he says, standing and motioning toward a long mahogany table across the room. “I commissioned new masks for the occasion.”

We follow him to the table. It’s clear which mask is meant for each of us; though most of their design is identical, they’re easily distinguishable by the gemstones set under the left eye slits that match the official colors of our cities: Kal’s has rubies, Pierce’s has emeralds, and Axl’s, sapphires. Mine has black diamonds, a nod to my Obsidian city.

I run my fingers over mine, admiring the detail in the metalwork. It’s a full-

face mask with a vertical opening from beneath the nose to below the lower lip and two horizontal ones for the eyes. The rest is covered with intricate designs that whirl toward a sharp chin.

We scoop them up, sliding them over our faces in a move that almost feels rehearsed. Something shifts among us, our powers snapping through the room. United and strong, the Legends of Chaos are something to be feared.

And tonight, I suppose, the woman I select will be the least terrified of them.

Axl claps me on the shoulder. “I’ll take your pick if you haven’t found anyone by midnight. Deal?”

I give him a nod as we head out the door and file into the elevator.

“She’s out there,” Axl says hopefully.

“She has to be,” Kal adds.

“And if she isn’t?” Pierce counters, always one to explore both sides.

“Then we go another year without our mate,” I answer plainly. “And risk losing our mothers’ protection of Lumathyst.”

5

Rylee

“Invitation,” the enforcer at the gates of the palace says in a gruff tone as we stop before him.

I hand mine over first, proud when my fingers don’t tremble. I deserve to be here. I deserve answers.

“Take a pin if you agree to the contract.” The enforcer holds out a silver bucket filled to the brim with glittering jeweled pins. I hesitate, but only for a second, before plucking one from the pile and securing it on my dress above my left breast. Ivy and Layce do the same.

My friends are right. The money I can get from selling this after the event outweighs the risks of being selected as a potential mate. I won’t go near the princes—just like Ivy and Layce said—so I won’t get chosen. Knowing I can feed a starving group of Ashlanders with the money earned from this pin makes it worth it.

I glance down at the jewel-encrusted gold pin as we follow a herd of other event guests up the palace steps and inside. The large, gilded base holds four tiny precious gemstones from the Legends’ cities: a ruby, an emerald, a sapphire, and a black diamond. The four gems surround a smaller cluster of clear diamonds in the center of the pin, making up a number that is now linked to my invitation.

Thirteen.

I do my best to think it’s a coincidence that I drew an unlucky number and focus on the relief barreling through me as we’re directed toward a hallway filled with glistening golden elevators. I made it through without a hitch. Not that I ever doubted Ivy’s forged invitation.

“I hate this part,” Layce whispers as we slide into the elevator.

“Deep breath,” Ivy says, her shoulder brushing Layce’s as we’re crowded into a corner.

Four other people pile in beside us: two giggling women our age, dressed in bright-yellow dresses with sparkling masks that look like they’re made from real honeybees, and an older couple that seems to be their parents. I glare at them for their lack of empathy for the creatures, knowing full well they could’ve used fabric for the design, like my mask. But that’s Lumathyst nobility for you—entitled, never thinking twice about a resource before exploiting it.

I tear my eyes from them. I wonder what it would be like to be here solely for the chance to be selected as a potential mate, and not to illegally search for answers about my missing sister.

A groove appears between Layce's brows as the elevator jolts upward, moving at top speed as it carries us toward the roof of the palace. Ivy told me about it beforehand, but there's nothing quite like experiencing it for myself. I can't stop my grin at the rush, the knowledge that this tiny gold contraption now holds our lives. One break and we'll all plummet to our deaths.

I let out a small, excited laugh. Maybe I'm as mad as Turner always says I am. As everyone says.

Maybe I don't care. It's easy to laugh at death when you've got nothing to lose.

The twinkling lights above us flicker, and Ivy flashes me a concerned look. Layce bites her lip, her fingers gripping the rail behind her so hard, her knuckles turn white.

The buzzing yellow bees beside us look our way, their mouths scrunched up as if they can smell the lower cities on us—or maybe they're so wealthy, they look at everyone like that.

The flickering intensifies, and I step in front of Layce, smoothing my cheek over hers, drawing an arm up to lean against the elevator wall. To the bees, it looks like we're embracing. Just a friendly, supportive touch as Ivy blocks her from the other side. Girls telling secrets before the big event. They can't see the air I'm spinning from my fingers, the cool breeze I'm guiding over Layce's face and into her lungs. She's always loathed tight spaces.

"Thank you." Layce breathes the words as the elevator stops.

The bee family buzzes out the second the doors sweep open, but Ivy and I remain, not budging until we know Layce is in control.

"I'm good," she says, the white streaks of barely contained power in her eyes dimming as her panic ebbs. She squeezes my hand and hustles out the doors, sucking in a deep breath the second she's clear of them.

Ivy and I follow her, the heels of our shoes clinking on the floor—

"Holy shit," I gasp, and I turn a few heads with the remark. I lower my voice, barely holding back a laugh as Ivy tugs me to the right.

Power. This is what real power looks like, to make a place like this *exist*.

We're at least three hundred floors up, and the event space is a giant balcony that juts from the side of the palace. The inky sky stretches above our heads in a blanket of stars, and the floor is made entirely of glass, the surface so smooth and polished it looks like we're walking on starlight. A thrill sends shivers over my skin.

The most eligible and wealthy of Lumathyst are milling about the large space, draped in red and sapphire and emerald and gold, most doing their best not to look down. Fear and discomfort are evident in the tight lines of their lips or the nervous flutter of their fingers as they talk and gossip and sip the sparkling wine being served by the royal staff.

“Clever,” I say, following Ivy and Layce as they head right for the food.

“What is?” Ivy asks, delicately plucking a ripe strawberry covered in fluffy cream from one of the many serving platters scattered atop rows and rows of tables lining the balcony. I follow suit, grabbing a chocolate-covered strawberry and popping it into my mouth. I moan, unable to contain it. We never have strawberries in the Ashlands.

When I come down from my high, I motion to the crystal-clear floor. “Intimidation,” I say. “Hosting the event in a space most find terrifying.”

Ivy and Layce are as unbothered as I am by the height and the appearance that nothing separates us from falling to our deaths. We’ve been in far tighter spots before and survived—like when Erin and I concocted a plan to steal food from a duke who was hosting a party in Oak and Iron. Ivy and Layce had of course tagged along. We’d almost made it out with our spoils when the host spotted me and waved down a kings’ enforcer who’d been lingering outside. Soon we were being chased through the streets by six enforcers and only managed to lose them by climbing one of the nearby taller buildings and hiding on a thin balcony that had seen much better days. We laughed about it after, but it had been a close call. Still, we’d taken all that stolen food to a home of starving Ashlanders, so it’d been worth it.

In comparison, walking on glass is a breeze.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” a deep, robust voice announces over the twinkling music. “Please welcome the Legends of Chaos!”

The crowd around us shifts, energy sparking with excitement and awe as four men emerge from a private elevator. They’re each wearing a mask that’s identical to over two dozen others worn by their entourage, but even from here I can tell they’re built like royalty—soldiers’ bodies, each one cut from the same cloth. Good. Now I at least know their builds, so I can avoid them the entire night.

“And your hosts for the evening,” the announcer continues over the sounds of the crowd. “The kings of Lumathyst.”

Acid claws up my throat as I follow every single person around us—even the Legends—and bow as the four immortal kings appear from the same private elevator. One is dressed in glittering gold, a smirk the only thing truly visible beneath his diamond mask. Another wears emerald green, another ruby red, and

the last, glimmering sapphire. They do not release us from our bows, and while hunched over, the crowd in the center of the balcony parts as the kings make their way to the opposite side, climbing a large dais and taking the four thrones positioned there.

The one in gold, King Baydel Lavine, stands after they've been served drinks and finally motions for us all to rise. Bastards.

"It is my honor," King Baydel says to the silent crowd, "to welcome you all to the Legends' sixth Choosing." The diamonds in his mask sparkle distractingly beneath the lights. I have to squint as he scans the crowd. "One of you will be chosen as their potential…" A collective, hopeful energy flows through the crowd, and it's an effort not to roll my eyes. "And if the goddesses will it, you will be a fated mate by the winter solstice." He raises his glass and motions to the four Legends waiting patiently at the foot of the dais. "So, drink, dance, eat. Converse. And may the goddesses be with you."

"Oh, *please*," I whisper as the crowd claps and raises their glasses to him. The music swirls around us once more, the chatter cacophonous even in the exposed outdoors. A plethora of dresses swarms the Legends, the women practically stepping over one another to get to them first, all not-so-subtly displaying their numbered pin as clearly as they can. "Can't they see the way King Baydel is looking at all of us?" I say to Ivy. "More like chattel for slaughter. And look…" I nod toward the women hovering around the Legends. "They're flocking like good little sheep."

Ivy starts to respond, but a deep, languid laugh resonates behind me. The sound sends warm shivers over my skin. I glance over my shoulder, trying to be casual about it, but fail miserably when I meet a pair of indigo eyes, barely visible behind his full-face mask. I feel his laugh in my bones, can still see it in the way his eyes are smiling. I'd bet my entire wealth—which isn't much—that he's grinning beneath that mask.

Whirling back around, I try to catch the breath I somehow lost. Did he hear me? I thought only Ivy could hear, but if he did and he *laughed* at it? That level of disrespect is grounds for both of us to be thrown in the palace dungeons.

Dangerous, reckless. I'm not here to draw attention to myself. I need to be more careful.

I press against Ivy's shoulder insistently, and we work our way deeper into the crowd, bringing Layce with us. I want to kick myself for looking back, but I can't help it.

Purple eyes find mine among the sea of masks and bodies, and my stomach *flips*. The man holds my gaze for a few seconds before slowly turning away. I get a glimpse of short blue-black hair, like raven's feathers, and a lithe body draped

in midnight black, before he's swallowed by the crowd.

"See something you like?" Layce teases.

"Definitely," I admit. "Not that I'm looking."

"You should always be looking," Ivy encourages as Layce brings us to a stop in the center of the crowd. We have a perfect line of sight to the space in front of the dais.

"Why here?"

"You don't want to miss the show," Layce answers. "Being your first time and all." She smiles and winks at my confusion.

The magical orbs of light hovering over us dim on cue, and the music softens to a barely audible hum. The kings shift on their thrones, delight flickering over their features as they eye the empty space before them expectantly.

"The Tale of the Four Goddesses," the announcer says. Ivy and Layce mouth along to the words. Spotlights erupt near the dais. "As portrayed by the Ruby Aire Players!"

"In the beginning," Ivy whispers in a mocking lilt under the announcer as he shifts to a narrative tone.

"There were four men who stood above the rest," the announcer continues, the spotlight trailing over the kings. "And there were goddesses who walked among us." The lights shift to the space before the dais. "Four goddesses who fell in love."

"You've got to be kidding me," I groan to Ivy. "We all know this story—"

"Shh," Layce says, nudging me. "Look at the costumes, the *details*." She gazes longingly as each actress performs onstage.

"Evaluna," the announcer says as an absolutely stunning woman draped in royal blue silk and stardust, her hair as black as night and eyes rimmed in streaks of silver, dances in smooth movements along the stage, "goddess of the moon and stars, chose King Baydel Lavine as her mate, imbuing him with immortality and powers the likes of which Lumathyst had never seen.

"Tareena," he continues, "goddess of earth and water, chose King Lucas Dawson…" A gorgeous actress sheathed in hunter green and ocean blue glides with fluid movements onto the stage. "Eirdis," he says, drawing out the name like *er-deeze*, "the goddess of wisdom and time, chose King Brooks Bertrand…" This actress wears purple, her hair an array of beautiful curls, the symbol of a spider laid into the delicate folds of her dress. "And finally," the announcer calls, and my breath catches. "Neph, the goddess of sky and sun, chose King Jullian Erhart." This actress is covered in gold, her hair done in a wide fan around her face, her eyes resembling the sun itself.

Neph is the goddess whose gift runs through my veins. The cloud birthmark

practically burns on the back of my neck as the actresses fall on their knees before the kings the goddesses once chose.

I wonder, not for the first time, what the real goddesses looked like, wonder if our goddesses would be pleased by the portrayal or offended by it. Shouldn't the kings be bowing to them? Not the other way around?

"Together, the Kings and the Goddesses of Lumathyst created our beloved kingdom," the announcer goes on. "Together, they loved and lived in a passion that can never compare, and the goddesses walked among the people of Lumathyst, blessing those they deemed worthy.

"But the imbalance of power became a catalyst for betrayal by their people, so the goddesses wanted to ensure their sons, their only heirs, would never suffer the same fate. They used their magic to call forth for their sons only *one* mate who would connect them all, to act as their tether to the people of Lumathyst and ground them if their hunger for power ever grew too large.

"And all too soon, Lumathyst suffered attacks from those overseas who wished to conquer our prosperous land. The goddesses were heartbroken. They did not want their young sons to grow up during a bloody war. And so they sacrificed their current lives, putting themselves to sleep, using their inherent powers to act as protective wards against those enemies who would threaten their mates' and their sons' future."

The goddesses on the stage fold in on themselves, sadness coloring their features. But I barely see them. Instead, I see the kings poised on their thrones, the four Legends still near the dais before them, surrounded by wealth. I see no hint of sadness in the kings' eyes, no ounce of regret or longing. They don't look like mates being reminded of those they lost.

They look like men with the power of the goddesses, intent on doing anything, killing anyone to keep it.

Why would the goddesses go to sleep when they could've likely created wards on their own? That part of the story always rubbed me the wrong way.

"And so it has been, with the kings working tirelessly to ensure Lumathyst prospers…" The story progresses, but I shake my head.

"The only reason they have any wealth is because those beneath them dig it out for them at the expense of their backs," I mutter under my breath.

Layce gasps at my side, eyes darting around to see if anyone heard me.

But a familiar laugh sounds again, this time right behind me, right at my ear, and a shudder runs down my body.

"That mouth," the deep, masculine voice says.

I turn around, looking up into those indigo eyes.

"I bet it gets you into all kinds of trouble," he whispers, and this time I can't

tell if he’s smiling or intrigued or offended. The metal mask covers too much of his face.

“Maybe it does,” I say as the play continues behind me. “Who’s asking?” I arch a brow and feel my black butterfly mask rise with the movement.

His eyes roam over my face, down my neck, over my body, lingering on my pin for a few seconds. “No one important,” he says, then nods past me, to the play. “You don’t seem to agree with the pageantry. Why?”

“The pageantry is fine,” I say, turning back to the show. I feel him move closer behind me, and something inside me stretches toward him like a cat begging for attention. I don’t have time for this, whatever this is, but I can’t deny that I like it. It’s been a while since I felt that spark with someone. That itch to discover and touch and play. And I haven’t even seen this one’s face. “Beautiful, even,” I say, watching as the goddesses on the stage appear to turn to stone. “It’s the writing that bothers me.”

Ivy flashes me a warning look.

A low, amused murmur rumbles in his chest, and I swear I feel it between my thighs. *Who is he?*

“Are you a writer?” he asks.

“No,” I admit.

“Then what bothers you about it?”

I swallow hard. Telling the truth is grounds for imprisonment, and I’ve already run my mouth past its allowance tonight.

“Is it the romance?” he whispers in my ear when I don’t answer. I can feel the heat of him, can smell his smoke-and-leather scent as it curls around my body. “The history? Or is it the unbelievable parts that are hard to swallow?”

Surprise flits through me, and I glance back at him. He’s so close, my lips almost brush his mask, but then again, we’re all crowded together. “Which unbelievable parts?” I whisper. There are so many.

The performance ends, and Ivy and Layce clap along with the rest of the crowd.

He could be talking about the goddesses blessing the people of Lumathyst and making them demis for no reason, or the fact that they fell in love and chose non-gods as their mates—

“The part where the goddesses leave their beloved sons for the sake of a threat they could’ve easily wiped out with half a thought,” he says under the sound of the crowd’s approval.

Shock tightens my skin. He could be baiting me, or he could merely share my thoughts on our kingdom’s founding mythology. Either way, I can’t take the risk. As much as my body is begging me to keep talking to him, keep standing near

him, keep inhaling that intoxicating scent and getting lost in those indigo eyes, I didn't come here for that.

It's not to eat and drink and dance. To gossip and laugh and flirt. I'm here to find my sister, or at least discover where she went.

So, I turn around and give him my best, most nothing smile. "No honorable citizen of Lumathyst would say or agree with such heresy," I say.

His eyes flicker down to my lips. "Who says I'm an honorable citizen?"

The words send lightning through my veins. "Well, I most certainly am," I manage to say, my voice cracking slightly. "And I must do my duty." I bow slightly to him. "And submit myself to the Legends as a potential choice."

Those eyes grin like a cat catching a canary. "With all the other sheep?"

I'm already backing away, but I don't break his gaze. "Baa," I say, then wink at him before whirling around and losing myself in the crowd.

6

Rylee

One thing I can give the kings credit for—beyond the beauty of their palace—is their insistence on keeping a gargantuan library of records.

I follow the route I've memorized from Ivy's map of the palace, easily slipping from the balcony and inside, turning left down one hallway and right down another until I've found the room I've been waiting a year to get into.

I can almost hear my sister's voice challenging me, urging me to look for all the exits, even the ones that aren't obvious.

Slipping through the unguarded double doors, I note two doors in the back of the expansive room and a dozen windows on the second level that I can duck out of if necessary.

The walls are lined with floor-to-ceiling mahogany shelves encrusted with rubies, emeralds, and sapphires. The tomes glow from hidden lights lining the shelves, making each glisten like a gem begging to be plucked. The amount of magic it must take to power this place is completely unfathomable to me.

I hurry deeper into the room, the smell of leather and paper beckoning me. I've always loved books, but they're a rarity in the Ashlands. Stealing books is the only thing I've ever actually felt bad about. Taking the wealthy's food or money never brings me guilt, but their books? What kind of an asshole steals someone's favorite escape?

Me.

I'm the asshole.

But to be fair, the kings banned books from Ashlanders, so desperate times. We're all taught to read so we can better serve in the Ashlands, but reading for pleasure is what's forbidden.

But I'm not after a book today, despite the worn bindings lining the shelves practically screaming for my attention. One crack of a cover and I can be in a different world. Between the pages, I'm not a thieving Ashlander living for scraps from the royals—I can be a princess or a warrior or an enchantress. Any given story can become my entire personality if I wish.

I skim my fingers over a wooden table the size of a small pond that dominates the center of the records room, stopping before a massive row of scrolls speared on iron rods for easy access. This information isn't secured because no one cares

about the names on it. And knowing the names and locations on the list doesn't hold any power, either—hence this room remaining unguarded.

But *I* care. I care so deeply about this.

My pulse races as I unroll scroll after scroll, searching, searching…

The Never List. I try not to squeal in victory. *Almost there, Erin. Wherever they sent you, I'm coming.* I hurry through the list of names and take a silent moment to thank the goddesses that it's in alphabetical order.

"Gray, Gray, Gray." I whisper our surname. "Goddess, how many Grays are on this thing?" There are so many, the common surname going on for ages. Several of them have *Palace Dungeons* next to them; some of them are stricken through with a thick line of ink, which I assume means they've passed.

I pause when I see our parents' names and the location *Erithmore* written next to them. I swallow around the lump in my throat, the old wound throbbing with a dull ache only decades of separation can manage.

Despite the hardship they'd faced, my parents lived a simple life and were content with the family they'd built. Their first names were never added under the *Gray* surname on the list until they were caught crossing borders one night, dressed above their station—my father wanted to take my mother to a tavern in Leaf and Claw for their anniversary celebration. Their punishment earned them a one-way trip to Erithmore on a fatal mission for the kings.

That was the year I turned twenty-one, reaching the age of maturity where we stop counting the years. We live hundreds of years if we're lucky, but usually that high number is only reached by the wealthy, who can afford to live that long.

There's no line stricken through their names, so a small hope grows that they may be alive in Erithmore.

Just as quickly that hope disappears.

They left two decades ago. We never saw them again. It's a fool's dream to think them anything but dead.

I move past their names, waiting for Erin's to appear. For her name to jump out at me with the location appointed to her when she got caught here last year, whether that be dungeons or somewhere overseas. Because that's what *had* to happen, even though it doesn't make sense.

Erin could get out of any tight situation, physically or mentally. She could charm or seduce her way out of the worst trouble with the kings' enforcers and was practically best friends with the shadows. How did she get caught? How in the goddesses' names did she draw enough attention to herself for them to realize she was an Ashlander?

"Gray, Gray, Gray…"

I hunch over the scroll, my eyes darting back and forth a few times, checking the aliases I've known her to use, too…

She's not here.

Her name isn't on the list.

My stomach drops to the floor, and I back away from the scroll like it might explode any second—some horrible, awful trick set just for me by the kings.

But I'm not significant enough to merit a trick from them, so I hurry to roll it back up and return it exactly as I found it.

Slowly, I walk toward the double doors, my mind whirling.

If Erin didn't make the Never List, then what happened to her?

A traitorous image flashes through my mind, one of Erin meeting someone at the Choosing and running away with them. Starting a new life somewhere far, far away from the Ashlands. She could do it. She could succeed in the shadows, live unchecked and unmarked by the kings' enforcers if she wished, but we'd always wanted to stay and do what we could to help the people there. Stealing food was a weekly outing we did together, along with scavenging for clothes or medicine for those who needed it, too.

What if she wanted to put all that behind her? Saw a way out and took it?

I force the thoughts away. She wouldn't have left me behind—

The door swings open just as I'm reaching for it.

"Well, well, well," a familiar voice says, a pair of indigo eyes locking with mine. "What have we here?"

My lips slip into the innocent smile I know men love, and I tilt my head to the side for good measure. "The funniest thing," I say as I look up at him. "I was searching for the wash chamber and found this place instead. Can you blame me for sneaking a peek?" I stroll to the nearest shelf, trailing my fingers over the spines. "I'm a sucker for a good book."

He stalks over to me, hands sliding into his pockets. The metal mask looks more intimidating in this light, the angles sharper, the slash for the mouth more severe. The hair on the back of my neck stands on end as he stops before me, leaning one arm on the shelf to the left of my face, partially caging me in.

I wait for the instincts to rise, the same ones that are triggered whenever Turner has me up against a wall, cornered and helpless.

But they don't.

For some reason, I'm not afraid of this stranger when I most certainly should be. He's obviously wealthy, and if he knew I'm an Ashlander? Goddess, he could have me thrown in the dungeons with a snap of his fingers.

"You're lying," he deadpans, not budging an inch. "That mouth again," he continues. "You should do something about it."

I tip my chin, not showing him an ounce of the rising panic climbing up my throat. We're alone in a spot in the palace that is most certainly forbidden. "Oh, I bet you have *all* the thoughts on what to do about it," I say, my tone slipping into that seductive lilt Erin taught me—a little softer, a little stickier.

"What's your favorite?" he asks, giving me whiplash.

"Excuse me?"

He draws up his free hand, skimming it along a book on the right of my cheek, completely caging me in now. Something sparks between us, a charge that will either blister or burn, I'm not sure which, but I'm instantly hooked.

"You said you're a sucker for a good book," he says. "What's your preferred poison? Romance, horror, suspense?"

I bite back a genuine, unstoppable smile. "Why can't it be all three?"

A flicker of amusement flashes in his eyes. It's the only emotion I can see with the mask covering his face. I have the most ridiculous urge to reach up and slide it off to see what lies beneath.

His eyes narrow behind the mask, searching me, scanning me. Confusion settles there.

"What are you looking for?" I ask.

"You," he says, shifting closer. Goddess, he smells good, all leather and smoke. "You're alone in a room with a stranger. And the music from the party is so loud, no one would hear you scream," he continues. "But you're not trembling, not even trying to get away."

My heart flutters. "Is that what does it for you, stranger? Making women like me scream?"

"Depends on the type of scream," he says.

Heat crashes over me like a wave. I know I should be scared, but I'm not. Maybe I'm numb from not finding the information I needed. Maybe I've known too many men like Turner, the *real* ones to be afraid of, so I can tell on instinct who is a threat and who isn't.

Maybe I'm too addicted to the rush of danger, like Ivy said.

"What's your favorite type of scream?" I ask, playing right into whatever game he's started.

Shock radiates from behind the mask. "I haven't found a favorite yet, butterfly," he says, eyes flickering to my pin again. "But if I do, I'll be sure to tell you."

The music outside cuts off, the announcer informing the crowd it's thirty minutes to midnight.

I blink out of the haze the stranger has put me under and jerk to attention at the realization that I'm out of time. Once the Legends choose their potential mate,

the party will disperse, and it'll be an even bigger risk to be caught hanging around here.

I'll be leaving this Choosing empty-handed. The weight of that hits me dead center in the chest, and I duck beneath his muscled arm.

"What's wrong?" he asks, following behind me. "You going to turn into a pumpkin at midnight?"

A laugh slips from my lips as I clear the double doors, hurrying down the hallways. "One for fairy tales, huh?"

"Only the darker ones," he calls, keeping a casual pace behind me that rattles me more than if he sprinted. Even at this speed, it feels like I'm being chased.

And I like it.

The open air is cool and welcoming when I make it back onto the balcony. I spot Ivy and Layce across the way, chatting up a couple of masked fellows that are flagging down drinks and no doubt showering them with compliments. I wonder if they've lifted anything from them, or if they might string them along for a night of fun.

The starlight glitters like diamonds beneath my heels as I make my way across the floor, more than ready to join my friends and nurse my wounds back at Ivy's. I make a mental note to steal a bottle of whiskey on the way out. I'll have to come up with a new plan to find Erin, maybe one that involves searching every damned royal city for her. Even if she did run away…I deserve answers.

"Dance with me." I hear the stranger's voice at the same time he touches my wrist, whirling me around and into his embrace in a move so smooth, it should be criminal. I immediately fall into step with him. His other hand snakes around the small of my back, eliciting a trail of fire anywhere he touches.

Goddess, he feels good, maneuvering us around the floor as if no one else is here. His motions are effortless, like shed silk pooling on the floor. I'm lost in it, swept up in a swirl of emotion that's too intoxicating to be real. I haven't had that much to drink, but in his arms, the music and stars twinkling around us, I feel as if I've had several.

"What do you do?" I ask, trying to ground myself in reality, even though we're dancing on starlight.

"Right now, I'm dancing with you, butterfly."

The term of endearment shoots lava through my veins. I'm suddenly starved, but not for food.

"You know what I mean," I say, rolling my eyes. "Do you work in the royal city?" I assume from the cut of his suit and the detail in his mask that he has to live here, or in one of the Legends' cities at the very least.

"Sometimes," he says simply.

Dangerous. He's danger and thrill personified and so damn tempting. It would be too easy to distract myself with him tonight, to fall into whatever spell he's weaving and let him help me forget that I've failed, forget that I'm no closer to finding my sister and that I'm still just an Ashlander in a pretty dress.

"Where are you from?" he asks. "I haven't seen you here before."

"Do you memorize every Choosing's guest list?"

The hand on the small of my back flexes. "Dodging my question," he says, his voice like liquid honey. His indigo eyes fall to my lips. "Better than lying. Maybe that mouth is warming up to me."

"Sounds like you have an issue with liars," I say, noting he's brought it up twice.

"I hate liars," he says smoothly. "Lumathyst is filled with them."

"Yes," I say. "And the biggest ones usually have the deepest pockets." I bite my lip, instantly regretting my retort.

Shock churns in his eyes.

The music fades, the song ending, and I step out of his embrace.

"Thanks for the dance," I say with a wink.

"Don't I get another?"

"Time's up."

Something tugs on me the farther I get away from him, but I ignore it as I finally make my way to Ivy and Layce.

"It's midnight," the announcer says. "Time for the Legends to announce the potential mate of their Choosing."

"Who was the guy?" Ivy leans down, whispering the question in my ear.

My eyes immediately dart to where I'd left him, but he's no longer there. I scan the crowd but can't find him. "No one," I say, my chest tightening. Except maybe someone worth sneaking over borders for. I didn't get his name, though. Probably for the best.

"Didn't look like no one," she says. "Not the way you were dancing."

I wave her off, still searching for him.

The kings rise from their thrones, raising their glasses as the Legends make their way to the stage.

"Wait—" I glance at Ivy, then the dais, as the men who were announced as the Legends don't budge an inch. Instead, three men emerge from the crowd in suits of ruby, emerald, and sapphire, climbing the stairs to stand with their backs to the kings.

Their masks… They all look…

"Bait and switch," Ivy says, impressed, and Layce laughs at the trick.

But I can't share in their impressed intrigue. I'm too busy feeling the floor

shift beneath my feet.

“Thank you all for coming,” the one in the suit of sapphire says, his voice deep and coarse. “With so many amazing and eligible potentials, it’s never an easy decision. On behalf of the Legends of Chaos, we want you all to know how grateful we are that each of you came to meet us. So, for tonight, the number of the potential is—”

Another man cuts in front of him, a pair of indigo eyes finding me through the crowd.

No. Fucking. Way.

“Thirteen,” he says, that silken voice awakening every nerve ending in my body. “The Legends of Chaos choose number thirteen.”

7

Rylee

I’m not sure if I’m breathing.

I can’t hear anything but the static roaring in my ears. I glance down at the diamond-encrusted numbers on my pin, wanting above all to be remembering my number wrong.

But I’m not.

Everything inside me is frozen. I’m certain I’ve fallen into a nightmare. That has to be the only explanation. There is no way tall, dark, and dangerous just said my goddess-damned number.

“Rylee.” Ivy’s voice pops the static, my ears crackling as the sound of applause shakes the world around me. “Rylee,” she says again, a more-than-fake smile on her face as she tries to catch my focus.

I blink until she’s not so blurry and immediately throw my arms around her.

“They’ll kill me,” I whisper into her ear, tears filling my eyes. Panic storms my body, making me tremble against her. I hope anyone who is watching mistakes the tears for joy, not terror. “They’ll kill me for deceiving them, Ivy,” I whisper again, and her grip on me tightens. “If they find out I’m— If they find out what I am—”

A swell of fear crashes over me like an icy tidal wave.

I cling to Ivy, glancing over her shoulder and beyond the crowd, toward the balcony. We’re hundreds of stories up, but I could jump. I could jump and use my powers to slow my fall.

I could run.

“There’s no chance,” Ivy says, reading my eyes. “Don’t you dare take yourself out of the game like that.”

I swallow hard, and Layce comes to our side, hugging us both, buying us more time and shielding our mouths from the ogling crowd around us.

“You make them fall for you,” Ivy says, voice more determined than I’ve ever heard before. “You make them fall for you so fucking hard, they won’t be able to *survive* without you, you understand?”

I part my lips, shaking my head. “How—”

“Whatever it takes, Rylee. You do it. That’s the only play here. And if—*when*—you succeed, it won’t matter where you come from, what runs through your

veins. They'll be *yours*. Nothing and no one will ever be able to touch you again."

I'll never make it that far. My number is linked to my name. I take a deep breath and slow my racing thoughts. At least Gray is a common surname present across all regions, so it won't be immediately known that I'm an Ashlander, but still… I should have asked Ivy to link my invitation to a fake name, but I never once thought I'd get fucking chosen. What else can go wrong tonight?

"She's right," Layce says, pain and regret flashing in her own eyes. Just like Ivy's, they show she's both sorry and shocked at the turn of events.

Six years.

They've been coming here for six years, taking the pins and selling them after, and never once have they drawn enough attention to themselves to get chosen.

Reckless, foolish girl.

Why did I have to flirt with him? Fall prey to those indigo eyes? Why didn't I realize who he was?

A sigh rushes out of me, something between a shudder and a cry. I thought the Legends were on the opposite side of the party, far away from ever laying eyes on me. They made the crowd believe otherwise, so they had the opportunity to browse their selection without anyone being the wiser.

Clever *bastards*.

The partygoers shift around my little group, and I can see the golden uniforms of the kings' enforcers coming my way.

My heart rate skyrockets, causing my airways to shrink.

I squeeze Ivy and Layce tighter.

"Find Erin," I whisper. "If something happens to me—"

"It won't," Ivy says as if she can will it to truth.

"You can do this, Rylee," Layce says. "If any one of us can pull it off, it's you."

"Even if," I say, "and that's a giant *if* I can get them to fall for me, there's the Athanry to contend with." Spiders dance down my spine at the thought.

"One impossible situation at a time," Ivy says, shifting back enough to wind her fingers through my own. "You survive," she demands. "I don't want to go through this life without you."

"Me either," Layce adds.

I glance between them both, a sliver of air working its way into my lungs.

Another breath as I focus on their scents, their comforting embrace—my best friends, my sisters not by blood but by *bond*.

"Now," Ivy says, her eyes widening as the kings' enforcers draw near, the crowd still clapping in awe around us. "Pull up that mask of confidence you're

so damned good at and go win over four mates." She smirks, adjusting my butterfly mask where it tilted. "And then relish as they fight for *your* approval."

When she puts it that way, it seems so easy. Impossibly so, but I cling to the fantasy as they both release me.

"I love you both," I say as one enforcer gently tugs me away from them.

Ivy and Layce mouth the words back, their smiles stretched but believable as they clap with the crowd, but I can see it in their eyes, despite Ivy's confidence. There's true panic there, and fear, and maybe a little grief. Because the three of us know the odds of me escaping this alive.

It's more likely that I've just said my final goodbye to my two best friends in the world.

"Right this way," the enforcer says as he leads me through the crowd, his hand on my shoulder directing me, as if I had a choice to go any other direction.

I close my eyes for the briefest of breaths, digging and clawing up the mask I've worn more times than I can count—the one that fools nobility on the regular. I've never tested it like this before, though. Never with actual royalty. And even as I slide it into place—drawing up a sugar-sweet smile that would make any noble Lumathyst citizen who vied for the role of potential mate proud—I can't shake the feeling that I'm being escorted to my execution with a melody of applause behind me.

"Address the kings first," the enforcer says, his voice gruff, his grip tightening on my shoulder enough that I have to physically stop myself from pulling away from him. Stop myself from twisting out of his grasp and laying him on his ass. Erin and I spent countless hours sparring with each other back in the Ashlands, ensuring we could defend ourselves against enforcers who liked to take liberties. I could do it. I could make him wish he'd never touched me…

But that's not what a potential mate would do. Not one who actually wanted to get chosen.

My heels clink against the glass dais stairs as he draws us up them, stopping us before the kings, who haven't budged from their thrones.

The enforcer drops his touch, and I suck in a deep breath, holding my smile in place as I survey the kings.

What the goddesses am I supposed to do now?

Think, think, think. What would a noble do? Goddesses, what would Ivy *do?*

With no time, I count on my instincts and make my way to the king on the farthest left, bowing so deeply my black skirts flare about the dais, hiding my legs.

"Rise," the king says. Jullian Erhart. That's who I've bowed to first. He gives me a simple nod before I can study the eyes behind the mask, and I take my

dismissal, moving on to the next king. I repeat the process until I come to the last king.

Baydel Lavine is more animalistic-looking than the others, despite the mask. I think it has to do with the way he's surveying me like I'm a meal he's in desperate need of, and he's the only king who sticks out his hand.

At first, I almost move to shake it. But that's ridiculous. Kings don't shake hands, and with the way he's holding it, palm down, his fingers loose and hanging toward the dais, I know what he's demanding.

Acid claws up my throat. This prick wants me to *kiss* his hand.

Another tremor racks my body, but I lock my muscles down before inching my way toward him, still bowed, still wearing that ridiculous grateful smile as I press my lips to the back of his hand. For half a second, I envision sliding two of the jeweled rings right off his fingers, but I quickly squash the instinct.

Once a thief, always a thief.

"You may stand," Baydel says, his voice rumbling over the crowd. Everyone goes silent at the sound. "Turn and face them," he says a little lower.

I obey despite wanting to protest on principle. It feels wrong to turn my back on the kings.

Most of the crowd is smiling up at us, their eyes hazed from drink behind their masks, but there are more than a few women shooting me death glares. I hold my grin but sharpen my gaze across them. I've never been one to take kindly to judgment—credit can go to everyone spitting on Ashlanders my entire life. It just twists me up the wrong way.

But a higher-class lady wouldn't stoop so low as to glare back at the jealous crowd. So, I tip my chin up, searching the sea of faces for my friends. I find them wearing expressions of approval, hands clasped as Ivy sends me an almost imperceptible nod. I can practically hear her in my head, saying, *Good, make them fall. Make them all fall.*

I nod back just as the announcer says my name again, and the same enforcer walks up behind me, taking me by the arm and hustling me toward the group of Legends like a prize mare.

My eyes tear away from the crowd, landing on the four men the enforcer is hurrying me toward. They're captivating up close, even with the masks. Now that I draw nearer, I can feel their powers charging the air between us in an overwhelming wave that threatens to steal my breath. I check myself, burying my own power deep inside me so they can't sense it as the enforcer jerks us to a halt so hard, I nearly trip.

I fling my free arm, trying to right my balance, but instead connect with a strong chest, a muscled arm sliding around my waist, steadying me.

“Take your hand off of her,” a deep voice says, the timbre confident and full.

The enforcer immediately releases me, and the effect has me stumbling even farther against the hard chest of the man holding me. My palms flatten over endless muscle, and I tip my head upward as I right myself.

His mask is identical to the one the man I danced with wore, except where that man’s stones were black, these are glistening rubies that match the color of his suit. I inhale at the deep blue of his eyes, the kindness in them as he looks down at me, and the absolute murderous shift they have when they look at the enforcer behind me.

“Touch her like that one more time, and you’ll lose more than that arm,” the man says, and the enforcer bows quickly before practically sprinting off the dais.

“Thanks,” I say, catching the scent of sunshine and lemon verbena as I take a step away from him.

He smooths down his immaculate suit jacket, dipping his head slightly before glancing behind him, where the other Legends wait.

One second, I’m standing among them, and the next, they’re whisking me off the dais, down the steps, and through the crowd. It parts as if some great power is shifting them out of the way, and all I can think as they herd me into a private golden elevator is *thank goddess I didn’t trip in front of all these people.*

I can hardly breathe around the power filling the small space as they fall two and two to my side in the elevator, the one with long black hair and the sapphires in his mask hitting a button that has us jolting down so fast my stomach flips.

I close my eyes and breathe, stifling the elated giggle that builds at the base of my throat, threatening to spill out in a mixture of joy and terror and pure madness. Because that’s what this is. I started the night off by dodging a power-drunk abusive ex, then offering a forged invitation to an event I have no business attending, and I’m ending it in an elevator with four of the most powerful beings in Lumathyst.

Breathe. Just breathe, I tell myself as I cling to something solid to focus on. Their names would be a good start. I draw up memories from the Ashlands, the posters plastered along brick walls.

The rubies, that’s Kal Erhart.

Sapphires is Axl Dawson.

Emeralds is Pierce Bertrand.

And the black diamonds…that’s Jax Lavine.

A warm shiver rakes down my body as I crane my head just slightly to look at him, my eyes finding him effortlessly as he leans against the wall of the elevator on the other side of Pierce. I swear his purple eyes sear as they meet mine, a thousand unspoken questions churning there as I force myself to look away.

The Nightmare. That’s his nickname. That’s what the kingdom deemed him long ago. His ruthlessness has shredded through more people than is likely public knowledge.

I danced with the Nightmare.

I flirted with him. More than that, I *wanted* him.

I still do. I can still feel that humming in my blood, a pull toward where he stands in the corner.

Goddess help me.

“Your name?” Kal asks, his tone soothing. Careful, even.

I hesitate, wondering if I should give a fake name but instantly dismissing it. The forged invitation will have my real name attached, and it’s common enough that I won’t immediately be outed as an Ashlander. They’ll have to dig to figure that out. I just have to hope I have enough time to work out what to do before then.

“Rylee,” I say, hating that my voice cracks. “Rylee Gray.”

The elevator halts, the doors sliding open to a grand room filled with slick marble floors, lush furniture, and a view of the sparkling royal city. Kal holds the doors open for me, ushering me inside.

I take one step, then two, as if I expect an axe to come down on me at any moment.

“We’ll be right back, Rylee,” Kal says, his voice filled with warmth as if he’s assuring a scared puppy.

“Where are you going?” I ask, whirling around, eyes wide as I see the elevator doors sliding closed, the image of the four of them burned on the backs of my lids before they disappear.

8

Jax

“I hate the start of these tests,” Kal says as we walk into Axl’s rooms and shed our masks, laying them on the table.

Kal leans against it, Pierce electing to hold up a pillar across from it. Axl and I take our previous spots on the couches, Axl instantly pouring the both of us another drink.

“How do you think she’ll do with this first one?” Axl asks, sliding me the bourbon.

I grip the glass, bringing it to my lips as I imagine the butterfly’s sharp tongue pitted against my father’s no doubt harsh words. I swallow a healthy pull and laugh.

Pierce straightens as he saunters toward me, studying me like I’m an explosion waiting to happen.

“When you laugh like that,” Pierce says, settling next to Axl across from me, “bad things happen.”

Kal comes around, too, dropping into the armchair. All their eyes are on me. That wary look they probably don’t even realize they’re doing. I get it. I really do. Fuck, I’d be offended if they didn’t fear me just a little bit.

Axl is the least concerned of our group, but his eyes are watchful as he finishes his drink. “Way to wait till the last minute to choose,” he says, setting down his glass. “What made you change your mind?”

“You danced with her,” Kal says before I can come up with an answer. “I’ve never seen you do that before.” I can’t tell if he sounds more worried or intrigued.

I take a few moments to sort it out myself, sipping on my drink.

Kal is right. I’ve never danced with a potential—I prefer watching them dance around me. There is power in the stillness, in watching. You learn their tells, their desperations, as they try to catch your eye, seeking your approval. I rarely hand out praise unless it’s earned, and since I’m the Nightmare, no one has worked that hard to achieve it.

But with the butterfly—*Rylee*—I couldn’t help myself.

Where most of the crowd’s emotions centered on the power-hungry and submissive loyalty to the kings I’m used to, Rylee’s emotions were the opposite.

She was a jagged diamond of indifference in a sea of attention-seeking wealth. And the closer I got to her, the more I realized her emotions weren't open to me like everyone else's. I thought if I touched her, it might make her feelings clearer, but even as I slid my hand into hers for a dance, they were muddled to me.

That's never happened before. And the way she didn't tremble in my presence, didn't bat an eye when I found her sneaking around the palace library, didn't fall to her feet and beg me to keep her secret, made me curious in a way that nags me still. And her emotions in the elevator just now? That bothered me even more.

"Did you get a look at her?" I finally answer them, opting for the most basic and shallow answer I can provide even though my reasoning for choosing her was anything but. I swallow the rest of my drink, the crystal clinking against the glass table as I set it down.

"She's stunning," Kal agrees, but he's looking at me like he doesn't really buy my answer.

"Do you want her first?" Axl asks. Kal and Pierce raise their brows at him.

Normally I say no. The chances of having our potential actually choose us at the end of all this go way up if she isn't near me too much, especially for her first time with one of us. It's become a rule of mine to never sleep with a potential. The one time I even came close ruined our chances.

Controlling emotions is an overwhelming power, and not many can handle it if I slip up and shift their feelings unintentionally. But who am I kidding? Part of the fun is testing them, pushing their boundaries to see how much they can take. It terrifies most, what I am, what I can do. Best to stay on the sidelines and watch.

An image flashes behind my eyes—one of Rylee spread out on my bed, chains wrapped around her delicate wrists, her blue eyes hazed with pleasure. I'd stalk her, tease her, touch her everywhere but where she needs me most. And only when she had been properly edged would I sink between her thighs.

"Jax?" Axl asks, and I blink out of the vision that has me shifting on the couch, clearing my throat as if that will help shake loose the desire coursing through my veins.

"No," I say, my voice a bit hoarse. Even if my cock is aching to feel her around it, a part of me *hates* the idea of her being afraid of me. Plus, something changed in her the second I said her number to the crowd… I haven't had enough time to figure out what exactly that is. "You three decide who has her first. You know me—"

"One of these days, you'll have to partake," Pierce says. "If she's actually the one—"

“She could be failing her first test right now,” I argue. “If she’s the one…” I swallow hard, not fully understanding the burn in my chest. “If she’s the one, then I’ll think about it.”

Axl smiles but shakes his head. He’ll never push me, but he’s never understood my contentedness to stand by and watch as they court our potentials.

“I went first last time,” Pierce says. “So, naturally, one of you should do the honors.” He motions an arm toward us.

“You think she can handle all of us right away?” Axl asks playfully.

“You know how well that worked the last time we tried,” Kal says, immediately shutting it down. “The potential was overwhelmed and skittish the rest of the time. She made up her mind that night to reject us but had to stay for that first month.” A muscle in his jaw ticks. It’s a hard blow every time, even though we know it’s part of the game. Most of the people vying for the position are only in it for the wealth and power, not for us. “Rylee looks like the type who needs us to earn her trust before letting us in.”

I bite back a snarl, a deep, primal instinct to roar at my best friend. He barely spoke two words to Rylee, and he thinks he knows her? She had the gall to lie to my face, her sharp tongue contrasting with her pretty smiles and fluttering eyelashes. If Kal knew her, he’d know she’s not a timid creature.

What the fuck? Just because I spent a few minutes with her, all of a sudden I’m acting like *I* know her? Like *I* have some claim on her?

Kal tilts his head, noticing my shift in demeanor. I shake it off, pouring myself another drink.

Pierce swirls his bourbon, eyes calculating. “Perhaps we should let her choose who she wants first.”

Axl grins. “I’m for that game,” he says.

Kal rubs his palms together. “I love the idea of letting her choose,” he says. “In the end, that’s what we’ll need her to do anyway. Choose us.”

“And survive,” I say, my muscles tensing. We shared a dance, some flirting; what if she chooses me first?

I don’t want her to.

I absolutely want her to.

But it would be the end of her as a potential if she did. If it comes to that, I’ll alter her emotions to ensure she doesn’t select me first—though, with the way she looked at me through the crowd when I said her number, I highly doubt she has any warm feelings toward me.

I saw it in her eyes. The sense of betrayal at not telling her who I was—especially after I told her I hated liars. And her smart retort about the wealthy being the biggest ones of all. She’s not wrong, but she clearly isn’t a fan of ours.

I might've picked the one woman in Lumathyst who hates us all.

But *panic* had radiated right after the betrayal. She'd hid it well as the enforcer brought her to the dais, but I'd felt it.

Another intrigue. What kind of potential panics when they're selected?

Likely the kind who has no interest in being selected, and that baffles me most of all.

Kal's knee bounces where he sits. "Hate this part," he says.

We each nod, and I can't help reaching for one of my knives, releasing it from its sheath to flip it end over end. Can't help imagining dragging the sharp edge across my father's throat. If he touches her, I'll do it slowly, carve him into tiny pieces over the course of a week.

Ten minutes go by.

"Isn't there usually screaming by now?" Kal asks.

"Yes, something is off," Axl says, hands in fists as he bounds toward the doors, Kal barely stopping him before he gets there.

"We can't," Kal says, shoving him back. "You know we can't."

I have two knives out now, one in each hand. When did that happen?

"Impressive," Pierce says, eyes sparking. "Perhaps this potential has no fear?"

I flip the knives in my hands and pace the room. "How many more minutes, Pierce?" I ask, knowing he'll have it calculated to the second.

"Eighteen," he answers.

I nod and count down the seconds with the turn of my blades.

9

Rylee

It’s only a few moments before the elevator doors slide open again, and I have to swallow my surprise at the appearance of the kings. I stumble back a step, unsteady on my feet at being approached by them.

“Did we scare you, little bug?” Baydel Lavine asks, slipping off his mask.

Heat washes over me at the degrading nickname.

He must see something in my expression, because he points at my mask. “Bugs,” he says in explanation. “Interesting choice.” He glances over his shoulder at the other three kings, who are sampling the array of food and drink left on the elongated table across the room.

“They’re butterflies,” I say before I can stop myself.

Baydel snaps his head back around, eyes hard as stones.

Shit. Activate royalty filter.

“Bugs,” Baydel says, a harsh smile cutting across his lips.

I dip my chin, even though it hurts every inch of my pride to do so.

How did I get myself in this situation? I’m the absolute last person who should be around royalty, let alone *speaking* with them. Their attention is something I’ve never wanted. In fact, I’ve spent my entire life trying to stay out of their way. But here I am, in a palace room big enough to fit the entire Ashland market inside it, and all four kings are shedding their masks and studying me like I’m a creature to be dissected.

“I’m sure you’re curious why we’re here and not the Legends,” Baydel continues, switching his tone from sandpaper to honey. He waves an arm at his friends, all of whom are handsome. There’s no denying it, and there is a signature energy buzzing off them, all unique. Two of them feel like oil, slimy with a side of sting, but the other two…Jullian Erhart, Kal’s father, and Brooks Bertrand, Pierce’s father, don’t feel the same. Not as grimy but just as mysterious. I can’t tell if the kindness in their eyes is just a physical trait that helps them get defenses down or if it’s genuine. But I swear I can see regret flicker in their eyes as they look from me to Baydel.

“I suppose I’m curious about everything that will happen next,” I finally answer.

He laughs, and the sound is nothing like his son’s. This laugh is all pompous

arrogance, where Jax's laugh…*goddess*, that made my knees shake.

"Where are you from?" he asks.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

"Cedar and Silk," I say, hoping that my time spent at Layce's will be enough to help me if he has any questions about the city.

Baydel's lips purse at the city's name. He shifts closer, walking toward me with such intent that I instinctively retreat until my back hits the golden pillar behind me.

"You're an Ari from one of the lower cities?" He whispers the question, almost like he can't bear to say the words.

I nod, dipping my head in what I hope looks like a combination of submission and shame. Goddess, if he knew what I really was…

I focus on keeping my breathing even. If any one of these kings could sense the demi in me, they would've already imprisoned me. For now, it seems, I'm safe from that at least.

"Brooks," Baydel says, calling to Pierce's father. Baydel doesn't take his eyes off me. "Have we ever had a potential from the lower cities?"

"Once," Brooks answers immediately. "She didn't make it past her time in Kal's city."

Delight radiates over Baydel's features. "That's right," he says, eyeing me again. "Cedar and Silk might serve the royal city, but it doesn't have our… quality of character. Are you a seamstress?"

I shake my head. I could lie—I've seen Layce do magical things with all sorts of materials—but I don't know enough. If they were to test me, ask me to make them a garment or curtains or sheets for their beds, I wouldn't be able to.

"Dyer," I answer. I've visited Layce where she works for one of the most sought-after seamstresses across the cities. I often hid in the back of the building when Layce had to deal with patrons, and I'd watched the dyeing process enough. There was something almost soothing about watching the dyers soak fabrics in large wooden barrels of colorful liquid.

Baydel's nose scrunches, as if he's trying to smell the remnants of the dyes on my skin. I bite the inside of my cheek to keep the hot swell of my anger in check.

"Only the most successful Aris receive invitations," Baydel says as he looks me over. "So, you were a lottery winner?" he asks, eyes raking over my mask, down my torso, and back up again. I resist the urge to tense, to turn away from the examination.

"Yes," I say, choosing the path of least resistance. If they keep records of all the lottery winners and check, I'll be dead for lying to him before I can even

wrap my mind around trying to outsmart their game.

“What is your name?” Baydel asks.

“Rylee Gray,” I answer. It’s easier this time, since I’ve already given it to the Legends.

From the corner of my eye, I see Jullian step away from the table and casually walk toward us, stopping to lean against an adjacent pillar. His suit isn’t a bright ruby red like Kal’s was; instead, it’s a softer, subtler red and is cut perfectly for his body. He’s fit and looks no older than fifty, but I know he’s much, much older. They all are.

Thanks to my own power, I can feel theirs swirling around the room. Baydel’s is the most overwhelming because he’s so damn close to me. Because of our forced education throughout the lower cities, I know exactly what each of their powers are, and Baydel’s is by far the most terrifying, especially as he keeps dragging it over me, testing me: immobilization and control.

With a simple push of his mind, he can own my body. Make me do whatever he wants—hold still, dance, jump off the balcony.

I’ve seen no less than a dozen public executions over the years. Ashlanders and residents of other lower cities are forced to travel to the royal square whenever there’s a crime the kings think merits public punishment. They want us to watch and learn, to fully understand what happens to those who aren’t loyal to them, all under the guise of never wanting conflict between our people again.

The last execution I saw had been a young demi Ashlander who’d never warranted attention before. Then he fell in love with the daughter of a duke, and the couple begged the kings for their blessing to be married. They’d been denied, of course, and they’d gotten married in secret—a direct defiance of their kings’ orders.

Treason, they’d called it.

Baydel had made the young man bend his own body in grotesque ways while his new wife watched. Ways a body should never bend. A slow, painful, brutal death.

They let the wife go, thanks to her noble status, but I don’t know if her fate was easier than her beloved’s. Living with those images…

All because they fell in love. Two people from the same kingdom but opposites in every other way.

It takes all of my will to bury my power as Baydel continues to reach out with his own, takes everything in me not to fight back. I don’t know why they can’t sense it; maybe I’m burying too well from years of practice. Or perhaps they don’t suspect, so they aren’t looking for it. Either way, it’s a blessing I don’t take for granted.

“You are quite exquisite for a mere Ari,” Baydel says, shifting to lean one arm on the pillar right next to my face. The motion draws him so close, his chest threatens to brush mine. “I wonder which noble line of blood runs in your veins.” He trails a finger down my cheek.

A wave of ice flashes over my skin to settle in my stomach. Goddess, I know what he’s doing, why they’re all here. Baydel is trying to seduce me. No, seduce would imply romancing and consent and seeking out how to pleasure the other most. This isn’t that.

This feels like what Turner did after the first time—take and take and take, regardless of what I wanted, regardless of whether or not I said *no*.

Can I say no to a king? To four of them?

He moves his fingers from my cheek to my hair, sliding them through the strands. Every touch turns my stomach, but I keep my face indifferent as I scramble to think through my options. If I fight it, he can just use his power and force me; if I submit, I’ll survive, but I can’t bear the thought.

I close my eyes, willing my mind to calm…

And for reasons I can’t even begin to explain, when I close my eyes, I see Jax. I hear his laugh and feel his hands on my body as we danced. I see Kal and the way he threatened the enforcer for touching me. Fire ignites in my core, burning the panic away.

I peel my eyes open, crashing back to reality with a newfound sense of confidence that is likely rash, but I can’t find the ability to care.

“You see, little bug,” Baydel says, his tone low as he continues to slide that hand out of my hair and down my bare shoulder, “we’re here before the Legends because it’s our right to experience you first, to test you and make sure you’re fit for our sons.”

That definitely wasn’t in the contract.

A wave of nausea bubbles up my throat. I knew what he was doing, but hearing him speak about me like I’m nothing more than a piece of property is impossible to swallow. How many people have the kings done this to? Not just the past potentials, but anyone else who has fallen prey to their entitled demands?

Just as that thought forms, another one follows. What if the others…wanted this? Sleeping with the four kings…maybe some said yes. Maybe some wanted them back, wanted to see what it would be like to be part of this much power. That’s fair and fine for them, if that was the case. But it’s not what I want.

I entertained the fantasy of being with the Legends. I accepted the pin, the Choosing contract, despite thinking I’d never be selected. I felt desire for Jax before he picked me.

This? The way Baydel is pressing, pushing… I don't give a fuck that they rule the world I live in; they will *not* rule my body.

Baydel's hand travels lower, down my ribs and shifting across my stomach—

I gently grab his wrist, pausing him. Warning ripples through his eyes as they meet mine.

"You will not be experiencing me, your majesty," I say as smoothly as I can.

Baydel tilts his head, and his grin transforms into something closer to a snarl. "You are my subject," he bites out. "I can experience you in whichever way I wish."

"I belong to Jax, *your* son. He chose me. Just as I belong to Kal," I say, flashing my eyes to Jullian, who has pushed off the pillar and stepped closer to us. I can't read his eyes, but they're nowhere near as evil as Baydel's. "I belong to the Legends of Chaos, and they will be the only ones laying claim to me."

Baydel's mouth parts, genuine shock washing over his features. I'm certain he's not used to being spoken to like this, just as I'm almost certain he's killed anyone who has ever dared to try.

He presses right up against me, breaking my hold on his wrist, rubbing his cheek over mine. "Are you sure, little bug?" I cringe, trying to move, trying to push him off…

But I can't.

I'm frozen. Not in fear or panic—though both are prevalent in my body—but by *him*. His power.

"You might enjoy it after we've gotten started," he whispers in my ear, his breath hot on my flesh. I can barely breathe as my throat closes.

I've been here before, but never so powerless. At least with Turner, I had enough control to pick my battles, to fight when I couldn't take it anymore.

"I'm your king," he continues, his hands roaming over my body. My stomach tries to heave, but even it stays locked down, under his power. "An immortal. You know what I've learned in that time, what I can do to you? What I can *make* you do to me?"

A traitorous tear slips down my cheek. I feel his power peel back just enough for me to speak. He wants to hear me beg or scream or consent.

I won't be doing any of those things.

My lips tremble, and the effort to move them is like lifting metal from mud. "Do this, and Jax will find a way to kill you. Kal and Axl and Pierce, too."

I have no idea if what I say is true. For all I know, the Legends might enjoy this game as much as the kings. I have no right to claim they'll protect me, but I can only count on the instincts roaring in my blood.

"You place too much value on yourself, little bug—"

“Kal almost ripped apart your enforcer for gripping my arm a little too hard,” I interrupt him. “What do you think he’ll do to you for touching me like *this*?”

Baydel’s eyes meet mine, and his groping halts. Something vicious glitters there, and he goes for the top of my dress.

I’ve lost.

Goddess, I’ve lost—

“Baydel,” Jullian warns from beside us. “She’s passed. Let it lie.”

Baydel doesn’t stop—his hand is almost down the top of my dress—

“Baydel,” Jullian says again, this time with an edge of power as he grips Baydel’s shoulder and tugs him away from me.

Cool air washes over me, the effect almost cleansing, but still I can’t move.

Baydel forces out a laugh, raising his hands in an innocent gesture. “I was only ensuring she did,” he says.

Jullian releases him as the other two kings come to flank Baydel. Surrounded, Baydel finally snaps his fingers, and I nearly stumble off the pillar as his power releases me. I suck in gulps of precious air, at the same time singing my own power to sleep. It’s angry and hungry and wants to rip the air from Baydel’s lungs.

Hush, I tell it. *Hush.*

Brooks looks at me with intrigue and surprise while Lucas—Axl’s father—just laughs and claps Baydel on the back.

“Almost, Baydel,” Lucas says. “Glad you passed.” He turns to me, and I furrow my brow.

“Yes, little bug,” Baydel agrees, feigning a smile, but I can see in his eyes that he’s rattled. Good. Let him be, the prick. “You passed our test.”

A test? *This?* My ass, it’s a test.

It’s a game. This whole damn situation will be one long, drawn-out game, and I’m sure the kings, and maybe even the Legends, are used to winning.

But I’ve always loved games, especially if they came with a shot of adrenaline. Mind games are new to me, but I’ve never backed down from a challenge, and definitely not when my life’s at stake. If they wanted an easy win, they picked the wrong fucking girl.

“Come,” Baydel says to his friends, giving me a dismissive look as he heads toward the elevator doors. “There’s still a party to attend.”

Brooks and Lucas follow him. Jullian lingers behind, hands in his pockets as he studies me. Oh, goddess, did he stop Baydel only to get me alone? I give him a look that says he’ll have as much luck as Baydel did.

Jullian chuckles softly, shaking his head. “Rylee Gray,” he says. “That’s your real name, correct?” he asks, then glances down at the numbered pin on my

dress.

I swallow hard and nod.

“Good,” he says. “Very good.” He gives me another once-over, taking the elevator once it returns.

I have no idea why he thinks I didn’t give my real name, but I can’t waste my mental energy trying to figure it out.

Their little *test* has me on high alert. I didn’t even get a second to adjust, goddess damn them. Damn them all.

I take a deep breath, shaking out my limbs to try and rid them of the adrenaline crackling beneath my skin. *Think. Plan. I have to survive.*

First, I need to wrap my head around the game I’m now playing. I can only win if I get the Legends of Chaos to fall in love with me. Not easy. Not with their reputation for mayhem and cruelty.

Jax didn’t feel cruel while we danced; then again, his father just held me immobile while he reached for my breasts. That kind of evil is easily passed down bloodlines, isn’t it?

Before I can think of a second step in my plan, the elevator rumbles again, the doors sliding open. I know it’s the Legends before they step into the room—their powers are *that* potent.

I breathe deep, knowing the next part of this game: I have to sleep with them.

That’s what the invitation said. That’s what I gave consent for by exchanging my invitation for a pin at the gates when I entered the Choosing.

Erin, what would you do? My sister was always the more confident one, the more seductive one. She had kings’ enforcers and wealthy men eating out of the palm of her hand. She taught me some tricks, but she had it in her blood.

I mentally check myself as the Legends step into the room, and I slip into that in-between space where I’m half myself and half imitating the person my sister would want me to be. Erin certainly wouldn’t cower behind these doors in a panic. She’d make the Legends *beg* for her by the end of the night.

Can I do that? Can I be like her?

We’re about to find out.

10

Rylee

Seeing the Legends of Chaos without their masks literally takes my breath away.

Jax is the first one out of the elevator, and my eyes are immediately drawn to him. His blue-black hair is slicked back, his skin so pale it looks like he lives off moonlight instead of the sun. He's shed his jacket, leaving him in a black long-sleeved shirt and a leather harness filled with various blades strapped to his ribs. Those indigo eyes are set deep in a chiseled face that looks like it's constantly shifting between glaring and growling. Except the warmth from earlier is all but gone, and my heart plummets as he walks by me without a second glance.

Like he didn't choose me. Like it isn't his fault I'm here in the first place.

"Thank you for returning so quickly. I know you don't have to." I force the words out. I can't play their game if I let myself be starstruck.

Axl smiles at me. His lips are full and wide, that grin absolutely infectious as he walks up to me. He's so damn tall, with bronze skin over tons of muscle, and his energy is just as large. It's a marvel there's space enough for him in this room; it makes me wonder what else about him might be big.

"Just because we're Legends doesn't mean we're assholes," Axl says, dropping into a chair at the table. He plucks a berry off a silver tray and pops it into his mouth. "Well, some of us are," he amends.

Jax stalks through the room—it's the only way I can describe his walk, like he's always on the prowl—and sits at the opposite end of the table.

"Which ones?" I ask.

Axl's eyes are practically sparkling. "Guess that's for you to figure out."

I can't help it—I laugh. It's small and quick but real.

Jax's brows raise just slightly at the sound, and it takes everything I have to not pick the seat right next to him. I can't deny the connection I feel, but this is the Nightmare. The Legend who kills first and asks questions later. The one who, according to gossip, spends his time in his nightclub, Lust, in the Obsidian City, providing his consumers with endless liquor and enhancements while he siphons off their wealth. Plus, his prick of a father… What he just did to me…

"Will you sit?" Kal asks, his confident, kind voice jerking me to the present. He's still standing, hands on a chair he's pulled out. He's *asking* me, giving me a choice in the matter.

As if I have one. I belong to them now, and my lifespan directly correlates with how long I can keep it that way. My earlier search of the room presented no bed, but there are plenty of couches spread throughout the massive space. Goddess, they could take me right here on this table if they wished.

Heat flares through my core, and I quickly take the seat in an effort to hide how unsteady I feel. After Baydel's test, I should be in no mood to entertain these princes, but I can't stop my body from reacting to the thought of it.

Kal helps push my chair in, and I give him a small nod of thanks as he takes a seat to my right. Pierce settles across from me as Kal reaches for an empty crystal glass and pours sparkling wine into it before giving it to me.

I wrap my fingers around the offering, and the way Pierce tracks the movement makes my heart race. His dark brown eyes lock with mine, and I'm immediately overwhelmed by their depth, though I honestly can't tell if he's intrigued by or indifferent toward me.

Pierce is refined in a way I've never seen before, all elegance and intelligence wrapped in one gorgeous package. His curly black hair is thick and neatly cut, his smooth brown skin shaping a wide nose and square jaw, but it's his eyes, brimming with confidence and mischief, that make my breath catch.

I look away and take a fast sip, hoping the sweet wine will calm my nerves. I've never seen such delectable men, and I'm baffled by my reaction to them versus their fathers. I don't feel the fear I felt in the kings' presence with the Legends. Anxiousness in the face of the unknown, sure, but I can't deny the innate curiosity tingling beneath my skin sitting among them.

"What happens now?" I ask, twirling the stem of the glass between my fingers. My heart starts pounding when four sets of eyes land on me, flooding me with anticipation and curiosity. I realize I'm waiting for them to grab me and start tearing off my clothes. Isn't that how this works?

Jax sits up in his chair at the head of the table, leaning forward to rest on his elbows as he studies me before he grins sinfully. My stomach flips. "We're going to spread you out on this table," he says, tapping on it. "Peel your dress off and take turns making you come."

I try not to react, but I can feel my face heat, and my core throbs at his words. Goddess, what is wrong with me? They're strangers. They're *royalty*. They stand for everything I hate. And if I'm found out? They'll have me executed.

It hits me all at once: I'm trapped, magically bound to their mercy for an entire month, and even if I leave at the first chance I get, I'm still screwed. If I reject them formally, I'll be discovered when they pull my records to elevate my social standing as part of my compensation; if I run, I'll raise suspicions, and they'll track me down when they learn the truth. My plan for this evening has gone so

wildly off course, I'm not sure I could read the map of this foreign world even if I had one. I'm no virgin, but this… What he's saying, what I've gotten myself into, is an entirely new game I'm not sure I'm equipped to play.

But I have to. I must. Because the prize *I'm* playing for is my life, and getting them to fall for me is my only chance of protection if the kings discover who and what I am.

Jax continues to focus on me, and I stare back at him, giving away nothing—not fear or intrigue or submission. He laughs then, that slow, sardonic sound that makes my heart flutter, and leans back in his chair, downing his glass of whiskey. I'm half tempted to ask for one, too, but Kal has already poured me another glass of sparkling wine.

"We get to know you," Kal says, and I tear my eyes from Jax to him. He tilts his head and smiles a little. "Maybe feed you," he continues, reaching for a plate and piling it with fruit and cheeses and bread and chocolates. He slides it in front of me, and I can't help but stare. It's more food than I could afford in a week and far more luxurious than anything I've ever eaten, but I'm so lost in the emotions of this game, I'm not sure I can actually eat it. But it would send the wrong message to refuse their hospitality, and I can't afford that.

"Thank you," I say, reaching for another strawberry and popping it into my mouth. It's as crisp and sweet as the one I had at the party, and it's an effort not to moan. Instead, I close my eyes and savor it.

"You're welcome," Kal says.

I open my eyes and take another bite. Then another, sipping my wine as I do. With each mouthful, the tension eases just a bit, and I swear I can feel their powers relax around me. I don't know what they were expecting, but I suddenly realize they've been just as on edge as I have.

"Do you need anything else?" Kal asks when I've finished my plate.

"I don't know how to answer that question," I admit. "I brought nothing of my own. I honestly never thought…" My voice trails off.

"Personal effects are not an issue," Kal says, frowning in concern. He shifts in his chair, angling his massive body to face me. Goddess, he's nearly as big as Axl, tall and muscular, maybe even a little broader. "I'm asking if you need anything after your encounter with our fathers."

The bread turns to paste in my mouth at the memory of Baydel's hands on me, his powers rendering me helpless. I swallow around the lump in my throat, and I can't help glancing at Jax. His demeanor changes from infinite boredom to murderous rage in the blink of an eye, but just as quickly, the rage is gone and his face is as hard as stone. It happens so fast, I could've imagined it. I focus on Kal again.

His question hangs in the air, heavy and suffocating. I scan each of them, note the tense set of their shoulders, the flex of a jaw or clench of a fist atop the table.

"You have nothing to be ashamed of," Kal says. "Telling the kings *no* is impossible—"

"No, it isn't," I say, unable to stop myself. Blame it on the wine, my frayed nerves, or my inability to control my mouth, but there it is.

"You denied them?" Pierce asks, his tone surprised yet calculating.

I arch an eyebrow at him, then glance at Axl and back at Kal, unable to look at Jax another time. His opinion means the most to me, and I don't know why. We only danced, for fuck's sake, and he's barely spoken to me since, minus his dirty tease a moment ago.

"Of course I did," I say. "I didn't consent to being with *them*."

A low rumble rattles from Kal's chest, and the sound eases the knot in my chest. Just like before, his unyielding protection feels like a sun-warmed stone wall, solid at my back. "Did…" His blue eyes are severe, and his lips clamp together, his curled fist on the table trembling. "Did any of them force you?"

The power in the room rises, a brush of lava over my skin.

"No," I say, my traitorous eyes glancing toward Jax again. His are on me, his jaw hard-set. In a flash, he slams a knife into the table, the blade sinking in an inch. I jolt in my seat.

"Tell the truth, butterfly," he says, harsh and cold compared to how he spoke to me at the party.

I glare at him. "I *am* telling the truth."

His lips peel back, shifting into a sneer that matches his eyes. "You know what lies feel like to me, butterfly?" he asks. "They're an irritating vibration."

My blood goes icy. He can sense lies? I'm so fucked.

"And you've been *buzzing* since the moment I called your number." I'm trapped in his gaze; it feels like being flayed open.

"Jax," Kal chides. "You know full well it isn't exact. Of course she's going to have secrets—reservations, even."

Relief barrels through me. Jax can tell I'm hiding something but not what. "I'm telling the truth," I say again.

"But not the whole truth," Jax says, retrieving his blade and pointing the tip at me. The move should elicit fear or anger, but for the life of me, I only want him to keep looking at me like that.

Goddess, I really am mad. I'll never be able to win them over if I can't even keep myself in check.

"That mouth," Jax continues. "That's what got you here in the first place." His voice is low and rough. Everything narrows until it's just the two of us, caught in

each other's eyes. "Speak the rest."

There is no room for refusal in his demand. "One king tried."

Jax falls back in his seat, letting out a rush of air. He turns his blade end over end, disappointment and a hint of that chaotic rage I saw earlier coloring his features. "Baydel." He drags out the name in a statement, not a question.

"You fended off Baydel?" Axl asks, leaning over the table toward me. He's amused. Maybe even impressed. Good. I need more of that and less of whatever Jax is giving me.

"For the most part," I admit.

"How?" Pierce asks, unbelieving. He seems to be more inclined toward Jax's mood, which is *so* not team Rylee. I'm not offended by how surprised he sounds or how shocked they all look. I don't blame anyone who couldn't successfully deny the kings, but I am sad for them. I'm more pissed that they chose me and now they're practically interrogating me like I'm the villain—well, Jax and Pierce, anyway. Fuck them both, then.

I take another sip of my drink. "I told him Jax would carve him to pieces for touching me." I spare a look at Jax, who fiddles with his blade. "I reminded him Kal nearly ripped off an enforcer's arm for merely touching me roughly." I turn to Kal, and he nods his affirmation. "I assumed you two would do the same if they took me without my permission." I motion to Pierce and Axl.

"You're fucking right about that." Axl shakes his head. "Pricks."

"Do the others normally…consent?"

"You shouldn't judge them for it," Pierce says in his matter-of-fact tone. "Anyone who stands against our fathers usually doesn't live to see another dawn."

I raise my eyebrows, shocked at the blatant truth. I assumed the princes of Lumathyst would be on the side of the kings. Maybe they are, for the most part, but don't mind calling them out when needed.

"I would never judge them," I say a bit too harshly. "If the previous potentials consented to it, more power to them. But I will blame the ones responsible if the potential said no and the kings forced their hand."

"Easy," Axl warns, but the corner of his mouth is turned up. "Walls have ears here."

I clear my throat, flashing him a grateful look for the heads-up. "Well, I don't need anything in that regard," I say to Kal, circling back to his original question. "But I will eventually need to change out of this dress."

Axl and Kal laugh, breaking the tension, and I try not to get hung up on the fact that Jax and Pierce are still looking at me like I'm the enemy.

Kal relaxes his fist on the table. "Like I said, everything you need will be

provided.”

I think about my sister, wondering if all I have to do is ask and they’ll use their status and wealth to find her for me. I shoot down the idea just as quickly. No way can I trust them with my greatest weakness.

“Where are you from?” Axl asks. Such a casual question after such a serious conversation.

“Cedar and Silk. I’m a dyer.” The lie tastes especially bitter now that I know Jax and Pierce are analyzing everything I say.

“A lottery winner, then,” Pierce says with what sounds like disappointment. “Such slim odds.”

“Is that all you do?” Kal asks, not suspiciously, but like he’s genuinely interested in my life. It may be an act, but I soak it in, allowing his calm, kind demeanor to ease some of the tension rattling through me. In this chaotic storm of a conversation, Kal is a welcome lighthouse.

“I also procure things,” I answer, sticking to half truths. Pairing lies with truths may be the way to shake off the Nightmare’s intense study. In the Ashlands, I *am* a procurer. One of the oh-so-lucky assignments that have me breathing dust and ash all day, searching for rare jewels or minerals for the royal cities. Funny that we’re considered the lowliest of the cities when our lands are rich in the resources that supply the wealth of Lumathyst. “Valuable materials for my mistress.”

I try to give them just enough to be satisfied with my answer without intriguing them so much that they’ll start digging for more.

“When I called your number,” Jax says, “you hugged two women. Who are they to you?”

Goddess, I don’t want to tell him. I don’t want them to know Ivy and Layce exist in case this blows up in my face in the end.

“My friends,” I say.

Jax flashes me a predator’s look. “Their names?”

Bastard. I can give them fake names, but that would only put me more at risk of getting caught. “Ivy Parcell and Layce Willis,” I answer with a smile on my face.

“You’re close?” Kal asks from my right.

“We’ve known each other since we were children.”

“Same as us,” Axl offers.

“Yes, I would say we’re as close, though I suppose I don’t know any of you all that well.”

“Yet,” Kal says. “You will soon enough.”

“And what *do* you know of us, Rylee?” Jax cuts in, and I have to fight not to

glare at him. *He's* the one who chose me, not the other way around. It's not my fault he's got a lie trigger I can't help but trip. Maybe I can convince him my lies are little, feminine secrets that are no matter to him. One step at a time.

"I know what anyone else in Lumathyst knows," I answer.

He rolls his eyes and returns his attention to his blade.

"Not all the rumors are true," Kal says.

"Some of them," Axl counters with a laugh.

"I'd wager sixty/forty," Pierce says. "Depending on the content."

I laugh again, unable to help it. They're a contrast that has my head spinning, but they truly live up to their nicknames.

The night wears close to dawn as they pepper me with more questions—easy ones like what type of music I prefer, if I enjoy the theater, my favorite foods, et cetera. I pluck most of the answers straight from my experiences with Ivy and Layce, since the only time I'm around such luxuries is when I've snuck over the borders to dine and dance with them.

And when exhaustion settles in my bones, my feet aching in my high-heeled boots and the brim of my nose irritated from the mask I still don, I'm finally ready to ask the one question I've been avoiding all night.

"I could stay up talking to you the rest of the night," I say, indicating mainly Kal and Axl, since Pierce has been calculatingly quiet for the most part and Jax has done his best to ignore me entirely. I'm curious despite myself. Ignoring the axe hanging over my head, they are remarkable to speak with. There is an unshakable bond between them that I admire.

I want more. I want to peel back the layers of who they truly are and piece out if the interest and kindness they've shown me is merely an act.

"But if I don't sleep soon," I continue, "I'll wind up passing out at this table." I swallow hard. "What *are* the sleeping arrangements?" I ask, trying to keep my voice light.

This is it. This is what we've been leading to this whole time. I'm not sure I have the energy to entertain all of them, especially if I want to make it unforgettable so I'll be irresistible to them, but I do my best to muster it.

"Of course," Kal says. "It's already nearing dawn. We have a room prepared for you."

My eyes widen. "Just for me? Not for…all of us?"

Axl laughs. "If that's what you want," he says, "we can arrange it."

My stomach drops.

"But if you don't," he continues, "you get to choose."

"I get to choose?" I ask.

Axl nods. "You'll spend a month with each of us in our home cities," he

explains. “You can decide who you want to stay with first.”

My lips part, but I have no idea what to say. That isn’t a decision I’d been preparing to make.

“Did you truly believe Jax’s jest? You thought we’d just have our way with you here? Get it over with?” Axl cracks that infectious grin. “Where’s the fun in that?”

I feel my cheeks warm a little, but I file that information away. So, Axl likes the tease, the anticipation. Good to know.

“In all fairness,” I say, “the invitation rather explicitly required my consent if chosen.”

“Ah, but it didn’t specify a time, did it?” Axl grins at me.

“No, I suppose it didn’t.”

“And consent can be withdrawn at any time,” Axl says.

“That wasn’t in the contract,” I say before I can stop myself.

“It’s one of our terms,” Axl says, motioning toward the other Legends. “You set the pace. And you choose who you want to start your first month with.”

Hope spreads through me for the first time since Jax called out my number. Their stance on my role here, intentionally granting me that power, is a welcomed surprise. It separates the Legends from the kings’ earlier actions more than anything else they’ve done so far.

“Do you have a preference?” Kal asks. “Because we can choose for you if you feel overwhelmed.”

I smile at him, shaking my head. “I appreciate the option.”

I scan their faces. Each of them makes my heart thump, but it damn near stops when I look at Jax. He seems the least invested out of the four—Pierce is a close second—but I can’t help but remember the man who flirted and danced with me at the party. Can’t help that burning connection practically begging me to say his name, to choose him first, as he’d chosen me.

But he’s the Nightmare. His father is an evil piece of shit. And because I want him the most, he’s the most dangerous of them all. With him, all my defenses come down, and I lose sight of everything but him.

No, I need someone I can easily win over. Because I *must* win them over to survive this.

I glance at Pierce again, and my skin heats at just the thought of being with someone as intense and intelligent and ruggedly handsome as he is. He can enter the minds of others at will, but he must not have attempted to enter mine, or he would’ve arrested me already. He’s also kept himself at a calculated but polite distance, so he may be hard to reach.

I study Axl next. He seems to be pure fun and adventure, with a side of

danger. He's been nothing but welcoming and friendly, but I have the sense that a timid partner would quickly be swept under and drown in his wake, and I'm not ready to make that cliff dive just yet. Then finally, I look at Kal, who has been the kindest and most attentive of them all throughout the night. Plus, he fed me, and that small act of service means more to me than he'll likely ever understand.

Who can I make fall first? The Nightmare, the Mind, the Player, or the Dreamer?

"Kal," I say. Hopefully, he'll have the fewest obstacles blocking my way to gaining his trust. "If it's all right with you, I'd like to spend the first month with you."

Kal's smile is genuine as he nods, rising from his chair and offering me his hand. "It would be my honor," he says.

I take his hand, unable to stop myself from looking at Jax one last time. I swear I see a hint of disappointment in his eyes, but I blink, and it's gone. In a blur of movement, he sheathes his blade, shoves away from the table, and stalks toward the elevator.

Pierce follows him with a cool "good night."

Axl stops before us, and he's so damn tall, I have to arch my neck to meet his eyes. "You know, just because Kal looks like a teddy bear doesn't mean he won't bite." He laughs when Kal rolls his eyes, then drags a knuckle along the edge of my jaw, making my breath hitch. "See you soon." He disappears into the elevator with Jax and Pierce, leaving Kal and me alone in the room.

Kal squeezes my hand and tugs me into the elevator once it's returned. "I'll show you to your room," he says after we descend a couple of floors, stepping into a long corridor.

Even the hall is stunningly decorated, with lush carpets of ruby and gold, walls adorned with gilded art, and little wooden tables holding priceless vases full of fresh flowers. Ivy and Layce would love it; Erin would've already marked everything she'd lift from it.

I smile sadly as we walk, my heart aching for the sister I can't find and the friends I was forced to leave behind.

"This is you," Kal finally says as we come to a set of double doors on the left. He opens them, guiding me inside. He doesn't bother shutting the doors behind him, but he lets go of my hand, allowing me to venture around the room on my own.

It's bigger than any bedroom I've ever slept in. A bed fit for a king is tucked in the corner, with a four-poster frame draped with luscious red curtains. There's a sitting area on the opposite side, complete with a lush couch and chaise longue

with gold details. There's also a wet bar and a giant wardrobe next to a set of glass doors that leads to a balcony overlooking the city below.

I turn around, looking up at Kal, who has been watching me the entire time.

"Does it suit you?" he asks.

"More than," I say. "Thank you."

Kal hesitates, and my heart races as the air between us tightens.

They said it's my choice.

My eyes flash toward the massive bed. "Will you be staying with me?" I finally ask.

He grins softly as he walks toward me, his long stride eating up the space between us in a single breath. I don't back away, don't retreat. I feel no need to; no instincts flare within me. For whatever reason, call it fate or bad luck, I'm in this for the long haul. May as well start now.

"Not tonight," he says, and my chest deflates with…disappointment? Except his stunning blue eyes dance as he reaches for me. "May I?" he asks, his fingertips brushing the delicate fabric of my mask.

I nod because I can't speak. My heart is in my throat, his scent of the sun and lemon verbena swirling around me. I can feel the heat from his body, can see the muscles straining beneath his suit. More than that, he's been so kind, so aware of my needs the entire evening. I want him. There is no denying it.

A breath shudders from my lips as he slides off the mask and cool air brushes my oversensitive skin. Or maybe it's from the graze of his skin against mine. Just the brief, innocent touch feels intimate.

He gently lays the mask on the table near us, his eyes never leaving mine.

"Stunning," he says, smoothing his hands over my cheeks, cupping my face. "Absolutely stunning."

I'm trembling now; his touch is like a flame against my skin. I'm aching in all the right places, need making me breathless as he slides a hand into my hair, gently tipping my head back.

He draws us together until our bodies are flush. His body is hard against mine, nothing but muscle and power radiating against me. He holds me there, watching my reaction, as if he has all the time in the world to do so.

"Rylee." He breathes my name, and I nearly whimper. Forget the Choosing, forget that he's royalty and I'm ash. My need tugs and yanks and begs. "May I?" he asks again, his eyes flicking to my lips.

He's asking permission despite already having it. Where is the ruthless Legend I've heard of? Where is the royal prince who works people to the bone in his precious Ruby Aire? Maybe the rumors aren't true. Maybe the people have it wrong.

Maybe I no longer give a shit.

"Yes," I whisper, and then his lips are on mine.

I gasp at the way his mouth presses against mine, all warmth and sunshine and sparks. Goddess, he kisses like a dream, parting my lips and sliding his tongue between them, rubbing against mine in expert flicks that make my hand close around his suit jacket, desperate to draw him closer.

The doors are wide open behind us; anyone could walk by and see what we're doing, but not an ounce of shame creeps inside me. In fact, a thrill of delight shivers through me at the idea of being caught like this. If I had to bet, I'd say Kal likes the idea, too.

He snakes his arms around my back, lifting me off my feet with an effortless grace that doesn't break our kiss. In the dress, I can't wrap my legs around his waist like I desperately want to, but he doesn't seem to care. He keeps kissing me, keeps claiming my mouth in deep strokes that have me trembling against him, have me whimpering with each teasing caress. I slide my arms up and wrap them around him, tangling my fingers in the hair at the base of his neck, giving back all he's taking as I lose myself in this moment.

Kal breaks the kiss and rests his forehead on mine, holding me against him. He smiles, his eyes hooded and churning with desire. His immense power swirls around me, and without the others in the room, I can finally feel the depths of it. The Dreamer is a god—only half of one, yet his power makes mine feel like a drop in a vast ocean.

Slowly, Kal lets me slide down his body until my feet touch the floor again, eliciting warm chills everywhere we connect. Almost reluctantly, he releases me, stepping away enough that I feel cold where I'd just been burning.

"Tomorrow," he says, still backing away, grinning in a way I haven't seen yet tonight. It's hopeful, just like his eyes, and it makes my heart clench. "I'll take you home." He reaches the open doors, licking his lips like he can still taste my kiss there. "Sleep well, Rylee Gray."

And then he's gone, disappearing in a blur of movement so fast, my eyes can't follow.

It takes me five whole minutes to catch my breath and shut the doors.

In a daze from the kiss and exhaustion and the events of the night, I shed my dress, drape it on one of the chairs, and grab the first thing I see in the wardrobe. I sigh in relief at the feel of the loose cotton tunic and fall into the oversize bed.

My skin is ultrasensitive, every nerve pricked to awareness, begging and searching for more of a touch that isn't there. I blow out a breath, sinking deeper into the luxurious mattress, hiking the fluffy blankets over my bare legs. Tomorrow, the game will resume, and I hope I'm smart enough to survive it.

11

Rylee

“How are you still in bed?” A sharp, feminine voice jolts me awake, accompanied by the jostle of curtains being drawn from the windows. Light spills into the room, and I shield my eyes, my brow pinching. It takes me a few seconds to remember where I am.

The Choosing.

The kings and the Legends.

Kal’s kiss.

Fuck. My lips tingle with the memory, but the pleasure is quickly washed away by exhaustion. I slept a couple of hours at most.

“Up, up, up,” the woman barks, clapping her hands as she comes to my bedside. She’s striking in a simple pair of black pants and a gold top, her silver hair short and feathery above her ears. Her skin is smooth, barely a wrinkle in sight, but her eyes are aged like the kings’, which likely means she’s in the late stages of her life despite her slightly-over-fifty looks.

“It’s first light,” I groan but throw the blankets off of me anyway. She definitely doesn’t look like someone I should argue with.

She eyes me as I stand. “Goodness, child, did you sleep in your makeup?” She studies me with irritation. “This will take more time than we have.”

I hold up a finger as she brushes past me to strip the bedding and toss it in a pile across the room. “First off, it’s way too early to be barking at me. Second, who are you, and why are you worried about my makeup?”

She huffs and turns to face me. “It’s not early for a potential mate of the princes of Lumathyst,” she says. I can’t help but notice how she doesn’t refer to them as the Legends of Chaos and how she says *princes* with an air of endearment. “You’re expected to meet with Kal and travel to the Ruby Aire in less than two hours.”

“That’s more than enough time to get ready.”

She pinches the bridge of her nose, sighing dramatically. “I’m charged with __”

“Who are you?” I cut her off, repeating the question she neglected to answer.

“Mirren,” she says, her lips tight as she draws her palms together. “The princes assigned me to you.”

I open my mouth to ask more, but a younger woman wearing a similar outfit walks in carrying a tray of food. She sets it on the table, dips her head to me and then Mirren, and hurries out. Distracted, I cross to the food and inhale deeply.

"Thank goddess," I say as I scoop up the mug of steaming coffee. I take a piping hot gulp, relishing the burn all the way down.

Mirren gives another little huff, resting her hands on her hips as she watches me. "How do you take it?" she asks, nodding toward the mug in my hand.

"Any way I can get it," I say automatically, then tense. An Ari from Cedar and Silk would be privileged enough to have cream and sugar and honey. I had coffee mixed with chocolate one time, but that was ages ago and only thanks to Erin's thieving. "I like it any way it's prepared," I try to clarify, and Mirren nods.

"Well," she says, "at least that part is easy." She motions to the tray of food—eggs, salted meat, fruit, and bread. It's enough that if I were at home, I'd ration it throughout the day or offer some to the nearest starving worker. "Eat quickly. I'll draw your bath and be ready to wash your hair when you're done."

I nearly spit out the coffee. "Wash my hair?"

Mirren sighs again. "If you repeat everything I say in the form of a question, this is going to be a very taxing relationship."

I smile behind my mug. The woman has fire in her blood, and I have to admit, I like it.

"Did you not have a handmaiden in Cedar and Silk?" she asks, eyes curious. I sit at the table and shovel a bite of eggs into my mouth instead of answering. "I know not all ladies from that city do," she continues, and my shoulders relax a little.

"I never had need of one," I say truthfully. Even if I had the wealth of the kings, I wouldn't force someone to work at my beck and call. I've been fending for myself way too long for that.

"Hmm," she murmurs. "You have one now. The princes have trusted me to care for your needs while you journey throughout their cities and when you return here. I intend to do as they say."

I take a few more bites, then glance up at her where she still stands. "Are you hungry?" I ask, waving toward the chair opposite me at the little table tucked near the balcony doors. "You can sit. There's plenty to share—"

Mirren laughs, shaking her head. "I ate before the sun rose," she says, reeling in her laughter. "And we will not share meals."

"You dislike me that much?" I ask. "You don't even know me."

"I don't like or dislike you," she says, deadpan. "It wouldn't be acceptable to dine with a potential."

"Sounds like a ridiculous social standard," I say. I swallow the last bite I can

manage while Mirren continues to gape at me like I'm a creature she's never seen before. I push the half-eaten meal away and down the rest of the coffee before standing. "I can draw my own bath and wash my own hair," I say.

"But I'm—"

"A true delight," I cut her off as I head toward the bathing chamber. "But I have no need for you to *wash* me."

"Is there something I *can* do for you?" she asks, a strain in her voice that says my dismissal is making her wildly uncomfortable. I wonder if the princes will punish her for not forcing my hand.

"Yes," I say, an idea springing to mind. "When I'm done, I have questions about the past Choosings. Will you answer them?"

She shifts on her feet, clasping her hands together. "I'll answer what I can."

I nod, grateful. "Were you handmaiden to the previous potentials?"

She nods.

I smile. "Brilliant. I'll need your help. I want to know what to expect."

Mirren laughs. "I could tell you verbatim every detail of every previous potential's experience, and you'd still not know what to expect. Every day is new and different, depending on the princes' moods." Her voice trails off, her lips forming a stiff line. "They aren't predictable, and there is no formula to win them over," she continues as she rearranges the dishes on my abandoned tray. "The sooner you learn that, the better."

The oversize bath is lined with glass bottles in vivid greens and royal blues and golden ambers, all filled with luxurious scents I can't begin to place. I grab a rose gold one at random, enjoying its crisp smell—like a summer breeze—and get to work. I'm tempted to stay in the hot bath all day, but Mirren fusses at me through the closed door far too soon.

I hurry to dry myself, working the strands of my hair into a half-up, half-down style. I've never been more grateful than when I realize that one of the perks of being a potential is access to makeup as I settle myself at the crystal vanity in the bathing chamber. All the shades match my skin tone, and there is a rainbow variety of eye makeup, enough to last me two lifetimes.

I shake my head at the excess but hurry to cover up the mark on the back of my neck. I'll have to keep a compact of cover-up with me at all times and never wear my hair up if I don't want the mark discovered. The Legends would instantly recognize it if they saw it.

I swallow down the fear, focusing on my eyes. I've never done my own makeup. Whenever I've worn it before, Layce or Ivy did it for me, but I have to look like I know what I'm doing or Mirren will question why I didn't allow her to do it for me. I settle for a neutral tone on my eyes—a simple shimmery white

mixed with the slightest hint of cobalt at the corners of my lids that makes my blue eyes pop. After a quick brush of ink on my lashes, I close the gold silk robe around my body and step back into the room.

"Ready," I declare as if I've won a medal.

Mirren stops tidying the room—the leftover breakfast trays and bedding are gone—and purses her lips at me. "Wearing a robe to the Ruby Aire would certainly make a statement," she says.

"Did you just make a joke?" I ask, grinning.

She waves me off, scoffing for good measure before she points to the sitting area and takes a seat. "You have twenty minutes before you need to be clothed and ready for me to take you downstairs. Ask your questions, child."

"Thank you," I say, hurrying into the chair opposite her. "I've only seen illustrations of the previous potentials in the royal post," I start. "Do you think physical appearance plays a role in being…pleasing to the princes?"

Mirren sits up so straight, I wonder if she's comfortable at all. "The previous potentials have all been high nobles, except for one Ari, but even she maintained her appearance to the level of royalty. Proper clothes, proper manners. Those things matter when the people are scrutinizing their potential future queen. But," she continues, "not one of them looked like the others. So no, I don't think your goddess-given looks matter to the princes…they're more concerned about substance, in my opinion."

Good to know. I remember reading about the previous potentials, but only when spending time at Ivy's. Ashlanders get select bits of information from the kings, and a full recount of the Choosing events isn't one of them.

"The order of events," I say. "The Choosing happens, and then I travel to each of the Legends' cities. And it's there I'll be tested, right? By the kings? In what way?"

Mirren sighs. "Did you choose not to read about this in the previous royal posts?"

"Sometimes," I lie.

"Some tests are simple—little trials set up by the kings to test you. I believe it's their way of inserting themselves into the rules set forth by the goddesses." She shrugs. "Sometimes they don't test you at all. Sometimes they delight in creating situations curated to find out if you're delicate or intelligent or deviant, and so on."

"Mind games," I whisper, nodding.

"Yes," Mirren says. "Other tests…"

I swallow hard, a pit opening up in my stomach. "Other tests?"

She shrugs again. "The princes are known for protecting the citizens of their

cities. They can do so in chaotic ways. Some tests are crafted to test your reactions to such…brutality."

Dread slides over my skin. I'd read about one potential being badly wounded during such a test, but I assumed the story had been embellished for shock value. Another way for the kings to keep us living in fear. But if the discomfort on Mirren's face is any indication, the story wasn't an embellishment. *Shit.*

Will I be forced into a test that will make me fight for my life? Or will I be forced to dole out punishment right alongside the Legends?

I clear my throat. "How…how would the kings know if I passed any of these tests? Do the Legends relay the information or—"

"You truly haven't been paying attention at all for the last six Choosings, have you?"

"I've had work to do," I say, doing my best not to bite out the words.

"Clearly it wasn't preparing to be a mate potential," she says, shaking her head. "The Occuli," she continues. "Surely you've heard of them?"

Every hair on my body stands on end as I recall the illustrations I've seen of Lumathyst's ancient conjurers. They're an elite group of magically inclined people who do all manner of things for the royals, using their magic to power a variety of materials that Ashlanders like me can barely fathom. Each Occuli varies in appearance save for one unnerving characteristic—their eyes are pitch-black, void of emotion. Beyond that defining quality, you could spot them in a crowd due to the dark-purple robes they wear, a symbol of their magical status and connection to the royals.

History says they're from a forgotten kingdom but were welcomed by the goddesses when they traveled here. The most powerful among them now serve the kings as an unbiased band of scribes, entrusted to provide truthful accounts of the most important concerns to the people of Lumathyst in their daily royal posts.

They aren't only terrifying because of their power, but because they have no stake in anything beyond relaying the facts.

"I've heard of them," I say.

"Thank goddess," she says. "The history of the Occuli is one I'd rather not rush through, and we're running out of time. They will observe and report everything to the kings."

"They'll be following us," I say, dread twisting my stomach.

"Only in public," she assures me. "The princes long ago forbade the Occuli from entering any of their private residences. But they're stealthy beings. Some can shift into shadows. Be on guard. Always."

I silently thank her for the private warning.

“After the tests and the months spent with each Legend…if they deem me worthy, I’ll earn their tokens? Then at the final Choosing ceremony, I decide whether to choose them forever and go through the Athanry, where I submit myself to the goddesses to become immortal?”

She nods.

“I read that none have ever made it as far as the Athanry and that most left as soon as they could declare their rejection. The royal post never explained why.”

“Why does anyone reject another?” she asks. “Because they weren’t the right fit.”

The walls seem to press in around me. I doubt a lying Ashlander is the right fit for them, either.

“You don’t think it was the Legends forcing their hand?” I ask. “Telling the potentials not to choose them because they didn’t want a mate?”

Offense ripples over her features. “Absolutely not. The princes want a mate. Need one. But they need the *right* one. It is no small feat to love them all, especially when they’re so starkly different. And constantly being around that much power can be overwhelming. Only someone strong will be able to adapt and rise to their level. Someone fated. The goddesses ensured it when they forged the Choosing when the princes were young.”

Chills erupt over my skin. Goddess, she speaks of them in such a protective, almost motherly tone. She’s hopeful for them. For me to be the right one.

But I’m not. I’m a liar. A fake. Definitely not fated.

Guilt eats at my insides, but I shove it down. It’s lie or die. I won’t nobly sacrifice myself for their cause.

“None of the potentials have ever earned the princes’ tokens, right?” I ask.

“Correct.”

Worry makes my skin feel too tight. How will I ever win their trust if no one else has before?

“And regarding the nature of the Athanry, I’ve only heard the histories of when the kings were turned immortal,” I say. “Do you know what it will be like?”

Mirren’s eyes narrow, and something like respect flickers there for just a moment. “Already planning that far ahead? Are you so confident?”

“Not at all,” I answer honestly. “But I like to know what I’m walking into. Especially from someone as close to the events as you’ve been. Did the other potentials not ask these things?”

“This conversation is the longest I’ve had with a potential.”

I frown. “But you said you were their handmaiden—”

“Yes,” she cuts me off. “And normally, nobility doesn’t converse with

servants.” Her eyes shimmer with something curious, and I swallow hard.

Already I’m not behaving like the others. Shit shit shit.

I take a breath, forcing myself to calm. The others failed. Perhaps being a little different will help me in the end. Being different…maybe that’s the key. Everything I know about the other potentials from Mirren and the stories I read paints them the same way—noblewomen, or women acting like royalty. Behaving like princesses born for the throne.

That’s not me, so it won’t be hard to stand out. I wasn’t born and raised to be a royal offering. I was bred to work and scrape and dig my way out of the Ashlands, so pretending to be a princess isn’t an option. And, if I’m being honest, I don’t think that’s what the princes need anyway.

They’re dubbed the Legends of Chaos for a reason. It’s already clear to me that they’re fiercely protective and loyal—nothing and no one can threaten the things they hold dear without swift punishment. Men like that don’t need a silent princess; they need a sharp warrior, someone who will fight by their side and not cower in fear when their darkness comes out to play.

I can be that. I can be different. I can be whatever they need me to be, in order to keep myself alive.

“The Athanry is dangerous,” Mirren says, finally answering my earlier question. “I wasn’t alive when the kings were turned, but I’ve…heard about it enough.” She shifts nervously. “The goddesses laid forth in their rules that the princes’ mate won’t gain any power beyond the responsibility of keeping them grounded to maintain the balance between the four. I believe they wanted one, singular mate for their sons because of the stories of the goddesses being pitted against each other too often when they shared power with their own mates…but that could be nothing but speculation and rumor. Either way, becoming immortal goes against nature. It breaks all the rules of our bodies and minds. The kings survived, but it wasn’t easy.” She shakes her head. “Sometimes I think that’s why the previous potentials have rejected the princes early. The minute they decide the princes or their shot at the throne isn’t worth their life, they leave. They take their rise in nobility status and *leave*.”

I swallow hard. “Do you think them cowards?”

“Not at all,” she says. “Survival is the most primal instinct. They were smart. Realizing they’d never survive the Athanry is a show of intelligence. But the princes need someone who is not only intelligent but strong, brave, and passionate. Someone who isn’t afraid to check them if they get out of line. That takes more than love. It takes courage and a level of understanding between mates that I’ve never seen in my long life.” She shrugs as if she doesn’t believe she’ll ever witness that kind of connection.

And I can’t blame her. The way she’s describing it… Goddess, what have I gotten myself into?

But I also can’t deny the intensity inside me, screaming just as strongly to play this game. To get to know these princes who I haven’t stopped thinking about since last night. A foolish intrigue, for certain—one of those dangerous cravings Ivy likes to playfully chide me about—but I’ve always been at the mercy of my own sense of adventure.

“Any other questions?” Mirren asks. “We only have ten minutes.”

Filled with a confidence in my plan that is likely foolish, I shake my head.

“Good,” she says, reaching in her pocket and pulling out a small glass vial. “Drink this.”

I take the offered vial and examine the clear liquid inside. “What is it?”

Her brow furrows. “Have you never taken the anti-fertility tonic before?”

“Not in this form,” I admit, hoping it doesn’t give me away. Ivy always gave me the tonic in tea form, using the spiny leaves from amber thistles that stop one from becoming pregnant, but that’s the way the poorer classes prepare it.

“It’s a concentrated dose,” Mirren explains. “It’ll last a month. I’ll give you another one at the end of your stay at the Ruby Aire. The princes want a mate, not an heir.”

I drink the tonic. I absolutely do not want to be linked to them that quickly in the form of a child. It tastes earthy, much like the tea Ivy makes, only much more potent.

“Good,” Mirren says, taking back the empty bottle.

The next step is to get dressed, but when I open the wardrobe doors, I’m overwhelmed by the amount of clothing inside. Dresses and pants and suits and blouses, leggings and tunics and shoes, all organized by color. I run my fingers over the luscious material, starting with the reds before trailing over the blues, greens, and finally blacks.

The colors of the Legends, hand tailored to make me as attractive to them as possible.

“Did the previous potentials wear the Legends’ colors when living with them?” I ask.

“Of course,” Mirren answers, eyeing me.

I grin a wicked smile, biting my lip, and pluck a sapphire outfit from the wardrobe.

“Oh, for goddesses’ sake,” Mirren says.

The lapis-colored pants pool around my feet and climb to just over my belly button. The top consists of a piece of tight fabric over my breasts and a sharply cut jacket covering my shoulders, leaving just a strip of my stomach bare. I grab

a small, beaded bag that matches the outfit, placing a compact of cover-up and some red lip tint into it. After slipping on a pair of blue heels, I survey myself in the mirror, smiling at the overall effect.

Axl would love this. But I'm not going to Axl's city today. I'm going to Kal's, and he'll be expecting me to wear red.

"What do you think?" I ask, smoothing my hands over the jacket.

Mirren releases what I'm quickly learning is her signature sigh, the weight of all of Lumathyst behind it. "You look like trouble," she says.

I grin triumphantly.

"Why not the red?"

"I'd rather they know now," I answer.

"Know what?"

"That I'll never be what they expect." I motion for Mirren to lead the way, clutching the small bag beneath my other arm.

Mirren laughs, high-pitched and sharp. "You're something. I don't know what yet, but definitely…*something*."

"I'll take that as a compliment," I say as she leads the way out of the room.

"I don't know if you should," she mutters under her breath, but I let it drop. "Your things will be delivered to your rooms at Kal's estate while he takes you to the city," she explains as we walk through the palace. She has to grip my arm and tug me along several times because I keep stopping to admire the art.

Regardless of how much I dislike the kings—especially Baydel, after his cruel little *test*—their taste in art is exquisite. Or perhaps they had nothing to do with selecting it and the credit lies in someone else's hands. Either way, I've never seen anything like it.

Unless you count Erin's art, which I do. She's skilled with any kind of paint and canvas, whether it be a rock wall or a flat piece of wood. She made everything more beautiful in the small hut we called home, and she sometimes delighted in decorating the walls of crumbling buildings in the Ashlands, only for the enforcers to demand it be cleaned whenever they found it.

Her art could be on these walls. Could compete with the beautiful canvases in gilded frames. My heart aches. I need to play this game well. If I gain enough of their trust, maybe they can help me find her.

We turn a corner, and Mirren stops so fast, I nearly topple over her. Immediately, she gives a small bow, and I follow suit. "Your majesty," she says, her words flustered as if she can't catch her breath.

Jullian Erhart shifts a book in his hands, smiling down at her fondly. "Mirren," he says with familiarity. "How many times do I have to ask you to call me Jullian?"

I rise from my bow, clamping my lips shut as I glance between them.

Mirren stands as well but keeps her head dipped. “How many times must I tell you that it’s improper?”

The king steps closer to her, lowering his voice. “Nothing is improper when it comes to you.”

Oh my goddess. Is Jullian Erhart flirting with Mirren? Is that a flushed smirk I see on her lips?

“Rylee,” he says, shifting his attention to me. “Did you sleep well?”

“Until she woke me up,” I say, and Mirren glares at me over her shoulder. I shrug, grinning at her.

He laughs, and the sound isn’t as deplorable as I would’ve imagined. Just like last night, he seems the most approachable king of the bunch. He eyes my blue outfit. “I thought you were accompanying Kal to the Ruby Aire today.”

“I am,” I say, folding my hands behind my back.

He looks at Mirren, who shakes her head in a *don’t ask me* kind of way. It’s cute, the little silent communication they have. I wonder how long Mirren has worked for the kings and their sons and make a mental note to ask her later.

The king studies me again, then releases a soft chuckle. “Clever,” he says, pointing the book at my outfit. “Very clever.” He smiles at Mirren, then me. “I hope you have a wonderful time with my son,” he says before striding past us.

Mirren releases a tight breath, and I nudge her with my elbow as we continue our journey. “What was that about?” I whisper.

“I have no idea what you’re referring to,” she says, chin tipped high, her stride determined until we reach a golden elevator.

“Oh, come on,” I say, keeping my voice low. “There was some serious chemistry happening there. Are you and the king—”

“Of course not.” Her tone is hushed. “He’s a king, mated to the goddess Neph. It would be—”

“Improper?” I tease, and she shoots me another glare as we wait for the elevator.

“That’s enough of that,” she says with finality, and I bite back my grin.

Jullian Erhart mated the goddess Neph, and she’s Kal’s mother. The same goddess whose gift runs through my blood. I wonder if that’s why I felt so safe with Kal, felt drawn to him? If that’s why his father is less abhorrent to me? He certainly was kind last night, even defying his own friend, and he clearly has affection for Mirren. If that is possible, then maybe all the kings aren’t as emotionless and entitled as I originally thought. Maybe there’s hope for change —

The elevator doors slide open, breaking my train of thought.

“I told you to handle it.” Baydel’s voice is harsh from inside the elevator. “And yet somehow it evades you.” He’s yelling at another man dressed in an elite enforcer uniform—black leather, golden vest, and a diamond-encrusted helmet covering his face. There is a number *one* emblazoned on the upper right shoulder of the uniform, identifying him as Baydel’s personal guard. “If you weren’t hand selected, I would have you thrown in the dungeons with all my best torturers to teach you a thing or two about failing me.”

My previous hopeful feelings turn to ash in my mouth. Baydel takes his eyes off his elite enforcer and steps out of the elevator. He ignores Mirren completely and stops before me. The enforcer follows him, silent and stoic with his duty.

“I thought that when I ran into you this morning, I told you to dress her for Kal,” Baydel says, visibly scrutinizing my outfit.

“Yes, your majesty,” Mirren answers, the fire leached from her voice.

“And yet you found this task unattainable?”

Acid sizzles in my blood.

“I—”

“I chose for myself,” I cut in over Mirren. “She is not responsible for what I wear or say. Ever.” I speak with as much power as I can. I don’t want my actions to reflect badly on her now or in the future. And knowing me? I’ll definitely get her in trouble if I don’t establish my independence now.

Baydel looks me up and down again, shaking his head with an air of disgust. “You won’t last a week,” he says. “Shame. But there are always more girls *dying* to take your place.”

“Thanks for the reminder, your majesty,” I say, bowing without taking my eyes off of him.

Unfiltered rage churns in his eyes as I step into the elevator, not waiting for a dismissal. It’s a bold move, one that will most certainly come back to haunt me later, but I don’t care. Baydel is on my shit list, and if I survive this *and* have the support of four powerful mates, too? He’ll be the first one to discover what it feels like to be humiliated.

Mirren hurries in behind me, and I let her push the button, not breaking Baydel’s gaze until the doors slide closed.

“Do you like dancing on the edge of death?” Mirren snaps at me in a low tone, a hand over her chest.

For some reason, the minute she asks the question, an image of Jax and me on the dance floor pops into my head. A slow smile spreads over my lips at the memory, at the way I’d felt in his arms. Jax was the personification of danger, and I did indeed like dancing on the edge with him.

But all his flirty interest vanished the second after he’d called my number. The

second he’d sensed my secrets.

The doors slide open on the ground level of the palace, and Mirren leads me through an ornate entryway with golden marble floors and white pillars stretching high to an intricately painted ceiling. She shows me to the doors, stopping at the top of a long set of stairs descending to the palace grounds.

“Goddesses save us,” Mirren says after I’ve ignored her question.

I can see Kal at the bottom, waiting for us. I turn to look at Mirren.

“The goddesses haven’t saved anyone in a very long time,” I say before taking the first step.

THE RUBY AIRE

12

Rylee

Kal laughs under his breath as I reach the bottom step, shaking his head. He leans against one of those two-wheeled contraptions made of iron and leather and metal, powered by intense Occuli magic only the wealthy can afford: a velomage. I've only ever seen one once, outside a nightclub in the Obsidian City when sneaking out with Layce and Ivy. The rest of us must walk or, for those more fortunate, use carriages pulled by horses. This looks like a cross between a carriage and a horse, only in the sense that you must mount it to ride.

Kal folds his muscular arms, his tight ruby shirt showing off the definition of his broad chest. His brown hair is styled to fall effortlessly over his forehead, and the dark, rugged pants he wears hug his massive thighs.

Goddess, he is delectable. His blue eyes trail the length of my body, each slow pass like a caress as I stop before him, looking up at him with a smile.

"Interesting color choice," he says, amusement dancing in his eyes.

"Do you like it?" I ask, doing a little spin to give him the full view, trying to imitate the same spin I've seen Erin do a thousand times when working a target. The memory of her threatens to catch up with me by the time I face Kal, and I do my best to shove it down so he can't see the grief in my eyes.

"It suits you," he says, nothing but warmth in his tone.

I didn't have a clue how he'd react—from the stories, I half expected this Legend to scold me about tact—but his casual confidence leaves no room for things as petty as telling a woman what she can and can't wear. At least that's how it looks from where I'm standing, but only time will tell.

"Thank you," I say, giving a little dip before eyeing the velomage behind him. "Are you going to use that?"

His grin stretches wider. "Have you ever seen one before?"

"From afar," I say, grateful these things aren't common enough in Cedar and Silk that it would be suspicious that I haven't seen one up close before.

Kal lifts one leg over it, like he would mount a horse, and settles in the seat. He grips a set of metal bars with one hand and holds the other out to me. "I'm honored to be your first ride," he says, his voice going low and seductive in a way that's too smooth to not be rehearsed.

I bite my lower lip, my heart thundering in my chest. "Is it safe?" I eye the

magical contraption suspiciously.

He laughs again, the sound like the comfort of a warm blanket. “In my hands?” he asks. “You’re always safe.”

A wave of heat crashes inside me at his declaration, and I can’t lie, it’s hard to defend against. I know he’s playing the game as much as I am. We need each other: I need him to trust me enough to fall for me so when the truth comes out, he won’t damn me, and he needs me to choose him in the end. Still, it’s…*nice* to feel wanted in this way, even if it’s all a game.

I slide my hand into his, and he wraps his fingers around mine as he tugs me close. I mimic his movement, situating myself behind him. I’ve been on a horse a time or two, and while this is similar, I can feel the humming of magic beneath the seat. Magic is a temperamental thing—everyone knows that—and I can only hope the obscene amount of wealth and power Kal has ensures this thing won’t explode beneath us.

Kal wraps my arm around his abdomen, and I reach around with my free hand, pulling my body tight to his, my chest pressing against his broad back.

“Hold on tight,” he says, giving me a one-second warning before taking off.

The rumble of the thing vibrates throughout my entire body in a pleasant way, and I cling to him as his speed increases. The royal city flashes by in a blur, and the people crowding along the main roads wave as their prince darts in and out of carriages and horses.

My eyes water from the wind, but a wild laugh shakes free when he takes a turn at top speed, the velomage leaning so far over I’m sure we’ll tip. Kal maneuvers it with an expert grace that speaks volumes about how many times he’s done this before. It’s exhilarating, my heart in my throat and my adrenaline soaring to an all-time high that I absolutely *live* for.

After a few more high-speed minutes, Kal slows, taking a bridge up and over the main road, offering us a stunning view of the city as we leave. I wipe at my eyes to clear them. The bridge dips suddenly, and we go soaring down so quickly, my stomach flips and my nails bite into his abdomen.

He turns his head just enough for me to see his profile as we level out, a full grin on his face. He frees one hand and reaches back, stroking my calf in a way that is both reassuring and possessive. A bolt of lightning scorches my center at the simple touch, making me buzz in a way that has nothing to do with the magic roaring beneath us.

I’m in trouble if a few caresses and a fast ride have me melting for this man.

It’s over an hour before we cross the border into his city—we passed Jax’s Obsidian City along the way—and I still can’t shake the fluttery feeling Kal has given me. It’s only my body reacting to him, not my heart, and as long as I keep

it that way, I'll be fine. I decide that if I can't fight it, I might as well drench myself in these feelings in the hopes of shedding all other worries. Is it slightly delusional? Maybe, but I'll dive into any fantasy right now in order to keep myself together.

"What do you think?" Kal asks. He slows as we reach the main road, so I can actually see everything around us.

"It's breathtaking," I answer honestly. I've never ventured as far as the Ruby Aire before, and I'm instantly regretting that decision.

The city is stunning. A collection of ancient buildings varies in stonework and detail and size, but all have a common ruby roof. The sun glitters off those roofs, dappling the cobblestone sidewalks in sparkling crimson. We enter a bustling cluster of market buildings housing luxurious items. People are strolling in and out, wearing clothes that show their nobility: elegant dresses or suits, silk blouses and slacks, tunics and leggings, their hair and makeup impeccable. And beyond the city center, I catch glimpses of the lush fields and pastures that support the agricultural wealth that Kal's people are known for. There isn't a sign of poverty in sight.

A rock settles in my stomach as Kal brings us to a stop along a stretch of road lined with bright buildings, shops, cafés, and taverns. How can a city like this exist—with such wealth and abundance that people have the luxury of strolling around in their finest without a care in the world—while those in the Ashlands have to beg for food most days, let alone clothes that are warm and durable?

I knew the Legends' cities are wealthy, but hearing about it and seeing it are two very different things. Once again, I hope for change in the Ashlands, but hope gets me nowhere. If I had real power…if I had the support of four powerful mates, perhaps I *could* change things—

No. Survive first, dream later. I blame Kal and his peaceful, prosperous city for making my head drift toward unattainable things.

"Would you like to have lunch with me?" Kal asks as he helps me off the velomage.

"Of course—" I jolt at the sudden appearance of two Occuli behind Kal.

He turns around, spotting them before shifting back to me with an apologetic look. "I assumed you knew—"

"I did," I say, catching my breath. I have a hard time taking my eyes off the Occuli. They're even more terrifying in person. Their eyes…pools of black that seem endless. Their power feels otherworldly, too, ancient and jagged, so unlike Kal or any of the other Legends, whose powers feel like a strong, unshakable beacon. I force my focus back to Kal. "Just…startled me."

"They have a knack for that," he says. "But they won't touch you, with hands

or magic. They're under strict orders and will meet death if they do."

"Is it so easy to deliver death sentences?" I ask, wondering if a bit of the Legend I've heard so many stories about has slipped through the calm, caring persona he's shown me. I have no love for the Occuli, but I don't relish unnecessary death.

"It is if they break the rules when it comes to you," he explains. "You're our mate potential," he continues. "Your safety, comfort, and well-being are of utmost importance to us."

Butterflies take flight in my stomach. Would he think so if he knew the truth?

"Hungry?" he asks, and it's such a sweet gesture to change the subject.

"Always," I say. If there is *one* thing I'm certain about in this game, it's the food. I'll never let an opportunity slip by where I'm allowed to eat.

He holds out his hand, then leads us down the street when I take it. "Try to ignore them," he says into my ear when he catches me eyeing the Occuli again. He smooths back some of my hair that's come loose, the touch easy and welcome. "And if it gets to be too much, just tell me, and I'll take you home. They're not allowed inside my estate."

I wet my lips, noting the sincerity in his eyes.

He shifts us, interlocking our fingers as he guides me down the busy cobblestone pathway. The other pedestrians move to the side and flash him gracious smiles as he walks by. They don't balk in fear or dip their heads to avert his attention; they welcome it. Some even say a few kind words as we pass.

Definitely not what I was expecting from a prince rumored to have pushed a man off one of these buildings for simply looking at him the wrong way.

"This is my favorite café in the city," he says, holding open a door for me at the base of a quaint building pressed between two taller ones. The scents of fresh-baked bread and sugar and coffee hit me as we walk in. The hostess practically falls over herself to get to us.

"Your highness," she says, bowing low at the waist. "I didn't realize you'd be in today."

"Spontaneity struck," he says. "Alice, this is Rylee. I wanted to take her to the best café in town for her first visit."

Alice beams at him, then me. "Of course," she says. "Your usual seat?"

Kal nods, and she weaves through the place, guiding us to a back corner table that offers more privacy. I slide into a cushioned seat across from him. The lanterns around us are low and flickering with the faint hint of red.

"What can I get you?" she asks, eyes darting between the two of us.

I flounder, having only been to a handful of restaurants in my entire life. That's what happens when it takes me two months' wages just to afford a meal at

one in Leaf and Claw.

"Would it be all right if I asked the chef to surprise us?" Kal asks me. "She's the best, trust me."

"Definitely," I say, sighing with relief. He could've easily ordered for me, but it's adorable that he asked. He's playing this game much better than me so far.

"I'll let her know," Alice says. "Coffee?"

"Please," Kal and I say in unison, then laugh as Alice winks at us and disappears. She returns with our coffees in record time, along with a silver tray with cream and three different types of sugar on it.

Kal immediately scoops some white sugar into his coffee, topping it off with a heavy amount of cream. I watch his motions carefully, taking mental notes. If I learn enough of his preferences, winning him over will be easier.

"You don't take anything in yours?" he asks, holding the mug up to his lips.

I blink a few times, then glance at the sugars again. "I'm not against a little chocolate in mine," I say. "But I don't mind drinking it plain, either."

Kal smiles, then nods to a darker-looking sugar. "Try that one."

I pick up the small spoon and stir it into my coffee. Kal watches me as I take a sip. My eyebrows rise involuntarily at the sweet, rich flavor.

"Like it?"

"Love," I say, taking another steaming hot sip. The dark sugar has transformed the drink into a blissful, velvety texture with notes of chocolate and cinnamon.

"I told you," he says, raising his mug to mine. "This is the best place. They make everything here, right down to their infused sugars."

I gently clink my mug against his, my muscles relaxing as I take another sip. I can't imagine having coffee every morning, or a life that would allow for such luxuries, but I'm going to enjoy it while I'm allowed.

A crack sounds from across the room, and I jump. One of the Occuli is holding a green flame in the palm of his hand, those black eyes reflecting the flame's color. He nods at Kal, an emotionless smile on his lips. The conjurer is already bored with us and playing with magic for entertainment? Or is he showing a slip of his power in the hopes of intimidating me?

Kal dips his head, but a muscle in his jaw flexes. "The flames are a form of communication," he explains.

I tilt my head.

"A direct line to my father," he continues. "They're reporting. Likely telling my father we've arrived safe in the Ruby Aire."

Goddess, the power in that direct line to the kings is astounding. And terrifying. One slip, and I won't even have time to beg for my life before the

kings know about my misstep. My nerves tangle at the thought.

“Do you ever get used to that?” I ask, forcing the fear from my tone. “Being tracked constantly during this time?”

“Not really,” he answers. “You adjust. You learn to separate yourself into different categories.” I flash a silent question at that. “When the Occuli are around, I behave a certain way,” he explains. “A way that would be acceptable to the kings and not cause further interruption in my life. Then, I behave differently when I’m around my friends and those I trust.”

I take another sip, scanning the lines of his face. “What about privately?” I dare to ask. “What’s that like?”

He wets his lips, blue eyes flaring at the question. “What do you mean?” He lowers his voice, eyes darting to the Occuli across the room and back.

My heart flutters at the way his voice shifts, the way his eyes darken just slightly. “I mean,” I say, hushing my words, “the *private* Kal. The one you become in the safety behind closed doors.” I can’t help but think of the kiss from last night. The way he’d held me against him, scooped me up and claimed my mouth and then left me hanging in wire-tight suspense. My lips tingle with the memory. “The one I think I got a glimpse of last night.”

He smirks, then takes another drink, not taking his eyes off me. Slowly, he sets down his mug, drawing out the tension so much, I think I might break. “I’ll show you sometime,” he says. “If you’re up for it.”

Anticipation unfurls in my core, and I shift in my seat. “I think you’d be surprised what I’m up for,” I say, a little breathless from the butterflies in my stomach. I’m not faking this reaction, and I don’t exactly hate it. I *should* hate it. Hate him and everything his royal blood represents. But he’s making it impossible.

His eyes are full of curiosity. “Is that right?”

“What, the other potentials never surprised you?”

His smile drops, and he clears his throat. “The other potentials were clearly not a match.”

“And who’s to say I am?” I grin. “Isn’t it too early to tell?”

A startled laugh rips from his lips. “You really are different,” he says, leaning back in his seat. “Jax was right.”

A thrill rushes through me at the sound of Jax’s name.

“He chose you because of it,” he says. “Not that he’d admit every reason behind his decision, but…” Kal nods, something churning in his eyes. “I see it now.”

“Jax isn’t a big sharer?” I guess.

Kal laughs again, shaking his head. “Never has been. Not even when we were

kids.”

I try to picture the Legends as young boys running around without a handle on their powers and have a hard time wrapping my head around the image. “I can’t imagine any of you as children,” I admit. “It must’ve been chaotic.”

“Where do you think we earned our name?”

“You’re not serious.”

“My mother gave it to us,” he says, eyes going distant, soft. “After scolding us for destroying one of her favorite tea rooms during a game.”

I swallow hard, watching his features shift as the memory plays out behind his eyes.

“As we were cleaning up the room we wrecked, I heard her explaining to Axl’s mother what we’d done. She said, ‘these little Legends of Chaos broke all my favorite teacups.’”

I laugh, shocked at the story I’ve never heard. Everyone who has ever spoken about the Legends around me has glorified the name with stories of destruction, madness, and murder. And here he’s saying it’s about teacups?

“Do you remember her well?” I ask, marveling at the fact that I’m asking about the goddess Neph like she’s any other mother in Lumathyst.

“Here and there,” he answers. “We were only six when they went to sleep.” A muscle in his jaw pops, his eyes hardening as he stares at a spot on the table, seeing something else entirely, I imagine.

“I remember when it happened,” I say, shrugging. “Even though I was only four.”

Kal nods, his gaze still distant.

I’m about to ask him where he is, what he’s remembering, but Alice returns with our food, setting it before us. Kal blinks away the memory, shifting back into that publicly acceptable version of himself so easily, it’s almost jarring.

Careful. I’ll have to be *very* careful with him. While he might be charming and sexy and downright intriguing, he’s also clearly an expert at wearing invisible masks.

So am I, but he doesn’t need to know that.

I glance down at the plates, inhaling the sweet smell of fresh bread and something like caramel.

“This is one of her specialties,” Kal explains as Alice leaves us to it. “You’re going to love it.”

I scoop up a knife and fork, slice through a piece of bread that is big and thick like a novel, and pop it into my mouth. It’s seared in some kind of egg, milk, and sugar mixture and then topped with vibrant fruit and cream that create a blend of flavors that work so well together, I can’t help but close my eyes.

“Goddess,” I say after finishing the bite. “How is that real?”

Kal chuckles, grinning pridefully. “Right?”

I take another bite. It’s all warm and sweet and savory at the same time—pure decadence on a plate. How can anyone ever complain about their lives in these cities when they can eat like kings every day?

I clean my plate, and Alice returns to clear it and refill our mugs with more coffee.

“I can see why you’d own a place like this,” I say, my head a little buzzed from the food and company.

“This isn’t mine.”

“I thought you owned everything in the Ruby Aire.”

He grins, shaking his head. “I own the land by birth, and some establishments I’ve created from the ground up. I have control over our imports and exports with Cardrayton in the southwest—they give us a great deal of the livestock used to support the other cities of Lumathyst. And I’ll always help my people when they have a dream they want to accomplish, but mostly I encourage them to build their own wealth.”

My lips part, surprise tangling up my words. His simple response makes my heart expand. Hearing him put words to dreams I’ve had myself is something I wasn’t expecting. I clear my throat, reaching for my coffee with shaky fingers.

“I guess that’s why they call you the Dreamer—” I miss the handle of my mug, toppling it toward Kal and searing one of his fingers with the hot liquid.

He hisses, drawing his hand back.

“I’m so sorry!” I’m up in a flash, rounding the table to his side with my cloth napkin as I try to clean up my mess. Mortification slides over me in a suffocating wave, and I can practically *feel* the Occuli reporting my absolute blunder. Royalty doesn’t spill coffee.

“It’s fine,” Kal says, shaking out his hand. “I promise—”

“Let me see,” I say, grabbing his hand before he can reply. His index finger got most of the damage, his smooth skin now an angry red. Instinctively, I bring it to my mouth, wrapping my lips around it without thinking. I swirl my tongue around the wound, treating it like I would my own if the same had happened to me.

Kal goes still, and I snap my eyes up to his. Something intense flickers there as he watches me.

Heat flares in my center as it dawns on me that this is likely *not* normal mate potential behavior. There’s probably some unspoken rule to *not* be physically intimate in public with the Legends, but Kal doesn’t seem to mind.

In fact, he looks completely into it.

I swirl my tongue around his finger another time, taking it a little deeper in my mouth before pulling it out. “Better?” I ask, slightly breathless at the way he’s looking at me.

“Not even close,” he answers, his voice rough.

I lean in, lowering my voice to a whisper. “Now we’re even,” I tease. “You left me tense and aching last night after that kiss—”

“Come with me,” he demands, grabbing my hand.

As quickly as it came, the heat is gone, replaced by a tightening in my chest as he drags me through the café, almost too fast for me to keep up. Shit, I definitely crossed a line. Either my bold words or presumptuous move embarrassed him in front of the Occuli—

He barrels through a side door, letting it close behind us as he grips my shoulders and presses me against a wall. It looks like a washing chamber, but the lighting is so dark in here, I can’t really tell.

For the first time since meeting him, I can see the Legend of Chaos everyone talks about in Kal. The one with infinite strength and a temper to match. The hard cut of his jaw, the determined set to his eyes, the no-room-for-escape power.

I’m in *his* city. He can do whatever he wants to me, and I’d never be able to stop him. A sliver of icy fear creeps into my blood as he leans closer, and I can’t help but think I’ve ruined things before they’ve even begun.

13

KAL

“Kal, I’m sorry—I didn’t mean—”

I cover her mouth with mine. Every instinct in my body roars at me to touch her, taste her. She gasps against my lips, opening for me as I stroke inside her mouth. I draw back, heart pounding against my chest.

“You’re not angry with me?” she asks. From the look in her eyes, I can tell she’s serious. I frown as I study her. Why would she think I’d kiss her like this if I was angry with her?

“You said I left you tense and aching last night.” I drag my lips across hers again. “It’s only fair that I soothe that need. If you want me to stop, now is the time to say so.”

A breath escapes her lips, and she shakes her head.

I grin, sliding my hands beneath the dark blue jacket she wears. *Blue*. The woman wore blue to *my* city. She’s a mixture of courage and rebellion, and it makes me want to claim her as mine like no one else before her has. No one has ever spoken to me like she has, much less shirked tradition like she just did by breaking social barriers in public.

I peel off her jacket, hanging it on a hook beside us. Then I step back to survey her. Fuck, she’s gorgeous. The top she wears is barely a strip of fabric over her supple breasts, and her pants sit high around her waist and drape down to accentuate her long legs. My eyes dart everywhere, trying to decide which piece of her I want first.

“So many choices,” I say, drawing out the words and relishing the delightful little blush that creeps across her skin. “So many places to explore.”

I step toward her again, caging her in with my arms before slanting my mouth over hers. She tilts her head, kissing me back with an intensity that mirrors my own. It feels like I’ve just met a worthy sparring partner instead of an easy conquest. Fire ignites in my blood from the simple kiss.

She runs her fingers over my chest and down my abs, then grabs my shirt to draw me even closer. I grip her chin, tilting her head back so I can kiss her at a deeper angle. She whimpers, sliding her leg up and over my hip, unabashedly searching for the pressure she needs. It nearly brings me to my knees.

The thought makes me smile against her lips, then pull away to look down at

her. Her eyes are lust-hazed, her lips swollen from my kiss, her chest rising and falling rapidly. “Can you be quiet?” I whisper, and her eyes flare before she glances toward the door.

“Can’t you lock it?”

My grin widens, and I let her see a little behind the mask I normally wear. Her lips part, but there is a fiery energy behind her blue eyes. I kiss her, hard and fast, before asking again, “Can you be quiet?”

I grind my hips against her, pressing against her heat. She trembles, a moan slipping from her lips before she bites down to silence it.

“Good girl,” I say.

She rocks against me in response.

I lay a trail of kisses down her jaw, her neck, and lower, palming her breasts and rolling her nipples between my fingers until they’re pert. Gauging her reaction, I pull down her top, lowering my mouth to one of her peaked nipples.

“Kal,” she whispers. *“Please.”*

“Such manners.” I close my mouth around the bud, and she arches into the touch. I suck hard enough to sting, then soothe the hurt with my tongue. Then I switch to worshipping the other one while my hands skim lower, unbuttoning her pants.

She sighs as I slide my hand beneath the fabric, reaching between her thighs. Fuck me, she’s already drenched; my fingers glide through her heat with ease.

“Fuck, *Rylee,*” I whisper, kissing her breasts one more time before rising to look down at where my hand is between her thighs. “You’re already so slick for me.”

Rylee leans her head back against the wall, her breasts out and peaked, her face flushed. I’ve never seen anything as beautiful and dangerously sexy.

I curl my two middle fingers just enough to tease her, to make her sigh, my lips hovering over hers. “Remember,” I whisper. “You started this.” I plunge two fingers inside her, groaning at how she squeezes me.

Her eyes flare. “If this is the result,” she says, “I’ll be sure to do it again,” once again shocking me. She rocks against my hand, chasing her pleasure with unrestrained need.

I press harder against her, kissing her again. Her nails bite into my shoulders where she grips me, and the little bolts of pain shoot straight to my aching cock.

“Kal,” she whispers, keeping her voice low. She drops her hands from my shoulders, reaching for my pants. For a moment, I think about letting her free me, think about fucking her senseless right here in the goddess-damned washing chamber.

I quickly move out of her reach, gently sliding my fingers out of her. She

whimpers, her eyes widening as she looks at me in question.

Slowly, I drop to my knees, tugging her pants down with me and sliding them over her heels. “When I fuck you, Rylee Gray,” I say, kissing the top of the lace undergarment that still covers her, “it will be in a place where you can *scream* my name.”

She shivers.

“Now,” I say, glancing up at her while I hook my fingers into the lace and rake it down her legs, too. “Watch yourself in the mirror while I make you come on my tongue.”

Shock and desire flutter over her features, her eyes focused on the mirror behind me. Fuck, just the idea of her watching herself while I get her off has every muscle in my body tensing with need.

I kiss her silky thighs, rubbing them while trailing my tongue over her skin, teasing just the edges of where she needs me most. She’s shifting her weight, desperate for the pressure I’m keeping from her.

The sound of footsteps outside the door makes her freeze, but I don’t dare stop. My blood is practically on fire as I grip her leg and settle the back of her knee over my shoulder. “Fuck. You’re so beautiful.” She has a small strip of blond curls, and she’s swollen and glistening for me.

“What about the door?” she asks again.

I glance up at her, my mouth poised above her. “Anyone who walks in here will catch me worshipping you.” I drag my tongue up her slowly, holding her gaze. “But if you want me to stop, just say the word.”

She slides her fingers in my hair, gripping it. “Don’t stop,” she begs.

I smile against her, then flick my tongue again. “Fuck. You taste like salted caramel.” Her thighs tremble around my face as I unleash myself on her, eating her like I’m starved. And fuck, maybe I am, because I’ve never been this desperate for anyone. *Ever*. With the previous potentials, it was all formulaic, strategic on both sides.

But this? This is unrestrained need. This is pure, carnal pleasure.

This is chaos.

Her grip on my hair tightens as she rocks against my face, moving against me. I hold her steady with my hands, one on her hip and one behind her lower back, adjusting her so she can do nothing but hold on. And just when I know she’s on that edge, when I can feel her primed and aching for that push, I suck hard.

“Kal,” she moans not so quietly as her flavor bursts on my tongue. Her body trembles as I work her through her orgasm, taking her down with slow, gentle strokes until she goes limp against me.

I lean away, licking my lips as I help her into her lace and pants, bringing the

clothing up with me as I stand.

“Mmm,” I groan after buttoning her back up. “I could do that all day.”

Her cheeks are flushed, her eyes hazy as she looks up at me. I grin down at her, adjusting myself so it’s not so obvious how badly I want her. I help her into her jacket, smoothing my hands through her hair. “Now that I’ve already had dessert,” I say, and her blush deepens, “would you like to see the rest of my city?”

She bites her lip, almost like she’s trying to hide the smile that steals my breath. Fuck, I’m already losing it for this woman, and we’ve barely begun.

Worry slices through my chest. I can’t get too attached. There are so many obstacles she has to overcome before I can even consider the possibility of her actually belonging to us, but I can’t help it. Something about her makes me envision a future I have no right to picture so soon.

What is she doing to me?

14

Rylee

Several hours later, my legs are still weak from what Kal did to me.

Fire flares along my skin just thinking about it. I've never—not *once*—come so hard before. And that was just his mouth. I can't imagine what else he can do to my body, what pleasures he can wring from it.

And right there in the café, next to an unlocked door where anyone could have walked in on us. This man is all kindness and charm on the outside, but delicious risk-taking on the inside. The combination is intoxicating, but it's doing horrible things to the defenses I'm trying to hold in place.

Since Kal's utter devastation of all my better senses, I've seen the many faces that make up the Ruby Aire, from the innovative businesses to the museums and everything in between. But the Crimson Riverwalk is my favorite. It's a long stretch of river that winds along the city's border with a gorgeous bridge that connects the lands on either side, all manner of shops and nightclubs and taverns along the way.

Mirren joined us around midday, arriving by carriage, and neither she nor the Occuli have stopped following us once. Not that I expected they would, but it's a little hard to get used to, especially when I've lived my life trying to *avoid* attention.

"The guys are meeting us here," Kal says after the sun has long since set, the stars casting the red city lights in a silver glow. "I'm sure you're hungry." He holds open the door to a grand brick building situated near the end of the Riverwalk.

"I can always eat," I answer honestly and walk inside.

The sounds of violins and other string instruments swell as we enter, cast throughout the space by magic, making the song reverberate along the dark walls. It's almost too dark to see anything, but crimson candles and lanterns hang in sections, bathing everything in that ruby glow that is the signature of Kal's city.

A marble bar takes up the length of one wall to our left, an endless number of bottles stacked on shelves behind it. Private half-circle tables with cushioned seats take up an elevated space on the right, with a few smaller round tables scattered around the ground level.

Kal leads us through the crowded space and up a set of roped-off stairs, guiding us to one of the private tables. My breath catches as Axl slides out of it, rising to meet us. Pierce and Jax remain seated behind the middle of the table. Pierce gives me a nod, but Jax scans the room, looking very much like he's lording over the place even though it doesn't belong to him.

And for some reason I can't explain, something tight inside my chest eases when I set eyes on each of the Legends.

Where is that coming from? Is it some side effect of the Choosing I haven't been made aware of? I barely know these men, and I've hated their fathers—and them by their relation to them—for most of my life. How can I breathe easier at just the sight of them?

My connection to Kal, I understand. I've learned so much about him today. I know the way he takes his coffee, that he prefers sweet to savory, and that he will do anything for his people. That much was clear when we were stopped earlier by a woman who begged Kal for special approval on renovations to her clothing shop. Kal signed the licenses needed without batting an eye or demanding a favor in return.

"Fuck, Rylee," Axl says after shaking Kal's hand. He scoops me up in a bear hug like we're old friends reuniting after a lengthy separation, spinning me around with my feet dangling off the floor before setting me back down. "You're downright edible in blue," he says, his smile wide as he glances at Kal. "How jealous did this make you?"

I chuckle, unable to resist Axl's energy. No wonder he's the Player—he's always in a good mood.

"How could it make me jealous when she looks this delicious?" Kal's eyes meet mine as he casually wets his lips. A deep shiver rakes up my center at the movement, and he flashes me a knowing look.

Goddesses help me, I'm ready to fall on my knees for this one.

Axl winks at me before sliding back into the spot next to Jax, who still has barely looked at me. My chest only twinges a little at that fact, but the sting is quickly washed away as Pierce stands and steps into my path. He grabs my hand and kisses the back of it, breaking the indifferent mood from yesterday. My heat skips a beat at the intensity in his eyes.

"Are you enjoying the city?" Pierce asks, releasing me.

"Yes," I answer. "The Riverwalk is my favorite so far." Pierce guides me into the bench seat, and its horseshoe-like shape means that when I slide in, I end up next to Jax. Pierce settles on my other side, and Kal takes the remaining seat next to Axl.

I hate the spark that flares to life inside me at Jax's proximity—the same one

that got me into this mess in the first place. The one that has me desperate to hear him laugh, to hear him flirt, to have him ask me to dance again.

Was that only last night? Time is flying by in a whirlwind. With so much new information shoved in my brain, it feels like weeks instead of barely a day.

And in that short amount of time, his anger and indifference only seem to have magnified. I swallow hard, wondering if he can sense the secrets I still hide, or if the sensation fades when I'm silent. I hate that I don't know, hate that I feel like I'm just waiting for the moment Jax figures out what I'm lying about and exposes me to everyone for the fake I am.

Fear climbs up my throat, threatening to close it.

"If you like the Riverwalk," Axl says from across the table, raising a hand to flag down a server, "you'll love the ocean in my city."

I turn my attention to him. "I guess we'll see," I say, winking back at him.

He laughs, ordering a round of drinks for the table as we fall into an easy conversation, covering what Kal and I have seen today, eaten, and talked about. Soon, I sit back, content to listen to the four of them.

The bond between them is undeniable. They have an effortless way around one another. But their powers rise and mix around me, the unique sensation of each buzzing against my skin. Kal's is warm like the kiss of sunshine; Axl's is wild like the crashing waves of an ocean; Pierce's is intense, like being unraveled from the inside out. And Jax's is sharp and chaotic like a lightning storm.

The Legends all at once are intimidating. They form an unbreakable unit that seems impenetrable, and their powers complement one another in ways they've no doubt tested and trained together since birth. I certainly wouldn't want to challenge them, but from all the stories I've heard, there are still many people throughout Lumathyst who do.

I definitely understand Kal's shock at my ease around him. It's clear that the previous potentials were nothing but proper around them in public. And I can see why they would be, not only because of their desperate wish to become royalty, but because of the intensity of being around all of the Legends at once. Falling back on etiquette would be a tempting way to cope.

Maybe that's why most rejected them in the end—their power. I imagine it's intimidating even for those who don't have power like I do. As it is, with the power I have, I feel like I'm sensing theirs on a larger scale, as if my power makes me more susceptible to feeling theirs… I just have to hope that doesn't go both ways. I take comfort in the knowledge that I've put a mental lock on mine most of my life, doing my best to not even acknowledge its existence, while the Legends are no doubt used to walking around with their powers on full display,

never once needing to subdue or dampen them.

Maybe the previous potentials couldn't handle such authenticity.

I can't really blame them, not when I can feel each of the Legends' powers swirling around me, testing my energy, calling to it—likely without them even noticing. And to think, the night might come when we're all…*together* together.

Lightning strikes through my veins at the image the thought creates—Kal pressed against my front, Axl at my back, Pierce's hands on me, and Jax watching all the while before he shoves the others away to take me—

"Do you like it?" Kal's voice cuts through my thoughts, and I straighten in my seat. They're all looking at me expectantly.

Kal glances down at the drink I didn't even see the server bring. I quickly take a sip, grateful for the distraction. The taste of raspberries and mint and sparkling wine hits my tongue, and I smile.

"That's delicious," I say, taking another drink.

Kal smiles, pride in his eyes. "It's a Ruby Kiss," he says. "My city's signature drink." He raises his small crystal glass, and the others do the same with their darker drinks to clink them together. "To the future," Kal says. Axl laughs, Pierce raises one brow, and Jax rolls his eyes.

"Always the optimist," Jax drones before throwing back the contents of his glass. "Dreamer to the core."

I take a quick sip before turning to him, my drink raised toward him. "And what would the Nightmare toast to?"

The rest of the men go silent as Jax locks eyes with me, shock flickering in them like he's never been asked before. He blinks, and the shock is replaced by a predatory look that makes my heart race. I should be scared of that look, of that slow smile stretching his lips that looks more like a warning than an invitation… but I'm not.

I *know* fear. I know what it feels like to have my will ripped away, my choices disregarded. I know what it's like to not eat for days. Know what it's like to huddle in the cold night, desperate for the sun to come up for warmth. I know what the hilt of an enforcer's short sword feels like splitting my skin.

That's fear.

This…this is something else. Something I can't deny. The same something that made me ache for more before I ever even saw his face.

"I wouldn't toast at all," Jax finally answers, his voice washing over me like warm honey. Goddess, I'm in trouble. These men are slowly sinking their hooks into me, and I love the way it stings.

It should be the other way around. I should be ensnaring them, but I'm vastly out of my depth. I just need to stay alive. After that, I can figure everything else

out.

“To nothing, then,” I say, clinking my glass against his empty one despite the lack of invitation.

Axl cringes. “That’s bad luck, kitten,” he says.

“You believe in such superstitions?” I laugh. “A *Legend*?”

“Axl believes in all sorts of things,” Pierce explains. “Something about the earth and water in his blood makes him more wary of the universe than the rest of us.”

“Make fun all you want, Pierce,” Axl says. “But who was proven wrong the last time? All of your calculations and strategies did fuck all against the rising tide.”

“But it was my *strategies* that saved your ass when that group of rebels tried to pirate goods from your ships.”

I watch them volley back and forth, hearing nothing malicious in their playful barbs. Kal pays them no attention, scanning the room as he watches his people come and go. The Occuli never sit, only adding to their eeriness as they linger in a nearby corner, no doubt catching our every word.

I spot Mirren at the base of the steps we climbed earlier.

“Mirren!” I wave for her to come up, and she dips her head, her lips in a thin line as she hurries over to us.

“Do you need something, Rylee Gray?” she asks in a formal tone.

“Do you want to sit with us?” I ask, noting how bored she looks.

“Join you?” Her eyes are wide.

“Yes,” I say. “There’s plenty of room.”

“You should,” Kal says, smiling at her politely.

“Yeah, Mir,” Axl says. “How long has it been since you shared a meal with us?”

“Several years, at least,” Pierce answers.

“I can’t,” she says, but her tone is warm as she responds to them. “You know I can’t.” She glances behind her, toward the Occuli. “If your fathers knew—”

“Mine would do nothing,” Kal says proudly.

“Nor mine,” Pierce says. Axl remains silent, a muscle in his jaw ticking.

“Mine would punish you,” Jax says without hesitation or regret, just matter-of-fact. I wince at the statement, knowing he’s right, and fold my arms around myself against the memory of Baydel’s hands on me.

Jax tracks the move, something like apology flashing over his face for the briefest of seconds. “Are you cold?” he asks.

Everything fades away when he looks at me like that.

“A little.”

Jax moves closer, sliding his arm along the back of the seat behind me. The warmth from his body washes over me, lingering, making me forget everything else. His eyes flick down to my lips and back up again, and I swear he's going to put me out of my misery and kiss me—

"Your highnesses." A masculine voice shatters the moment, and Jax immediately draws away from me. An enforcer has raced up to our table, breathless as he looks at them with panicked eyes.

"Riggs?" Kal asks, his muscles tense. "What is it?"

I immediately go rigid at the sight of the enforcer, my body tensing as if preparing for a blow.

Riggs glances to me, hesitant. "It's happened again."

The entire mood shifts around me. Gone is the light banter and the playful barbing. In its place is a sharpness I can feel in my bones. Mirren shuffles to the right of the table, out of the way, eyes on me.

"Where?" Kal asks, immediately standing. Axl and Pierce follow him, and only after a second do I realize Jax is waiting for me to get out of the way before he can move. I hurry out of the seat, stopping next to Mirren. She gently puts her hand on my wrist when I try to draw closer to Kal.

"The teashop near the library at the edge of the city," Riggs says.

"Is anyone harmed?"

Riggs dips his head. "Five," he answers. "They're being cared for."

Regret flashes in Kal's eyes, but they harden as he turns to the other Legends. "We need to go."

"I'll have them bring our transports around," Jax says, disappearing with a catlike grace that sends shivers over my skin.

Axl and Pierce follow him without a second glance my way, but Kal pauses, even as Riggs hurries down the stairs. "I'm sorry," he says, hands on my shoulders. "There's something I have to take care of."

I read the fire in his eyes, the concern and anger mixing together. "Where are you going?"

"Somewhere I can't take you."

"Why?"

"It isn't safe—"

"I don't need protection," I cut in over him. I'm not some simpering princess. I'm an Ashlander. The last thing I am is timid, and if this is some test from the kings, the last thing I want to do is fail.

"Rylee," he says, a plea to his tone. "There are things you don't need to see. Things you don't *want* to see."

"That's not fair," I say. "You can't possibly know what I do or don't want to

see, to know. If this is a test—”

“Kal!” Jax shouts through the crowded space from the entryway doors. He raises his arms, securing a black cloth mask over the lower half of his face. Axl and Pierce have done the same, and each of them has also donned a matching black leather jacket with the Legend crest on the back—a crown of stark white with five points, each topped with a circle in the Legends’ four colors, except for the middle one, which is blistering gold, a nod to Lumathyst itself. The crown looks like it was painted in a hurry in its conception, paint streaks dripping down the leather, giving the crest the illusion of movement.

“It’s not a test,” Kal assures me, bending down to brush a kiss over my lips. It’s long enough that I close my eyes—

He pulls away. “Take her home, please,” he says, and it’s a heartbeat before I realize he’s speaking to Mirren.

And then he’s gone, blinking out of sight so quickly, I have to wonder if he was ever there in the first place.

I turn to Mirren.

“He does that,” she says. “Speed and flight. One of his finer talents.”

I’ve heard of that power, but seeing it is another thing entirely.

“Come,” Mirren says, tugging on my wrist. “Let’s get you to Kal’s estate.”

I half expect the Legends to still be outside when we make our way through the entrance doors, but there isn’t a trace of them. I can’t even hear the rumble of their magical velomages on the busy roads. Mirren ushers me into her carriage, instructing her driver where to take us as we settle in the velvet-lined compartment.

What could’ve warranted Riggs’s urgency and the Legends’ intervention? Something so common that each of them caught on immediately without any explanation? The worry builds and builds until my chest threatens to crack from the pressure.

“What was that about?” I ask, my mind whirling.

Mirren shoots me a scolding look. She eyes the small, open windows, then softens her expression.

“Let’s get you to Kal’s estate,” she says again, with more emphasis this time. “He’ll want you prepared when he’s ready for you.”

I frown but catch sight of an unnatural shadow keeping pace with our carriage. The Occuli. Goddess, they’re unnerving.

And she doesn’t trust them. Fine, fair enough, but I shoot her a silent look that *demands* answers the second we’re out of earshot.

And I just have to hope that whatever those answers are, I can handle them, because watching the Legends assemble like that, donning those jackets and

masks, seeing their moods switch to that terrifying edge of anger has me worrying the same will be turned on me if I’m discovered for the liar I am.

15

Rylee

White stone and wrought iron–framed windows create Kal’s gated estate. Rows of fresh roses line the base of the home, all expertly cared for and manicured. The structure sits on an expansive piece of land, and to the west, I can just see the top of the massive ruby statue of one of our sleeping goddesses—his mother, Neph. I wonder if he had the home built here so he could always see her in the distance. The house itself is bigger than any I’ve ever seen, with the exception of the palace.

Mirren guides me up the steps to Kal’s front doors—large glass doors rimmed in a ruby red border, allowing the entirety of his entryway to be seen. Golden lights flicker from the inside as Mirren slides a key into the lock and ushers us in, then secures the door behind us.

The Occuli had stopped cold outside of Kal’s gates, as if they’d been repelled by an invisible border. It’s a relief, if not a blessing.

My heels click against the polished marble floor as I follow Mirren inside. A sweeping staircase with rich wooden steps dominates the entrance, and a sitting room lined with lush furniture rests to our left, a long hallway to our right.

“I’ve already had your things brought to your rooms,” Mirren says, not bothering to look behind her as she climbs the stairs. I hurry to follow, tearing my attention from my surroundings as she reaches the second-floor landing. “Kal’s room is that way.” She points to the left down a corridor that ends in a set of double doors. “Your room is this way,” she says, turning right. “It’s the only other room on this floor.”

“I won’t be sharing a room with Kal?” I ask, unable to stop and admire the art on the walls because Mirren is walking so fast.

“You may,” she says. “That depends on you and Kal. You’ll work out the official arrangements soon enough, but for now, I assumed you wanted your own space.” She opens another set of double doors and walks inside.

The room is as grand as the rest of the house, with a layout similar to the room I spent the night in at the palace. An oversize bed, a balcony overlooking the grounds, a wardrobe, and a bar stocked with food and drinks.

Something pricks my chest at the ease with which this room was prepared for me, at the wealth one must have in order to snap their fingers and stock it in a

matter of hours. What else can that wealth do if directed toward those who need it most?

I rub my chest while examining the room, scanning it for anything out of place—a habit I picked up from Erin, who always pushed me to listen to my instincts and not be lazy when it came to protecting myself. Missing her has become an entire part of my personality, so normal and consistent I'm used to the ache. What would she make of all this?

I grin slightly, thinking about how she'd give me grief for getting caught at the Choosing, for putting myself in a position like this at all.

I blink out of my longing and look toward Mirren. "Can we speak freely here?" I ask.

"It's safe here," she says. "All the princes ensure their homes are magically soundproofed, and only those they trust have a key."

"You're one of those people," I say.

"I am." She lingers near the doorway. "I have been for a long time."

"I imagine there aren't many people on that list."

Mirren shakes her head.

"Will you tell me what happened tonight?" I ask, hopeful. I hate being in the dark, hate feeling like I'm missing something, but she has no obligation to tell me anything. I'm merely a potential mate in a long succession of those who came before me. She could view me as a fleeting part of the Legends' lives, which would give her no reason to trust and confide in me. But she's given me answers before, so I hope she will again.

"Why do you want to know so badly?" Mirren tips her chin, her eyes as hard as glass. "Why do you care?"

I gape at her, shocked at the switch in her tone. I walk over to the little bar and select an amber-filled decanter, sloshing the liquid into two crystal glasses. I carry them and the decanter to the group of couches and armchairs across the room, sliding into one and setting the extra glass on a table between us.

"I want to know," I say, choosing my words carefully, "because for the foreseeable future, the Legends and I are linked. Even if they don't choose me in the end or I them, for now, we're in this together. If I can help them, I will." I take a sip of the liquor, the sweet burn easing the tension in my chest. "Plus," I continue, "I know it's been a short time—too quick, actually, to make sense—but…" I'm surprised at how true my words are. I might be speaking tactically to persuade Mirren back to my side, but I'm not just telling her what I think she wants to hear. "I don't want anything bad to happen to any of them. And from the energy tonight? It looked like something bad."

Mirren purses her lips, smoothing out her top, which doesn't have a wrinkle in

sight, before she walks over and takes a spot on the loveseat across from me. She grabs the drink and takes a healthy gulp. “None of the others ever asked,” she says. “They never bothered to care about the business of the Legends outside of their dealings with them directly.”

I silently wait for her to continue.

“Not that these particular…disturbances occurred last year, but the princes will always have Legend business to tend to. It comes with the role of ruling territories. There are always those who want to upset the balance and disturb the peace, and the princes are doing their best to minimize the damage to their people. Tonight, though, it’s a recent development.” She sighs. “But they’ve always had to clean up messes. Fix what’s broken, scare those who like to do the breaking.”

“You’re speaking in a code I don’t fully understand.”

“You’ll learn,” she says. “If you’re smart.”

I laugh softly and take another drink. “Suppose we’ll see about that one. Now, tell me.”

Her eyes dart around the room, her shoulders tensing as she finishes off her drink. “Recently, there have been attacks in random places throughout the princes’ territories. More than the regular infractions—like the enhancement-drug runners or internal fights between rivals.”

“What? Who would be bold enough to make direct attacks against the royal cities?”

The stories of the Legends’ thirst for violence are, well…*legendary*. I may not have seen that rage yet, but I haven’t exactly given them a reason to show me, either.

“Rumors say they call themselves the Faders,” she explains. “A group of rebels comprised of some of our own and, we suspect, those from across the sea.”

“There are people from Erithmore here?” My skin tightens at the thought. I’ve grown up hearing stories of Erithmore—the country to the north whose people loathe all things Lumathyst. The kings have issued dozens of mandatory royal posts warning of the threat they pose against us, urging us to comply, submit, and support the royal cities in order to ensure our protection against them. So many Never List missions have been dispatched to try to maintain a tentative peace with Erithmore, too, only for those put on the list to never return.

I swallow around a rock in my throat. If the kings charged Erin with such a mission…

No. It would’ve been in the records. Hundreds of those missions were listed “bound for Erithmore,” and her name wasn’t there.

“Yes,” Mirren answers, drawing me to the present.

“What’s their agenda?”

She leans back against the loveseat. “It’s too early to tell. So far, they’ve been focused on destruction in the Legends’ cities. Sometimes, in their efforts to destroy important property, some of the princes’ people get hurt.”

My heart rate kicks up, and I take a deep breath to slow it down. “Why haven’t I heard about this? Why isn’t the news a mandatory royal post?” Even in the Ashlands, we’re forced to listen to political messages in the town squares.

“The kings don’t know if the instigators are organized professionals or rebellious youths in over their heads. They’re leaning toward the latter.”

I tilt my head. “You don’t believe it’s youths,” I say, “and neither do the Legends. If they did, they wouldn’t have left like that.” Masks and jackets on, eyes ice-cold, powers crackling.

“How do you know?” she challenges. “You’ve just met them. Who’s to say they don’t rush off like that at any supposed threat to their territory? Haven’t you heard the stories of the Legends of Chaos? They rip apart anyone who tries to harm what belongs to them. Anyone who refuses to bow to them, anyone who refuses to obey their rules.”

I study her, noting the exaggerated way she says the last few sentences. “What do you think about the group, then? These Faders? Are they youths trying to show off or something more?”

She pours herself another drink. “Why does it matter what I think?”

“It matters to me,” I say. “I value your insight.”

She blinks at me, shocked, before she settles back into her indifferent attitude. “I think it’s more. I think it’s happening too frequently to be youths playing at being adults.”

“Well, if the threat is real, surely the kings would step in and assist, right? They wouldn’t leave it to their sons to handle everything. They could back the Legends with all of the kings’ enforcers if they wished, and the kings would still be protected. That’s one of the reasons Erithmore has kept its distance for so long, along with the magical protection of the goddesses’ wards. They can’t match the kings’ armies.”

Mirren looks like she wants to agree with me, but all she does is take a sip of her drink.

“Whoever they are,” I continue, “they’re mad. Everyone in Lumathyst knows even thinking about rebellion ends in a dungeon or a public execution.”

“You aren’t wrong,” she says, but there is a wariness about her that unsettles me.

Considering any form of rebellion is ludicrous, but I suppose knowing the way

the kings will deal with it doesn't mean someone isn't foolish enough to attempt it. Even in the Ashlands, where souls are broken in the mines, whispers of rebellion and change are exchanged, though they're never acted on. They're more like tiny drops of hope to get us through each day, of a future we'll never see.

"And they're harming people?" I shake my head. "The enforcer said five were hurt."

"It seems that anyone who happens upon them or gets in their way ends up getting hurt."

"I thought life on this side of the border was perfect," I mutter.

"This side of the border," Mirren repeats, slowly sliding to the edge of the loveseat.

"Yes," I say quickly, burying the panic in my heart. "There isn't a whisper of this in Cedar and Silk." At least that much I know is true; Layce would've told me. Same for Ivy in Leaf and Claw.

Mirren studies me for a moment. "The kings will deliberately keep it that way. They'd never allow such unsubstantiated rumors to reach the cities where… unrest is most likely to take root."

"But the more people they make aware, the more eyes would be on the lookout for the danger."

"Maybe," she says. "These Faders seem to be well trained. They blend in like shadows in the corners. Yet another reason to not believe it's youths." She nods to a shadow behind the wardrobe, and chills burst along my skin. "The Legends have yet to catch one alive."

"What power could they possibly have to stand against the Legends?"

"That's the question," she says. "The one that's driving the princes mad. The Faders aren't regular citizens—they have power of their own. Power that should've long weakened many generations ago."

My stomach turns. "Demis?" I breathe the question.

"Most likely," Mirren says with a cold finality that has my bones frosting over. "But there is no proof. They could be using enhancement elixirs. That much hasn't been uncovered yet. Could you imagine what would happen if word got out that the remaining demis who aren't imprisoned are no longer loyal and are, in fact, growing in numbers? That their powers haven't been diluted by time?"

Demis would face more suspicion than ever before. I'm not sure I'm breathing.

The power in my blood thrashes, and a small breeze flutters past the two of us. My heart pounds harder—there isn't even an opened window I can blame it on—but it's light enough that Mirren doesn't seem to notice.

“The Legends have been hurt by these Faders before?” I ask, worry leaking into every inch of my being.

“A few times, a Fader has gotten lucky and taken a piece out of one of our princes, but they’re so powerful, they heal quickly.” Her eyes go distant, reliving some memory I can’t even try to contemplate. I’m too busy spiraling inside.

I knew Erin, Ivy, Layce, and I couldn’t be the only demis with stronger-than-average powers hiding in plain sight, but I never once thought there were some out there *organizing* against the Legends, against Lumathyst.

Even if there’s no proof, I know it’s more likely to be demis than enhancements—the tonics and powders cultivated on the dark market that give the user enhanced abilities for a short burst of time. They have side effects I’ve seen firsthand on the poor souls in the Ashlands who spend all they have on one taste, one boost that helps them escape their reality, even for a moment. Wouldn’t the Legends easily be able to tell the difference between the two forms of power?

And now that I know the Faders are attacking the Legends and their cities…*goddess*, if the Legends figure out what I am, they might think I’m a part of that group. They might think I’m a Fader sent to weaken them from the inside out—which couldn’t be further from the truth.

I just want to *survive* and live long enough to find my sister.

Mirren rises after I’ve been silent too long, heading toward the doors.

“Mirren,” I say just as she’s opened it. “Thank you for telling me.”

“Thank you for caring enough about them to ask,” she says. “They aren’t used to that. The princes are used to being wanted for their power, wealth, and status. There are few out there who actually care about their safety, physical or emotional. Even some of their own fathers…” She cuts herself off. “Anyway, I hope you know what you’re doing, Rylee Gray. Hope you know what you’re getting involved with.”

My eyes widen just a fraction, but she gives me a nod and shuts the doors behind her when she leaves.

It’s an hour before I’ve calmed my racing mind, and my fear of discovery gives way to worry that Kal has not yet returned. Another hour before I’ve shed my day clothes and slipped into an oversize white tunic, leaving my legs and feet bare as I pace the room.

It’s another two before I realize I haven’t even tried to sit or sleep, too busy warding off scenes playing out in my mind—gruesome battles where Kal and the Legends are harmed, or stealthy fights where Kal doesn’t see a blow coming, injuring him beyond repair.

And just before dawn, my incessant worry transforms into anger—downright

irrational anger at Kal for leaving me behind.

Something gnaws at me. A desperation shaking inside me, reaching out for the Legends in a way I don't understand, like a thread stretched too tight over a long distance.

Kal should've taken me. Should've kept me by his side. Anything would've been better than this…waiting with no word. Not knowing if they are alive and safe or bleeding out in the darkness.

A deep, boiling rage builds inside me at just the thought of any one of them being harmed, and it's powerful enough to shake my senses. I don't know these men. Why should I care so much?

If something happens to them, I'll be fodder for the kings. That's the source behind the worry—

I hear the grand entryway doors open, and I'm out of my room in a heartbeat.

16

Rylee

The carpet is soft beneath my bare feet as I race down the hallway, skidding to a halt at the top of the wide staircase.

Kal pauses at the bottom, eyes cast upward. They widen when he spots me.

“Have you slept at all?” he asks, climbing the stairs. He shrugs out of his leather jacket and folds it under one arm.

My breath is tight in my chest, some feral thing inside me wanting to roar at him while simultaneously sighing in relief at the sight of him alive. “That’s the first thing you have to say to me?”

He stops in front of me, towering a good six inches over my head. Confusion flickers in his eyes. “Is there something else I’m supposed to say?”

“How about an explanation!” I’m fuming, even though I feel like I can breathe for the first time in hours. “How about—” I stop short, noticing a cut above his left eyebrow. “You’re hurt,” I whisper, concern washing over me like a wave. I reach out on instinct, grabbing his wrist as if I can hold him there. I scan him, noting a smattering of other wounds seeping through his shirt. “*Goddesses,*” I say, a lump in my throat. “What happened?”

He shrugs. “I’m fine.”

“You’re bleeding.” No wound looks too deep or too serious, but fear crackles up my spine. “Where is your bathing chamber?”

Kal points toward his room.

“Come on, then,” I say, tugging him toward the double doors on his side of the floor. “Let me clean you up.”

“It’s not your responsibility,” he says but follows me anyway, tossing his jacket on a hall table. “I can handle it myself.”

I flash him a glare over my shoulder—one that doesn’t leave room for argument. We walk through the doors, and I give myself all of fifteen seconds to survey his rooms. The walls are a soft white, the furniture a combination of luxurious crimsons with pops of blue here and there. There’s a sitting area, a study area with a desk and tons of books, and a massive sleeping area with a bed draped in red silk sheets and thick white blankets, large enough for five or more people.

I spy the bathing chamber tucked in the farthest corner of the suite and head

that direction, trying my best not to ogle the bed too closely—is that a mirror positioned above it?

The bathing chamber illuminates as I enter, and I'm grateful for the magical conveniences the Legends' wealth affords them. It certainly saves me time. I force Kal to sit on the closed toilet while I hunt for cleaning materials.

"Under the washbasin," he says, amusement dancing in his blue eyes.

The washbasin in question is set inside a polished marble slab spanning the length of the generous space, complete with a garnet stone shower that is larger than Ivy's flat and a tub that Layce would literally murder someone to get a dip in.

Digging through the cabinets, I find what I need and quickly drop to my knees before Kal.

I reach for the bottom of his wrecked shirt. In this light, I can see black marks splattered across the material. "Are these…*burn* marks?" I ask, tugging it up and over his head.

Good goddess, the man is comprised of eons of smooth skin over rippling muscles that look flexed even though he's just *sitting* there. What does he eat to look like that?

Warmth floods me at the memory of him devouring *me*, and my fingers tremble as I dab a cloth with purifying balm and start to work on his wounds.

He doesn't even flinch. "Yes," he answers, watching me work.

"I thought your power included 'impervious to harm' as well as 'incredible strength and speed,'" I say, focusing on the next wound. His skin is burned around some of the cuts, but nothing is gushing, so I think we're in the clear. "Not to mention immortality."

"I can be harmed," he says.

"Obviously."

"But it's difficult to do," he explains. "These people…they have numbers and are hard to predict. They also have weapons, some advanced, some not. They got lucky. And yes, I'm immortal, thanks to my mother, so I won't die of natural causes or old age. But I can be killed. It's hard to do but not impossible."

I swallow the rock in my throat. "Is everyone else okay?" Apprehension claws up my body at the thought of any of them hurt worse than this.

"Jax took a wound to the shoulder," he says. "But he's okay. Axl and Pierce handled the one that got him."

I grind my teeth as I finish disinfecting and prepare to bandage. Except I freeze, clenching the bandages while I watch the wound I was about to cover *seal* itself. My eyes flick from his to his wounds and back again. They're all sealing, even the one above his eyebrow.

I stand suddenly, taking a step back.

"I told you it wasn't necessary," he says.

I can't stop scanning his chest and abdomen as if the wounds will reappear… but there's nothing. Nothing but his glorious body, displaying all that strength. "Explain."

"We heal faster than normal," he says so matter-of-factly I almost laugh. "What happened tonight…" He sighs. "They have something. We're not sure what, but it delays the process. Under normal circumstances, these would've healed before I got home."

My mind whirls with the power he's demonstrating. I knew all the Legends had powers I couldn't fathom, but seeing it…seeing his body heal itself, it's jarring.

My anger returns, and I focus my glare on him. "You should've warned me."

"About my powers or about the potential for attack?"

"Both," I say, though I know I'm being ridiculous. I can't even really explain the rising anger myself. But there's something inside me that's furious with him for leaving me behind.

"I've known you all of two days," he says, an edge to his tone I've not heard before. "I had no idea how you would react. The others never wanted to know about Legend business. They avoided it like the plague it can be—"

"I'm not them!" I toss the bandages at his chest, and his eyes flare wide. "I'll *never* be them." My entire body is shaking now, adrenaline pushing me right out the washroom door and into his bedchamber. I fully intend to stomp back to my room, but I run into Kal's chest before I can even make it to the doors. I didn't even see him appear in front of me.

I splay my palms on his bare skin, and heat soars through my blood at the contact.

"What are you more upset about?" he asks, gently clutching my wrists, holding me there when I try to move away. "That you didn't know I could heal, or that I didn't warn you about the dangers—"

"You left me behind," I cut him off, the truth making my throat raw. "You left me…" Tears well up behind my eyes, angry and grief-stricken, and it hits me like a bolt of lightning.

The last time I was left behind, I lost Erin. I lost the other half of my heart, my sister, my soul's twin. And I may not care for the Legends like I do my sister, but our survival is linked, and they left without *any* promises of returning.

"Rylee." He sighs my name, the tone soft as he releases my wrists. "I didn't mean to hurt you," he says, "but I'll always do whatever it takes to keep you out of danger."

I raise my chin, allowing a little of my true self to seep through. “I’m not some dainty princess,” I say. “I’ve been taking care of myself for a very long time. If you’re looking for someone to coddle, you can blame Jax for choosing wrong.” My emotions are a tangled mess. I can’t separate my feelings, and I have no idea if the connection I feel to him is real or some creation concocted out of desperation.

I move to leave, but a strong, muscled arm cuts in front of my path. Kal’s hand slides along my ribs, and he shifts so he’s in front of me again. “Nothing about you is dainty,” he says, smoothing that hand up and down, eliciting chills everywhere he touches. “And Jax didn’t choose wrong. I *know* he didn’t.” He skims his other hand over my hip, eyeing the oversize tunic I’m wearing.

Everywhere he touches aches. Everywhere he looks leaves a brand on my skin.

“It’s so early in our time together,” he says. “I didn’t know you’d be so worried about us.”

Mirren said no one cared to worry about them before, and that statement hits deeper at his words.

“Well,” I say, swallowing hard. “I was. And I’m not some breakable thing. I can handle the Faders or any other kind of trouble as well as you can.” Well, maybe not *as* well—I’m not anywhere near as powerful as the part-god Legends—but I can hold my own.

“Mirren told you about the Faders,” he says, sighing.

“Yes, and she told me that they’ve been able to wound you more than once. And now you’re telling me their weapons stop you from healing. I think I’m more than justified in—in worrying that one of these times, you might not come back. That you’ll die out there, and I’ll be trapped here, and I won’t know, and I won’t be able to do a thing.” I rest my forehead on his chest, then turn my head and press my ear to his heart. “I thought there wasn’t anything that could hurt you,” I whisper.

Kal laughs sadly and wraps his arms around me, kissing the top of my head. “There never has been before, but we’re…we’re not at our full strength.”

I pull back to look at him again. “What do you mean?”

Kal gazes off to the side, folding his sadness away. “The tribute we pay our mothers—the power we give them, to maintain the wards—without our mate, it’s begun to cost us.”

“But why?” I ask.

“When our mothers chose to mate with our fathers, they bestowed them each with a drop of their infinite power, making them immortal. But soon they learned that, through their new magical bond, their mates could siphon and use one

another's powers at will. It created a relentless power struggle between the kings, which our mothers frowned upon." He runs a hand through my hair, and I shiver, but his eyes stay distant. "Not to mention, siphoning too much from one another nearly killed them a few times.

"By the time our mothers bore us, they wanted no such life for us. They used their collective power to suppress our gifts, magically weaving locks in our souls that can be opened by one mate and one mate only. Someone who would *choose* us and act as our tether to Lumathyst. Someone who would balance us and bind us together, forestall any fight between us, and ground us when our powers reach their full potential. Only with our fated mate did our mothers think us protected enough to fulfill our destinies."

He finally looks at me again, and he must see something in my face, because his brow smooths immediately. "But that is our concern, not yours. We don't even fully understand the Faders' agenda yet, and it's just as likely that we won't need our full powers to defeat them. It's not your fight."

Realization washes over me like a bucket of ice-cold water. The Choosings, the yearly event…the *real* reasoning behind it. And goddess, if people knew? If their enemies knew? They'd likely use the information to sabotage the Choosing. They'd use it to ensure the princes never reach full power, never ascend the thrones. The Legends need a mate for so much more than a royal agenda. They're willing to use me just as much as I'm using them.

But I'm not… There is no way I'm their fated mate. I snuck into that event with the sole purpose of finding my sister. There was no hope in my heart for becoming *theirs*, and yet, if I reveal those truths, I'll be imprisoned or executed for my lies. Despite all that, there's something deeper, an instinct screaming at the notion that Kal was harmed tonight, that anyone harm the Legends I'm now tied to, and I can't ignore it.

I trail my hand up Kal's rigid abdomen and over his chest, unable to resist with him so close. He smells so good, *feels* so good against me, and there is the relief inside me that he's here…safe.

"If it's yours," I say, "if it's the Legends' fight, then it's mine." I might not be their fated mate—and guilt springs up that I might even be preventing them from finding her and reaching their full power by continuing to stay with them—but I can't trade my life to appease that guilt. They'll have another Choosing after this one, and I'll do what I can to protect them until they have another chance at finding their true match.

Kal's blue eyes flare with emotion as he snakes his arms around my waist, hauling me closer. "Where did you come from, Rylee Gray?"

I bite back a grin. "You really don't want to know," I try to joke, but I feel the

truth of the statement in my heart.

He doesn't. If he did…

"That's my tunic you're wearing," he says, pulling back enough to look down at it.

"It was in my room."

"It looks good on you."

I wet my lips, the tension tightening between us.

"It would look better tossed over that chair," he says, motioning toward the chair a few feet away.

Shock ripples through me. And delight. A whole heap of delight. This…this physical attraction, this undeniable chemistry, it's much easier to focus on. Easier to lose myself in it than the reality he's just revealed.

I reach up on my tiptoes, gripping the back of his hair hard enough to sting as I bring my lips within an inch of his. "Don't *ever* leave me behind again."

"Never," he says and moves to kiss me, but I pull just out of reach and hold him at bay.

His grip on my hips tightens, and shivers race through me. "You won't always like what you see, Rylee," he says, seriousness threatening to steal the heat from his gaze. "But if you want to see it, I won't stop you."

Relief flutters inside me, and I release my grip.

His mouth is instantly on mine, and I sigh between his lips. Goddess, he kisses like a dream. The taste of him is like no other, all sweet and citrusy mixed with a whole mess of power. It makes my head spin and my legs tremble.

I wiggle out of his grasp, flashing him a teasing smirk as I grab the hem of my tunic and hike it over my head, tossing it right where he said he wanted it. Nerves threaten to steal my breath as his eyes trail my bare skin, but the look he's giving me washes any doubts away.

He closes the distance between us, smoothing his hands over my body, taking his time, taking control like he had in the café. But now it's my turn.

I unfasten his pants, dragging them and his undergarments down in one frantic motion.

"Sit," I demand, pushing him toward the chair. He goes willingly, dropping into it with a *thunk*. The man dominates the piece, his massive body shifting as he stretches out his legs. My eyes widen at the sight of him, at what is hard and ready between his massive thighs.

So, it's not only his power that he gets his effortless confidence from. Good to know.

I run my fingers up his thighs, massaging the muscles as I plant teasing kisses along his abdomen, his hips, touching every spot but the one he wants me to. He

shifts in the chair, letting out a low rumble as he tangles his fingers in my hair.

"Rylee." He says my name with an edge that vibrates right between my thighs.

"Yes, Kal?" I ask sweetly, flicking my eyes up to him from where I hover just above his lap.

"You'll be the end of me," he says. "I can already tell."

I grin at that. "You have no idea."

I wrap my lips around his length before he can respond, swirling my tongue as I move up and down. Kal hisses, his hips thrusting upward to go deeper.

I loosen my jaw and add my hand, working it up and down while I adjust to the size of him. I pull off to trail my tongue along his length and back up, sucking on the tip and moaning around the taste of him—all salt and citrus and *him*.

"Fuck," he groans, and a thrill rushes through me at the power I feel. He's letting me take care of him, letting me take the reins from him and show him how I feel, when normally he's the one always taking care of everyone else. *I'm* pulling those sounds out of him. I'm the one he's touching with greedy fingers. I feel like a queen already, and we're only getting started.

I up my pace, sucking him into my mouth and lowering myself as far as I can go. I breathe through my nose, my eyes watering at the sheer size of him, but my entire body is buzzing with need. Up and down, up and down, I work him until his thighs tense and his grip in my hair stings.

"Rylee," he groans before tugging on my hair, pulling himself from my mouth. He drags his thumb over my swollen lips, his chest rising and falling as he leans forward in the chair. "When I come tonight," he says, voice hoarse, "it's going to be inside you."

Lava pools in my belly. He hauls me to my feet and swipes one arm beneath my knees, cradling me to his chest effortlessly as he walks us to his bed.

My heart climbs higher in my throat with each step he takes. I *want* this. I actually want this. Want him.

In this moment, it's not a game, not an act, not a need for survival. I simply want to be devoured by this man in every possible way, and I don't waste a second thinking about the repercussions of wanting someone so badly so soon.

"A mirror," I say when he gently lays me on the bed.

He smirks playfully and glances up. "There's one here, too," he says, pointing behind me. I rise up on my elbows and tilt my head back to see that his headboard is a mirror. My skin flushes over my whole body at the sight of the two of us—me sprawled before him, his massive, powerful body over me as he stalks up the bed.

"You like to watch," I say. Likes to watch and likes the element of getting

caught. I file away the desires, biting back a smile.

“That depends on who I’m watching,” he says, his fingers gliding over my legs in languid strokes. “Look up,” he demands at the same time he drags my ankles down, laying me flat on the bed.

I do as he says, my heart racing. I watch him in the mirror, watch *us* in the mirror. His smooth, lightly tanned skin stretches over the muscles in his back, flexing as he shifts on his knees. His dark-brown hair is the perfect silkiness to grip as he spreads my thighs and—

Shock flares through my body as he drags his tongue down the center of me. He moves his hands beneath my ass, palming me as he lifts, giving him a deeper angle to lick me again. And *again*.

He thrusts his tongue deep before pulling out to tease that bundle of nerves that is aching, pulsing for him. He works me up so fast I can barely breathe around the need, around the ache—

He sucks hard, sending me crashing over the edge in a wave of pleasure. I arch against him, desperate and greedy as I ride it out.

“That,” he says, moving to settle atop me, arms resting on either side of my head, “I could watch all fucking day.”

I note my lust-glazed eyes in the mirror, the flush on my cheeks, the give in my body under his. Then my eyes snap to his as he nudges at my entrance. He hovers there, eyes on mine.

“Is this okay?”

I study him. Would he really stop if I asked? We’re already so deep into this—is he actually asking permission?

“Tell me to stop and I will,” he says as if he can read my mind. “You know I don’t care about the invitation, the Choosing contract. We do this on your terms. Always.”

Warmth pools in my chest and between my thighs. I’ve never been given this kind of compassion and control before, and I suddenly don’t know how to react to it.

Acting on instinct, I reach up and kiss him, more gently this time. Then I move my hand between us, gripping him, guiding him in an inch. A shudder rocks through him, and slowly, almost agonizingly, he slides in.

“Fuck, Rylee,” he groans as he seats himself to the hilt. “You feel so good.”

I tremble around him as he kisses me with long strokes of his tongue, the tastes of the two of us crashing in an intoxicating flavor that has me wrapping my legs around his hips, urging him to move.

He does. Timidly at first, his blue eyes on my face as he gauges my every reaction, almost as if he’s afraid he’ll hurt me. I suppose with his power—his

nearly indestructible strength and speed and flight—he could, but it's the last thing I'm worried about. All I can think, all I can feel, is him. The way our bodies fit together, the way we move together like we were made for it, like we've done this a thousand times and know all the right spots to hit.

"Kal." I breathe his name when he slides an arm under my lower back, hefting me up to take me from a better angle. In this position, his hips grind against my aching core every time he thrusts, ramping up my body so tightly, I can barely speak. I rock against him, needing more—more friction, more intensity, more *him*.

"Fuck," Kal says, eyes on me. "Look at you. Look at how *perfect* you are under me." He glances up, and I follow his gaze, watching him fuck me. It turns me wholly liquid, the sight of his powerful body atop mine, claiming me in a way I never knew possible.

"Harder," I demand, and Kal slows his pace, looking to me in question. I playfully bite his bottom lip. *"Harder."*

"Fuck," he groans. "Hold on to me."

I do as he says, wrapping my arms around his neck and locking my ankles behind his back. And then he unleashes himself on me.

Kal pumps into me hard and fast, gliding against that bundle of nerves while he fills me, and I can't help my gasp.

"Yes," I breathe. "Goddess, *yes*." He feels like a dream against me, his arms holding me so tight I see stars. Every nerve in my body comes alive at his touch, sparking, pushing me right up to that sweet edge.

I want to lose myself in him. I want to live in this bliss for the rest of forever. I want to live where nothing outside of this feeling exists.

I want to *fall*.

"Rylee." He says my name like a plea, and I open my eyes, my entire body tingling. I'm a tight spring ready to snap; my breath quickens as he keeps me right on the cusp. And then I'm pleading, begging him.

"Come with me." I almost moan the words. "Please. *Kal*."

"Say that again," he demands, pulling all the way out of me, holding me there in anticipation.

"Please," I beg. "Kal, please come with me."

He slams home, again and again—

I clench around him, my orgasm ripping through me in a cascade of tiny explosions from the crown of my head to the tips of my toes. Kal follows my release with his own as I cling to him. I feel like I'm floating by the time I catch my breath enough to open my eyes and really look at him—

"Kal!" I tighten my grip on his body, noticing the good five feet between us

and the bed.

"Sorry about that," he says, laughing softly as we lower safely back to the mattress. "That happens when I get…distracted."

I can't stop the laugh that comes from my lips. "You *can* fly," I say. I knew that, but it's another thing entirely to experience it.

He nods, trailing his nose along the length of my jaw, kissing down my neck. "I'll take you sometime," he says. "If you're up for it."

"You should already know," I say, arching my neck, giving him better access. "I'm up for *anything*." I blink out of my lusty, blissful haze with a jolt of apprehension.

Because that wasn't a lie or part of any game we're playing. I just gave him insight into *me*—nothing to do with being the best potential I can be. Even the way we just fucked was all me, and that…that terrifies me. Because if I get too comfortable here, if I lose sight of the role I'm meant to play, I may lose my life in the end.

But even as Kal continues to kiss every inch of my skin, I can't help but think, *At least it'll be fun on the way down*.

17

Rylee

“So, tell me more about the Legend side of your life,” I prompt Kal as we walk along the Riverwalk in the Ruby Aire.

It’s been three incredible weeks here…something I never expected. Kal has been a gracious host, showing me his city and introducing me to his people, contradicting everything I’ve ever heard about the prince before.

He’s kind and generous, but I haven’t seen the side I’ve heard rumors about. And as our time runs short, I finally work up the courage to ask. I feel like I have to know this side of him before I have any chance of asking for his help finding Erin, no matter how generous he may seem.

Kal pauses in the middle of the bridge, leaning his forearms over the stone railing, glancing out at the winding river below. It’s midday, and we just finished a fantastic lunch at another wonderful restaurant Kal introduced me to. The foot traffic is low—there’s no one else on the bridge right now but us.

He glances away from the river and at me, where I’ve come to lean next to him. “What do you want to know?”

I shake my head. “Can I be honest with you?”

“After the past three weeks together, I thought you’d know by now that I prefer it that way,” he says, and the slightest pang of guilt hits my chest. I’ve mostly been myself these past few weeks, but I’ve hidden those pieces of myself that could get me killed. I probably shouldn’t have phrased the question like that, but the more I’ve gotten to know him, the more comfortable I’ve grown and the less of a filter I’ve had on my mouth.

“I’m having a hard time reconciling the Kal I’ve seen these past few weeks, the one I’ve grown to know on many levels”—my cheeks flush at the way his blue eyes darken at that insinuation; we’ve been intimate many times, each better than the last, and I’d be lying if I said I didn’t think we matched on every level in that regard—“with the stories I’ve read in the royal post or have been told by the enforcers. They don’t really align.”

“My friends and I stopped reading the royal post years ago,” Kal says. “Why don’t you enlighten me on some of those stories you’ve heard about the Legends of Chaos?”

A dozen stories come to mind, most of them overheard or deliberately spread

throughout the Ashlands by the kings' enforcers, but I'm apprehensive about sharing them if he doesn't already know.

"You won't offend me," he says, clearly noticing my hesitance. "I promise you, Rylee. You're safe with me. Hit me with it."

I shrug, trying to not give weight to the rumors I've heard. "There are so many," I say. "I heard one not too long ago that some nobility decided to steal from one of the Legends' establishments. Someone from the lower cities. The stories didn't say why or what he stole, but they did emphasize how the Legends dealt with the man."

"And how was that?" Kal asks, nothing but intrigue in his eyes.

"They said the Mind slipped into the noble's thoughts, finding proof of his crime. That the Player laughed as the Nightmare dangled him over the roof of one of the tallest buildings in the city, ensuring he manipulated his emotions to feel the most genuine terror, all while the Dreamer stripped him of his titles and wealth, so no future dreams could come true."

Kal's lips part slightly, and I swear there's a hint of pain in his eyes. "What else?" he asks, an edge to his voice. "What else do the rumors say about us?"

"I shouldn't have asked," I whisper, a weight on my chest.

"I want you to ask." He shifts his body to face me. "I never want you to be afraid to ask me anything. I'm just suddenly hit with curiosity. What else could they possibly be writing about us in the royal post?"

I swallow hard. "They say that the Dreamer is one who *steals* dreams—denying out-of-status marriages, denying wealth stipends to those in your cities who are not as wealthy as the others. They say that the Player finds pleasure in placing bets on whether or not criminals in his cities can hold their breath long enough as he controls water around their heads. They say the Mind will alter your very reality, making you believe you're falling from the highest mountaintop or drowning in the darkest seas, all while choking the life out of you with those bands of energy he can control. They say the Nightmare laughs while he manipulates your emotions, making sure there's so much terror running through your veins, you loose your bowels. That the Legends sometimes do all of these things…in the name of entertainment."

Kal blows out a breath. "I knew the stories were bad," he says, "but I hadn't realized how bad." He lifts those blue eyes to mine. "And what do you think, Rylee? You've been with me for three weeks now. You saw me rush off on Legend business before, saw me return. You've seen me with my people. What do you think about those tales?"

I worry my lip between my teeth. He's not immediately denying the stories.

"I think they're believable," I say, noticing his slight flinch. "Believable if you

have no contact with the Legends," I continue. "What is everyone supposed to believe if there isn't evidence to counter the rumors? They ensure that those who don't really know you are afraid of you." I shake my head. "But, after getting to know you…" My voice trails off as I silently question everything. "The way you are with your people, the kindness with which you approach everyone…I don't think those stories are true about you, but perhaps they are about the other Legends? I don't know them like I've gotten to know you. But if they aren't true about any of you, I have to wonder why such rumors are around in the first place."

"That's a fair assessment," Kal says as he nods. "I can't say that some of the elements you've brought up aren't true, especially about our powers. It's no secret that the four of us are incredibly powerful, and the kings more so, but they aren't as involved in territorial disputes because they're ancient and uninterested in anything that happens outside of the royal city." He sighs. "As long as everyone is still loyal to them, still paying their taxes, still paying tribute to them and supplying their armies with people, they don't care. But *I* care. I care about what happens in my city. Pierce, Axl, and Jax care about what happens in theirs."

"And outside your cities?" I ask before I can stop myself. "Who cares about them?"

Kal's brow furrows. "The lower cities?"

I purse my lips. "Yes," I say. "Those like mine."

"We do our best to handle conflict in those cities when we can," he explains. "But our fathers have put rules in place about the amount of aid we're allowed to give."

Emotion clogs my throat. "And you're content with the way things are?"

"No," he says. "And I have a sense you're not, either."

I shift my weight. We've never danced this close to the truth before…not this truth. "I think there's a ton of work to be done in the lower cities. And after the wealth I've witnessed here, I know it's possible."

"That's something you'd want to do?" he asks. "If…"

His voice trails off, and my heart flips in my chest from the weight of that *if*.

If I choose them in the end.

If I survive the Athanry.

If. If. If.

"Yes," I finally answer. "I think there's a way to help the lower cities without resorting to all the tactics the rumors speak of."

Kal nods. "I won't lie to you and pretend I've never used my powers to intimidate someone."

My chest tightens at his admission, and suddenly I'm analyzing the last three weeks, wondering if the only reason he's treated me so well is because he needs me so badly. Needs me to choose him, choose all of them so the powers he speaks of magnify to a point they could overthrow the kings if they wished.

"My city isn't perfect," he continues. "I don't believe any city is. There are good people here with good intentions, and there are people here with bad intentions, too. When those intentions get bad enough to merit the Legends' attention…" He shrugs. "We meet them with the full force of our powers."

"And who decides what merits your attention? The kings?"

"Sometimes they advise us on investigating one crime or another," he answers. "But usually, these matters are brought to us specifically by the citizens being affected."

"Are you saying anyone in your city can have an audience with you? No matter their station?"

"I know that the laws in Lumathyst set forth by my father and the other kings say no," he answers. "But my people know that there's no fear when requesting my presence to discuss a grievance or a dream. Regardless of their station."

I study the lines of his face, searching for those signs of deception I've gotten so good at reading thanks to a life of dealing with the kings' enforcers—dealing with Turner and all the lies he spun before he showed his true self.

I see nothing like that on Kal's face, nothing that would indicate he's lying to me, telling me exactly what I want to hear in order to keep me invested in him. All I see is a heaviness in the set of his eyes, a tenseness along his broad shoulders, the muscle in his jaw ticking as he silently pleads with me to understand.

"So, you and the other Legends determine which people merit your intimidation or not?" I ask. "Was the first story true?"

"No," he says, then tilts his head. "Not entirely."

"Not entirely." I repeat the words, my stomach sinking.

"The story got the intimidation practices right," he admits. "Jax did dangle a man off a building while making him piss his pants. Axl made a bet on whether or not he would soil himself next. Pierce held his mind to have absolute proof of his crimes, and then I stripped him of all his titles and wealth." He shakes his head. "But the reasoning behind it, *that* was a story spun by the Occuli and our fathers to be beneficial to their laws. What's the point of printing a story if it doesn't have some tie back to the kings and the laws of the realm they rule over?"

"What was the man's crime?" Anticipation tightens my skin, my heart thumping against my chest as I wait. Could it be because the man was an

Ashlander crossing borders? Stealing food? I feel like I'm standing on the edge of a precipice, Kal's answer holding the power to determine my next choices in such an intense way.

Kal's anger turns his blue eyes into chips of ice. "The man was a father," he says. "Estranged from his wife. She'd taken their child across borders in an attempt to flee from him. She came from Jax's city, fleeing all the way into mine because of the way he treated them."

"If she had to flee…" I say, my imagination running wild.

"He hurt them," he answers for me. "And if that wasn't enough, he found them here and tried to take the child against their will back to the Obsidian City. The wife begged an audience with me, told me what happened, and we Legends reacted. If you feel we were unjust in our actions—"

"I don't," I say, reaching out and placing my hand on one of his fists, which rest on the railing of the bridge. "I don't," I say again, relief unwinding inside me.

The crime was severe. So was their action.

Kal sighs. "Pierce's power can be a terrifying thing," he says. "His ability to slip into any mind he wants is why so many keep their distance from him. Same as Jax. The knowledge that if he wished it, he could make you feel like you were dying, make you feel like you were being chased by a monster while doing nothing but sitting still." He unclenches his fist, smoothing his hand into mine. "But their powers are beneficial, ensuring that when we *do* deliver justice, it's absolutely vindicated. Pierce saw what the man had done to his wife and child. He knew without a shadow of a doubt that he was guilty of the crime, and therefore we carried out the punishment without remorse. That doesn't sit well with some people," he says. "I know that. I know not everyone agrees with the way we handle situations like that."

"And the kings spin the story to make it seem like some law was broken and you four enacted the justice necessary…to remind everybody to never break the kings' laws?" I ask, shaking my head. "And all of you just ignore these stories? Ignore these rumors that paint you as ruthless vigilantes who take pleasure in doling out their own forms of justice within their own territories? Doesn't it bother you?"

Kal shrugs again. "We know the truth. And our people—the ones who are invested in our cities—they know the truth as well." He motions a hand toward the city behind us. "As I'm sure you've seen. It's not like my people are spitting on my boots when we pass them on the streets."

He's not wrong. I haven't met one citizen here who seems ill content with him.

"And those rumors act as a deterrent," he continues. "If those stories the

enforcers or the kings' Occuli weave discourage even the most basic of crimes, it's a small price to pay, having those who don't really know you think you're a monster."

I let the weight of his words settle over me, let the information sink in. Some of my worries are soothed, but I have more questions than answers.

If what he says is true, then there are many in the lower cities who deserve to know the truth about their princes. But perhaps they're waiting until they ascend the thrones to make their true intentions known. Maybe the kings would stop any effort to explain to the people that their intentions are good and their actions are for the collective.

Or maybe it's all bullshit. A pretty story told by a devilishly handsome man in order to ensnare a mate. I feel that's the least likely possibility, but it's a thought I can't erase.

"Do you have any more questions for me?"

"You mean, do I have anything to make this conversation any heavier and more awkward?" I ask, a soft smile on my face.

Kal laughs, and I join in, the tension in my chest easing as we make our way back to the easier ground that we've treaded upon for the last three weeks.

I loop my arm through his, leaning my head against its bulging muscle. "What parts of the city have I not seen yet?"

"Several," he says, his effortless smile returning. "Would you like to see more of it?"

"Please."

We spend the next hour exploring more parts of Kal's city. Gorgeous hand-carved fountains set amongst lush gardens that separate the bustling city buildings. Delightful cafés with endless varieties of coffee. We walk by the playhouse, a gorgeous structure hewn out of stone and inlaid with rubies, where the Ruby Aire Players' home stage is housed.

I find myself relaxing the more we tour his town, the more people we pass who smile and wave and bow to their prince, to their Legend. They do not balk or cower from him. They don't turn their noses up in disgust. Certainly not the reactions of people who are terrified of him. There's a respect and compassion between everybody we pass that makes me question everything I thought I once knew.

We turn a corner, exiting the theater district and moving on to the next, and come upon a large stone building that's covered in an array of colors and swirls of paint.

"It's a community art wall. The Ruby Aire takes pride in artistic expression. We even have a small gallery in the library featuring local artists," Kal explains.

I admire the art along the building as we walk, but I stop in my tracks when I come across a particular section.

“Do you like it?” he asks as he pauses by my side.

The slashes of yellow and black, the way the delicate lines swirl and whirl together to create the shape of a thin black cat with yellow eyes staring right at me with cunning—it makes my heart stop and restart in my chest. I stumble closer, reaching out to touch it, as if I’ll feel wet paint and be able to turn my head and see my sister standing there, a brush in her hand.

I know this cat. I *know* this work.

Erin found a stray cat wandering by our hovel in the Ashlands years ago. She’d tried to domesticate him, but he never allowed it. Eventually, she was content to set out what little food we could scrounge up for him, and he’d come and go at his leisure. She painted him on the wall where her cot was tucked. She’d painted a moon on my side, since I loved it so much.

“Forget me.” I read the tiny words written next to the cat’s right ear out loud, my heart clenching in my chest.

Forget me?

“Rylee?” There’s an edge of concern in Kal’s voice, and I blink a few times, remembering where I am and who I’m supposed to be. He reaches out to touch my shoulder. “Do you like this one?”

“I do,” I say, doing my best to hide the trembling in my fingers.

Erin used to do something like this in the Ashlands, sneaking around at night and dodging the enforcers so she could splash little bits of paint here and there on different buildings. There was always a buzzing whenever anyone saw a new painting of hers, but then we were all quickly forced to wash them away. The enforcers never allowed such little intrigues to happen freely.

When did she do this painting? Had she gone out of her way to stop here before heading to the royal city last year before the Choosing? Ivy and Layce never mentioned taking the time to do that.

“Do you know how long this has been here?” I ask, hoping he thinks it’s mere curiosity.

Kal scans the massive building, noting all the different illustrations, the variety of painters laying claim to a blank space and making it their own. He points at the cat, his eyes reflective. “This one…I believe is relatively new?” He says it as if he’s not entirely sure. “From here to there,” he says, pointing from the cat to a few feet down, where there are other random paintings, “I would say all happened in the last six months or so.” He says more confidently, “I came to the art district around that time when the Ruby Aire Players were performing a fairy tale. I made this walk, and a great deal of this was still blank.”

My heart races in my chest and my legs tremble. Six months ago. Could he be right? Or could his memory be faulty? It would be easy enough to not recall the exact time this was done. But if he's right…

That means Erin was right here in the Ruby Aire within the last six months. She was alive then. Tears gather in the backs of my eyes. The relief morphs into something else, and my body tenses.

She was here, finding leisure time to paint, while I sat grief-stricken in the Ashlands, wondering what happened to her.

Anger and desperation and grief strike me so hard, I'm sure they'll bring me to my knees. I reach for Kal's arm, as much for stability as for comfort. My entire world feels as if it's crumbling around me, more questions and uncertainties threatening to swallow me whole.

"It's beautiful," I say, ripping my eyes away from the painting that's mocking me. Mocking my grief. Mocking the tears I've shed over Erin.

Maybe she really did meet somebody and run away without a second glance back. Maybe I didn't know my sister at all.

No, that can't be right. I shove away the irrational anger, forcing myself to breathe.

Forget me.

Erin knew me better than that. Knew that if I did happen upon this painting, I wouldn't just accept *forget me.* And she certainly wouldn't want me to forget her if she was out there living her best life. Which means…

She wants me to forget her because she's in danger or in some kind of trouble she doesn't want me involved in.

Or it's nothing like that, and she painted the cat and titled it *forget me* as some sort of apology for the fact that she hadn't been around to feed the cat in months. I had, and whenever I couldn't, one of the children from a family living next door took care of it for me, knowing I'd bring them back whatever treats I'd been able to steal during my outings across borders. Damn, I'd owe the kid a mountain by the time I got back to the Ashlands…*if* I ever got back.

Ugh. Too many possibilities. But one thing is certain: she's not overseas. Or wasn't, in the last six months.

It doesn't change things. Doesn't change the fact that I want to find her. Only now I feel more like throttling her than hugging her for making my mind spin like this with worry.

Kal and I continue our walk, and his eyes light up as we near a pillared building with a set of grand stairs. "Would you like to see the library?"

"I would love to," I say, nothing but honesty in my words. "You said there is a gallery with local artists there?"

“There is,” he says, smiling down at me.

I love books, though I doubt I’d be able to appreciate them right now. My mind keeps wandering to my sister, even as we ascend the stairs and enter the building.

I need to see that local artist gallery. Need to see if Erin left anything in there, too. Maybe it’ll give me another hint or some kind of answer to soothe my racing mind. The only thing I can cling to is the fact that Erin might be alive. Alive and well enough to paint. I should take more joy in that, more comfort, but I find myself confused and agitated at the uncertainty more than anything.

I’m in awe as we cross the polished marble floors, arching my neck to look up and *up*. Dozens of levels wrap around the building in a spiral, each set of stairs offering a new floor with new possibilities and stories to escape into. The place is drenched in the smell of parchment and leather and the hint of coffee brewing somewhere nearby. It’s a comforting smell, and my heart expands.

There are numerous people in here, some searching the stacks, others scribbling on parchment in little alcoves with tables and mugs of coffee. I glance over my shoulder, holding back my groan of irritation at the Occuli who followed us inside. They’re so out of place with their green flames in a space that contains mostly parchment.

“Your Highness.” A young man approaches us, bending low at the waist, a tome in his hand.

“Earl Marcus. How are you?”

“Very well, thank you. Might I beg a minute of your time? I’ve been researching the strain of plants we discussed weeks ago, and I found some riveting answers.”

Kal glances at me, and I nod and wave off his silent question. “I’m going to find that art gallery,” I say, leaving the two to their discussion.

I wouldn’t have been able to resist a look around even if I’d been ordered to, but of course Kal does no such thing. With the help of a map posted near the stairs, I locate the art gallery Kal mentioned on the fourth floor of the library. The walls are adorned with pieces similar to the ones on the building outside, done by amateur artists who somehow create works that look even better than the ones hanging on the palace walls.

After a full turn around the room, I’m convinced none of the works here are my sister’s. Another dead end.

It’s not that I wanted my sister to be on a Never List mission or locked in the dungeons. I never wanted her to be in danger. But this? Why would she do this?

I come across a private room behind a closed door. The etching on the glass reads *Royals Only*. I peek through the glass and see tomes laid out on the table

and more art decorating the walls inside of it. There's another painting of a cat, but I can only see a fourth of it from this angle. Glancing quickly up and down the hall to make sure I'm alone, I open the door and walk in without a second thought about the sign.

My heart deflates, the breath rushing out of my lungs when I'm close enough to see that the painted cat is nothing like the style my sister uses. I pride myself a little on being able to recognize her work so certainly but hate the disappointment that rings through me that it's not hers.

What did I think would happen if I found another one of her pieces, anyway? That there'd be a note under it with the name of the artist and the address of where they're residing? That she'd write something else other than *forget me* and help me piece together her thought process? How ridiculous of me.

I turn away from the painting, more than ready to explore another level. I reach for the glass door, pulling it open—

An Occuli stands in the entryway, making me jolt backward. Those green flames blaze as it shakes its head. "You aren't allowed in here." An otherworldly voice rings out through its mouth.

Ice drenches me as it takes another step closer.

"Only royalty," it continues as it herds me into a corner.

Magic I can't see but *feel* snaps against my skin like a slap. I flinch as more blasts hit my skin. The power in my blood starts to rise, threatening to burst free —

"Stop." Kal's demand echoes through the room.

The stings stop, and the Occuli immediately stands up straighter, turning and bowing toward Kal as he enters the room.

"Leave. Now," he orders.

The Occuli continues to bow as it shuffles out past him. Kal shuts the door behind it, waiting until it's out of sight before crossing the distance between us. He draws me into an embrace, holding me against his warm body.

"Are you all right? Did they hurt you? You're trembling," he says, holding me tighter.

"Its magic," I say, my voice cracking. "It *hurt*. I didn't… I didn't mean…" I can't get the words out, the events of the day threatening to break me completely. "The door was unlocked—"

"They're the ones who shouldn't be crossing lines," Kal says. "They have no business testing you like that." He pushes me away just enough to cup my cheeks and look into my eyes. "It'll never happen again. I promise," he continues. "You're safe with me. You know that, right?"

I nod, my head spinning with adrenaline and my power still rushing in my

veins. “I know,” I manage to say, relaxing with his assurance.

Goddess, just a little test of magic and I’m trembling. I can blame it on the vulnerability still clinging to me from seeing Erin’s painting, but the Occuli have always rubbed me the wrong way. I’m sure it’s reporting back to whichever king it’s attached to, gloating about the way it scared me.

I take a deep breath, trying to steady myself. I’m still playing a game here, and since my life is in the balance, I need to remember that.

“I know,” I say again, running my hands up his strong arms, slipping them behind his neck to pull him closer to me. “I know.” A restless energy hums in my skin—the adrenaline in my blood needing an outlet.

Kal leans down at my urging, and I graze my lips over his, softly at first, drawing back to look up into his eyes for a moment before kissing him with more fervor.

I grip his shirt to hold him closer. This. I need more of this. His kiss chases all the cold, dreadful feelings away, replacing them with the warmth of a dawning sun. The longer I spend with Kal, the more I realize he’s so much like that comforting warmth—powerful yet safe, passionate yet understanding.

He shifts me gently, walking me until my spine hits one of the shelves lined with books, never breaking our kiss.

I *cling* to him. Cling to the safety and the sensations he’s creating within me. Each masterful stroke of his tongue helps erase the grief and confusion and fear that are threatening to drown me. When he kisses me like this, I’m not thinking about Erin or the secrets I’m hiding. When he kisses me like this, I’m reduced to nothing more than a woman vying for his heart.

“Kal.” His hands roam over my body, hoisting me up until I lock my ankles behind his back. “More,” I beg, slanting my mouth over his again.

I can’t get enough, and each part of my being soars at every point of contact.

“Rylee.” Kal groans my name.

Every time we connect, as if our lives depend on it, is a claiming and a submission…

One we’re both powerless to stop.

18

KAL

"So, tell us," Pierce says, raising his glass from where he sits on the cushioned floor of one of my favorite rooms in my house. "Is it love?"

I glance at the square pool between us—the center of the room—to give myself a few moments to respond. The water looks crimson, since the walls are painted red and the ceiling sports a detailed and carved section of rubies. Two chandeliers illuminate the room in blush light, and candles line the walls made of bookshelves, offering a golden glow.

The pool is surrounded by cushions made for relaxing or fucking, but right now, my friends take up the space. Pierce sits across from me, Jax to my left, and Axl to my right.

"Come on," Axl says. "You can tell us." He curls his fingers where he relaxes on the edge of the pool, and droplets of water rise to his call, spinning with each flick of his wrist.

It's been a month since Rylee joined me in my city, and I can't remember a time I've felt so…*happy.*

Genuinely happy—hopeful and frustrated and lust-crazed and fiercely protective, but happy. She drives me mad with how much she keeps locked tight, but it's only been four weeks. I must be understanding and patient. She'll have secrets up until the point when she fully trusts us.

"Rylee is different," I say by way of answer, and Pierce and Axl laugh. Jax seems content to brood behind his drink. "She *is*—"

"You are the Dreamer," Pierce says. "You always see the best in everyone. It's your tragic flaw."

My gut clenches. He's not wrong. I've been betrayed more times than I can count because of it.

"You don't understand," I say. "She's not like the others." The previous potentials—it was easy enough to enjoy their company, but we were never as intimate as I've been with Rylee. She's an addiction. An intoxicating mystery I want to unravel with every breath I take.

"What have you learned?" Pierce asks, always gathering data.

I try to hold back my smile as my mind drifts over the last few weeks, but I can't. "Coffee and whiskey are her two favorite drinks, sometimes together if

she's in a feisty mood. She wears your two colors to get a rise out of me," I say, pointing to Axl and Pierce, easily picturing her in the stunning emerald number she wore a few days ago. Wore and then lost because I peeled it off her body and worshipped her for a few hours after.

My dick twitches at the thought. I've never been so starved for a person, and I fucked her before breakfast today.

"Does she ever wear black?" Jax asks, the first words he's spoken since they all arrived.

I think back on the past month. "No," I say, shaking my head. "I haven't seen her in black since the Choosing."

Jax's slow, sardonic smile stretches his lips as he leans farther back against the red cushions, sipping from his drink in a way that chills my blood. That smile… It usually means bloodshed or chaos, neither of which are particularly favorable when it comes to him.

"You can take the next month," Axl chimes in, looking at Jax. "Help take the edge off whatever is eating at you."

So, he's noticed, too. I glance to Pierce, who nods. They've both noticed Jax being more moody than usual these past weeks. I want to ask what's bothering him, especially since he's the one who chose Rylee—and thank fuck he did—but I know my friend like I know myself, and he's not one to open up about his feelings.

"No," Jax says, studying his drink. "I'm not keen to expose the little liar. I'll go last, like we discussed."

I sigh. "You're twisting it," I say, shaking my head. "She could easily be withholding some details of her life that she finds embarrassing or shameful. When she trusts us, she'll—"

"Spill all her dirty little secrets?" Jax waves me off. "You know me. I can't stand liars. I didn't sense it at first, but…" His purple eyes get lost as he stares at the water in the pool. After a few moments, he blinks. "I'm not eager to be rejected in the end again."

Axl flashes me a look, and my gut twists. I may be reading between the lines, but if he's dreading rejection, it means there's something about Rylee that's gotten under his skin in a good way. I cling to that kernel of hope that he'll come around when he gets to know her and drop the *little liar* business.

"Tell us more," Axl says, leaping at the chance to turn the conversation back to where we started.

"She loves to read," I answer. "So much that I have to be very clever when coaxing her out of the library." Flashes of taking her against the stacks at the city library last week races through my mind. She'd initiated it after her unfortunate

encounter with the Occuli, almost like she needed a physical outlet for the fear the thing had created. I spoke to my father about the Occuli overstepping, and if it weren't for the kings' demands I not punish it, I would've flown it to the tallest, harshest mountain in Lumathyst and left it there.

But her reaction after… The way she'd clung to me, kissed me with such passion. The way she'd said she felt safe with me…it was *everything*.

I shift where I sit. If I'm not careful, I'll have to leave our weekly meeting and find out where my potential mate is hiding. "She hasn't opened up about her family yet," I continue. "Nothing too personal. Every time I try, she changes the subject."

Jax laughs again, taking another drink as if that is explanation enough about his reservations.

"Maybe that's what she's hiding," Pierce says. "A troublesome family member? Maybe someone on the enforcers' radar or in the prisons?"

"I'm not sure." I press my lips together. We rarely dig deep into the potentials' pasts unless absolutely necessary, not wanting to be swayed by things out of their control, like family connections. "I understand her hesitance. This is all still so new to her. *We've* been through this six times, but…" I shrug. "Something about this time *is* different. It's like all the Choosings before this were just stepping stones guiding us to her."

"It's been a month," Pierce reminds me. "She's now free to reject us and leave. Has she given you any indication of contemplating leaving before venturing on with one of us next?"

"Not at all," I say confidently. "I won't pretend to know her mind like you could, Pierce, if you so wished, but I don't believe she has any intentions like that as of right now."

Axl releases his booming laugh, reaching across the corner of the pool to clap me on the shoulder. "Can't fault your optimism, Kal," he says, shaking his head. His hair hangs loose and over his shoulders today, a sleeveless blue tunic showing off his inked arms. I cock a brow at him, silently conveying my sincerity. He stops laughing, his eyes widening. "You're serious," he says. "You're not just being your dreamer self…you actually mean it."

"I do," I answer. "She's not performing for the Occuli when they're observing, and there are times I swear she looks lost when we talk about the history of my city…like she's never heard the stories before. And she doesn't hold back out of politeness or some sort of duty to submit to royalty. She calls me on my bullshit."

"Ohhh," Axl says, clapping his hands together. "This is going to be so much fun."

“What else?” Pierce asks.

“She’s expressed her desire to not be left behind the next time we face a Legend issue or a Fader problem.”

“You told her?” Axl asks at the same time Jax says, “She said that?”

My eyes dart between the two. “Yes, she was very adamant about never leaving her behind again,” I answer Jax first, then turn to Axl. “And no,” I say. “Mirren explained a few things when Rylee was worried about where we vanished to a few weeks ago.”

“She was concerned?” Pierce asks, and I nod.

“For all of us,” I say, glancing at Jax. “She was livid when I came home. There was genuine fear in her eyes at the thought of losing any one of us.”

“That soon,” Pierce says, his dark eyes calculating, considering.

“I know,” I say. “I doubted it, too, at first. Assumed she was just afraid of losing her chance at real wealth and power, but that couldn’t be further from the truth.”

“How so?” Axl asks.

I fiddle with the drink in my hand. “I don’t know how to explain it,” I say, struggling for the right words. “It’s almost like she didn’t want or expect to get Chosen. There are times—split seconds—when I can see that she resents the idea of the responsibility that comes with being our mate. But then there are even more times when I see the fire in her eyes, especially whenever we talk about the lower cities and the hopes she has for them. She wants change there, just like we do. And she worries and asks about you all. I swear, she checks on your health more than she inquires about what she’ll receive at the end of this. After she learned about the Faders and the possibility of more attacks against us, she’s on constant alert, like the thought of losing us is abhorrent to her, even if she can’t understand it.”

Axl whistles before taking a long drink. “I’ve always hated it when they don’t voice their own opinions,” he says. “When they only say what they think we want to hear.”

I grin. “You won’t get that with Rylee. She holds nothing back.”

“And she wants to be with us when we…conduct our Legend business?” Pierce asks, intrigue coloring his features.

“More than that,” I say. “I think she wants to *be* a Legend.”

Jax jerks his head my direction, wearing a look of shock I’ve never seen from him before.

“Not one potential has even wanted to *hear* about our Legend business,” Pierce says. “Most said they’d rather not know what we do, and none has ever wanted to join us.”

“I know,” I answer. “I get it. And if you get to know her and think I’m off base, feel free to tell me. I’m just letting you know this one is different.” The hope in my heart builds. A true mate, someone who not only understands and supports us but accepts each of us for who we are. That’s worth more than the power we’ll receive at the end of this if she chooses us, if she survives…

My blood goes glacial at the thought of the Athanry. It’s too early to worry about it, and honestly, I can’t stand the idea of losing her. I’m that fucking attached already. Even now, sitting here among the friends I love, I’m already mourning the loss of her to Axl.

“Speaking of the Faders,” Pierce says, segueing into the second reason for our weekly meeting, “they’ve gone silent since the last attack.”

I clutch my glass so tightly it threatens to crack. I loosen my grip. “Any trace of the weapons they’re using?” The same ones that were able to slice me up, burn me, delay the healing process. That’s never happened before. Outside of the kings’ personal powers, nothing has been capable of making me bleed. One of the gifts my mother passed to me.

“Not a hint,” Pierce says, his tone dipping.

He’s never met a problem he couldn’t solve, either, and the Faders have been an unsolvable problem since their recent appearance. They started by only causing trouble where one would barely notice—petty thefts, setting fires, and damaging buildings—such low-level crimes, our fathers assume it’s youths acting out.

But they’ve stepped up their ambitions to outright attacking innocent citizens in any one of our given cities. Plus, the weapons they carry prove they’re nowhere near rebellious youths and lean closer to an organization set on creating unrest in our territories.

“Those weapons they have… It’s either new magic or new materials,” Jax says. “I wonder where they’re getting them.”

“The threat across the seas your father keeps speaking of?” Pierce asks.

“Maybe,” Jax answers. “Erithmore’s hatred for us runs deep, and the kings have sent countless of Lumathyst’s people over there on Never List missions. Who is to say one of those missions didn’t end up joining forces with the locals?”

“It’s a possibility out of hundreds.” Pierce sets his drink down on a little table next to him. “We need to pinpoint their motive. Then we’ll better understand their origins. Figure out where they’re getting their power.”

“Baydel is always concerned about demis,” Jax says. “Do you think that could be the source?”

“Could be…” Pierce shakes his head. “But it’s unlikely. So many demis have

been thrown in prisons for crimes less than these. There aren't enough of them left to create an uprising again."

"There could be some in hiding," Jax counters.

"True," Pierce says. "But the consequences rather outweigh the benefit of anonymity. Being a publicly known demi is hard enough. The penalties for hiding such an existence?"

Jax nods. "So, we're leaning toward deciding that their strength and show of power has to be enhancements, then."

"Most likely," Pierce agrees, and Axl and I nod. "Again, we're back to ultimate goals. When we figure that out, the rest will likely be revealed."

"For now, it seems they want to provoke us or kill us," Axl says without a hint of fear in his tone. He's fearless to a fault, sometimes taking on more than he can possibly carry. "Are we overthinking this? Could it simply be a group of Ashlanders?" he asks. "Thanks to our fathers' suppression of that territory, every single one of them has a reason to hate us."

"I wondered that, too," I say. "The Ashlanders have always been a problem—"

The door swings open, letting light from the hallway pool into the room.

"Sorry," Rylee says quickly, backing out of the doorway. "I didn't realize this was a Legend meeting—"

"No, stay," I say, beckoning her to my side with an outstretched arm.

She scans the room, eyes grazing over Pierce, Axl, and finally Jax. Something charged happens as their eyes meet, something I think every single one of us can feel. But in a blink, it's gone, replaced by Rylee tipping her chin up and walking toward me. She drops to my side, settling in effortlessly beneath my arm.

"You all look well," she says after we're silent for too long.

Axl smirks at her. "We heard you were worried about us."

Rylee looks up at me. "Traitor," she teases, playfully smacking my chest.

I capture her hand there, bringing it to my mouth. "Apologies," I say, dragging my lips over the underside of her wrist. I relish the chill bumps that appear at my touch. "I told you I have no secrets from them."

"What were you talking about before I interrupted?" she asks, slightly breathless from my touch. I drop her wrist but keep hold of her hand.

"Faders, Ashlanders, kings… You know, everyone who might want us dead," Axl says, deadpan, and I clench my eyes shut while searching for patience.

She straightens under my arm. "Why would the Ashlanders want you dead?"

"Ah, so you don't have any argument with our own fathers wanting us dead?" Jax quickly counters, and she turns her head, focusing on him.

"I don't pretend to assume why the kings are the way they are, but I can imagine that they like their thrones, their power, maybe even enough to view you

all as a threat." She shrugs. "But then again, maybe I've read too many royal fantasy novels."

I bite back a laugh, shaking my head. That's my Rylee.

"Clever deduction," Pierce commends her. "And the Ashlanders could want us dead for multiple reasons: the withholding of noble titles from its people, the scrutinization of the remaining demis who are secluded there, the lack of resources. The list goes on."

"Are you the ones who put all these restrictions into place?" Rylee asks, carefully casual.

"No," Axl answers, a crease forming between his eyebrows. "The kings did that long before we came into play."

Rylee nods, her shoulders loosening beneath my arm so quickly I didn't even realize they were tense before now. I shift my arm from her, sliding my hand up and down her back. Is she nervous because of how small the room is and the way our powers fill it? I'm used to the constant weight of the power when we're all together, but I forget that she hasn't been exposed to it that long.

"So, you think the Faders and Ashlanders could be one and the same?" she asks.

"Perhaps," Pierce answers, and Rylee gives a little laugh that shocks us all.

"What's funny, love?" I ask, unable to stop my own smile. I love the sound of her laugh, especially this raw, unexpected one.

"It's funny that you think an oppressed people who barely scrape by for *food*, let alone money, could amass any sort of magic and create the weapons they attacked you with a few weeks ago." She shrugs. "Doesn't add up to me. If I had to guess," she continues, "I'd put my money on Erithmore. They have the numbers and the wealth, and rumors abound about their magical capabilities. The only things that have kept them off our shores for so long are the protection from the goddesses and the threat the kings and yourselves pose. And with the Choosings happening every year—if their spies have learned that finding your mate will unlock the full potential of your already impressive powers, that would be another reason to keep them from a direct attack. But a stealthy one? Before you come into your full power?" Another shrug as she reaches for my drink, then drains the contents.

I look to Jax. Rylee expressed the same theories he did not moments ago. There's something there—pride, maybe, or curiosity—but he doesn't open his mouth to say anything.

"Time will tell," Pierce says. "We're working on uncovering who they are and what exactly they want, but they're very good at slipping into the shadows."

"Is there anything I can do?" Rylee asks, genuine concern fluttering over her

face. “To help you?” She poses the question to each of us.

“You’re already doing enough,” Pierce answers.

“By being here,” I explain. “By entertaining the idea of choosing us.”

“Oh,” she whispers, a little surprised. “Well… I meant—”

“We know,” I say. “I promise, if there is a job you can do for us, we’ll let you know. For now, you have enough on your plate learning the ins and outs of our cities, our people, being in the public eye every time we step outside, and not to mention tolerating the four of us.”

Rylee laughs. “That’s not exactly a hard day’s work. I’m capable of more. I can carry more of the weight, if you need me to.”

I feel the guys’ powers crackle in the room at her declaration—a snap of curiosity and warmth that lets me know they’re starting to see what I’ve seen for weeks now.

On a silent cue, each of us stands, the meeting coming to a close. Rylee steps out of my embrace to say goodbye to Pierce, who kisses the back of her hand before leaving. Jax barely gives her a nod before he disappears, and then it’s Axl who’s scooping her up into one of his traditional bear hugs, holding her at his eye level. Something hot zaps through me at the sight. She looks so small in his big arms, and he maneuvers her so damn easily. Fuck, I can’t wait for the day when I can watch him make her come.

“I have a job you can do,” Axl says, his tone lilting on the side of seduction.

Rylee is grinning at him, their chemistry an undeniable, palpable thing. “What’s that?”

“Say *yes* to me now,” he says, smiling at her. “Tell me yes, Rylee. Tell me *yes* right this second, because the moment you step foot in my territory, I’m going to claim you so many times you won’t be able to explore my city for at least a week.”

I see the heat churning in her eyes, the delight at his directness. Just the thought makes me contemplate asking him to stay. Asking him to find out right here and now if she can handle us both, but I clamp down on the idea. I have two nights left with her all to myself, and I won’t waste them. Sharing her will come soon enough.

Rylee runs her fingers through some of Axl’s hair, the touch familiar, claiming, but she glances at me, almost as if she’s asking permission. She doesn’t belong to me solely, and if there is anyone I’d ever share a treasure like her with, it’s my friends, the Legends.

I dip my head, winking at her, and she turns her focus back to Axl.

“Yes,” she whispers, a giddiness to her tone.

Something like a howl comes from Axl as he spins her in a circle. “I like you,”

he says, sliding her down his body before setting her on her feet. “You’re adventurous. We’re going to have so much fucking fun.” He playfully smacks her ass as a way of goodbye. “See you in two days,” he calls over his shoulder before leaving the room.

Rylee huffs out a laugh before padding over to my side. “That was fun,” she says, sliding her hands up my chest. “What are the plans for the rest of the time you have me?”

“Tomorrow evening, we have a dinner with the kings,” I answer, and I swear the air goes right out of her. I crouch slightly, snaking my arms around her and lifting her to my height. “I know,” I say. “But it’s standard. You’ll have one at the end of every month in the cities.”

She nods, and I watch as she accepts the information and files it out of the way.

“But,” I continue, “tonight, I have something special planned for you.”

“You do?”

I trail my nose over the tip of hers, breathing her in. Fuck, she smells good, feels so soft and pliant against me like this. “It’s our last night together,” I say, knowing from history that tomorrow after the dinner she’ll be in no mood to play. “I’m going to make it count. You up for it?”

A shiver works through her as she nods. “Always.”

19

Rylee

“I can’t believe our month is up,” Kal says from across the candlelit table. We’re at least one hundred stories up, dining privately on the rooftop of one of his buildings.

“It’s gone by fast,” I say as the server clears our plates and refills our drinks. I’m not lying or playing a part, either. It *has* gone by fast. Faster than I would’ve imagined when I first woke up in the palace four weeks ago.

In that time, I’ve learned so much about Kal and his ambitions. Where I once thought the Legend of Chaos nicknamed the Dreamer delighted in crushing people’s dreams for sport, I’ve discovered that he works diligently to make them come true. Countless evidence met me every day here in the Ruby Aire as I watched him work out of this very building.

He invests in his people—their inventions, their innovative ideas, their artistic endeavors—and the percentages he takes from their businesses are small, fair, and don’t come into effect until they’re making enough to pay themselves and their employees first. And by doing so, his people have ensured the Ruby Aire supplies the royal city with not only agricultural products but an endless stream of innovations that have made Lumathyst one of the most wealthy and prosperous kingdoms.

I admire him for it, but…

The same courtesy isn’t given to the Ashlanders, to the people who supply his city with the rubies everyone wears here as a show of support of their leader and the goddess Neph. Even if the kings claim the Ashlands as theirs, making it untouchable to the Legends, it still stings on a level I can’t express without giving myself away.

Despite that, these weeks with Kal have given me a newfound respect for him, and I’d be lying if I said I hadn’t grown attached.

It doesn’t matter that the minimum month time limit is up and that I’m free to reject them…to take my nobility increase and leave—I can’t. My secret would be revealed before I had a chance to truly make them fall for me, and being imprisoned or dying would certainly end the search for my sister.

But more than that…I don’t *want* to leave. I don’t want to reject them.

Especially not Kal. Not after the last month.

I want more, despite being terrified of the cost.

“Dance with me?” Kal asks after we’ve finished our drinks.

On cue, music filters all around us. Kal must have triggered the sound with a wave of power. It fills the rooftop with slow, sparkly notes that cascade one over the other. I take his hand without hesitation, sighing at the contact as he pulls me from my chair and twirls me away from the table, away from my overanalyzing thoughts.

We come together after the spin, dancing slowly near the edge of the rooftop, his entire city glittering below us. The gauzy fabric of my green dress flares above my knees with every twirl, my heels clicking on the floor.

Kal slides a hand behind me, tucking me closer as he leads with my hand in his other. Something heavy settles on my chest with the movement as memories of dancing with Jax at the Choosing fill my mind.

“You’re somewhere else,” Kal says, never missing a beat, the perceptive ass.

“I’m here,” I assure him.

He spins us again, keeping time to the music, his powerful body whirling us around the roof with ease. “You’re thinking about Jax, aren’t you?” He motions to our joined hands. “What happened between you that night?” His voice is smooth, calm, not a hint of jealousy anywhere. “You never speak of it.”

I wet my lips, trying to find the right words to describe what happened. The memory, the longing—it’s assaulted me more than once and only magnifies after each time I’ve seen him when he comes for the Legends’ weekly meetings. It doesn’t matter that he treats me like the liar I am; I still ache for the charged energy and banter we shared that night.

“We spoke,” I finally say. “He asked me to dance.”

“He asked you?” Kal’s left eyebrow rises an inch.

“Is that not normal?”

Kal shakes his head with a smile. “For Jax? No. For me?” He twirls me out from his embrace and then expertly draws me back against him. “I’m an excellent dancer.”

I laugh, the tension breaking from my chest. “I can see that.”

“What’s bothering you?”

I swallow hard. Kal and I have grown close over the past few weeks, and not just in the sense that he knows how to make my body sing. I’d call him a friend, maybe even something more if I allowed myself to go that far, but either way, it’s more than what I thought I’d have when I started this mess.

“He barely looks at me,” I admit on a rushed breath. “Barely speaks to me.”

Kal leans his head back, eyes on the night sky. “Ah,” he says, glancing down at me as the music continues. “Jax is a complicated, complex person.”

“That, I already know.”

“His powers are an exceptional gift,” he tells me. “But also a heavy burden. Not that he’ll ever admit it. Controlling emotions is a powerful ability, but constantly feeling everyone’s emotions? That weighs on him. He lives between two moods—feeling everything all at once or doing his best to feel nothing at all.”

My heart clenches with understanding. “He says I’m hiding things,” I say timidly.

“Of course you are,” Kal says, moving us to the music.

“That doesn’t bother you?”

His eyes are sincere as he holds me. “We all have secrets, Rylee. And I have hope that when you fully trust me, you’ll tell me whatever it is you don’t want us to know.”

Warmth spreads throughout my chest, my heart, crashing against the walls I’ve tried so desperately to keep in place. Kal has definitely breached those walls, no matter how much I’d like to deny it.

Kal spins us again. “Jax knows that, too,” he continues, “on some level. His distance from you has more to do with protecting himself from you than from whatever it is you aren’t voicing.”

I consider this, wanting to accept it. It makes sense, sure, but Kal wasn’t there with us the night of the Choosing. He didn’t feel Jax’s laugh in his bones, didn’t shiver at his smile, didn’t go loose and pliant in his arms. Jax *felt* something that night that made him choose me, but the moment I was chosen, the lies I had to tell to keep myself alive separated me from him. And they always will, and there isn’t a goddess-damned thing I can do about it.

But Kal…Kal has done everything to make me feel comfortable, safe, *adored*. It may be hard for me to believe his words about secrets not mattering in the end, but I can at least revel in the fantasy while I can.

Not for the first time, I’m tempted to ask him for help finding my sister.

I haven’t been able to get Erin’s painting near the library out of my head since the day I spotted it. I’ve looked for her artwork everywhere since but haven’t found anything more. And try as I might, I haven’t been able to come up with any reason for why the painting is there, except that Erin decided to leave after last year’s Choosing and search out a better life than the one she had in the Ashlands, even if it meant leaving me behind. As much as I don’t want to believe it, nothing else makes sense.

Even so, I can’t give up that easily. I deserve answers, regardless of her intentions. There have been so many instances in the past month when I’ve almost asked Kal for help, the request on the tip of my tongue, but I’ve always

swallowed it down with a heavy dose of *fear*.

Letting any one of them know about how desperate I am to find my sister gives them even more power over me than they already have. And I'm not ready to be completely vulnerable with them in that way yet. But the fact that I can even contemplate feeling safe enough to ask eventually is something I never expected.

"Thank you," I say, focusing on the wonderful man whose arms I'm in.

"For what?" he asks innocently.

"For explaining those details about Jax to me," I say, moving my free hand from his arm to his chest, drawing closer. "For everything you've done for me. I didn't expect…" I let my voice trail off, unable to go further into what I actually expected—being forced to be a trophy the Legends could play with whenever they want, only to stow me away when they lose interest. Being tested by the kings at every turn. Being nothing but a pretty prize for the Occuli to gape at.

Icy shivers dance over my skin at the thought. I'm thankful that the stalking conjurers are nowhere to be seen. A small mercy Kal had arranged tonight.

"I will miss you," he says, shifting so our bodies are flush.

Something tugs at the center of my chest, a swell of emotions washing over me.

"Can I admit something to you?" I ask, the breath tight in my lungs.

"Anything," he says, sliding his hand along my cheek.

I bite my lip, wondering if what I'm about to admit will offend him. It's his best friend I'm about to ask about, after all.

"Whatever it is," he says when I hesitate, "you can tell me. I promise."

I blow out a breath. "I know I told Axl *yes* when he asked me to at the Legend meeting, and I'm not taking back that *yes*, but I'm…reluctant to leave you."

I cringe slightly at how pathetic that sounds out loud. It's been a month, and already I'm so attached. But can he really blame me? I've found nothing but comfort and safety and passion with Kal, and while Axl hasn't given me any reason to believe he'll be different…it's hard to dive so willingly into the unknown.

Kal's smile is supportive and warm as he looks down at me. "Though I would never want you to feel reluctant, can I say I'm the slightest bit honored you don't want to leave me just yet?"

A soft laugh tumbles from my lips at his grin—all male pride and confidence.

"Is it ridiculous?" I ask as he moves us around to the music. "I know the Choosing rules. I know I need to spend a month in each of your territories."

"You're not being ridiculous at all," he assures me. "And yes, that's a rule our mothers laid out in the Choosing, but nowhere does it state that you have to go to

each territory alone."

My eyebrows rise at that.

"We told you that first night, Rylee. With us, it's your choice—just as you chose me for your first month. If you'd feel more comfortable with me tagging along to the Sapphire Cove for the first few days, or even the entirety of your month there, I will."

Relief uncoils a tight thing in my chest. "Won't that…upset Axl?" I ask.

"No," he says. "I promise you, he won't mind. I know him better than anyone, and I can say with confidence that he wants you to feel comfortable and safe. If that means I come with you, then I come with you."

I sigh as the notion settles deep inside me. "Axl doesn't make me feel unsafe," I explain. "Not at all. And I'd be lying if I said I wasn't curious about him." A flush rakes over my cheeks, our previous flirtatious moments igniting a lick of flame beneath my skin. "It's just hard to let you go." That admission feels like a risk, somehow, as if I've given him a piece of me I should've protected.

Kal pulls me closer, the embrace a warm comfort as we continue to dance to the music. "I understand," he says. "You don't have to decide now. Sleep on it and tell me what you want tomorrow."

"You're too kind," I say, meaning it. I shake my head. "You're probably ready to be rid of me. I shouldn't be asking you to extend your time—"

"Even a night away from you will feel like a lifetime," he cuts me off, nothing but sincerity in his eyes.

My heart skips. No one has ever spoken to me the way Kal does—without fear or judgment, with nothing but pure passion and support. It's hard to get used to, and I definitely don't have the right words to say back.

"Axl will take excellent care of you, though," he says, laughing to himself. "If you decide to go alone. I want you to know that."

"Should I be worried?" I laugh with him.

"No," he says. "From what I've learned about you, you're going to love his antics. I know I do."

A warm tendril works its way down my center at his playful, endearing words about his friend. An image of the two of them together, me between them, makes me flush with need. The more I picture it, the more I'm leaning toward asking Kal to come with me to the Sapphire Cove.

"Any tips?" I ask.

Kal considers, twirling me again. "Try to sleep when you can," he answers when he draws me to him once more. "Axl runs at full speed ninety percent of the day. When he finally goes down to rest, you need to as well, or you'll kill yourself trying to keep up."

Goddess.

"I'll be sure to do that," I assure him as he slides me closer, every hard muscle pressing against my softer ones.

"Now," he says as the music fades and switches to a new melody, "I have one important thing to ask you."

"What's that?" Apprehension and excitement tingle beneath my skin.

He leans down so his lips graze the shell of my ear, sending a delightful shiver of along my neck. "Do you trust me?"

The answer clogs in my throat. Do I trust him? With my body? Absolutely. With my heart? My soul? How can I possibly give him those, when not two hours ago I heard them talking about the Ashlanders like they were a separate people from Lumathyst? How can I be sure he wouldn't chuck me off this balcony if he knew the truth?

Kal plants kisses along my neck, soothing the panic whirling in my mind.

"Yes," I finally answer, though it's only a partial truth. I trust him with pieces of myself, and that will have to be enough for now.

"That's good," he says, nipping at the soft patch of skin beneath my jaw, causing me to close my eyes and sigh as I arch against him, giving him better access. His arms slide around me, holding me to him in a way that makes me ache in all the right places. "You're not afraid of heights, are you?" he asks, shoving some of the lusty haze away from my mind.

"No." There were countless times I'd been selected to go to the highest peaks in the mountains in the Ashlands in search of the rarest minerals or gems. I grip the lapels of his suit jacket, wanting him closer.

"Open your eyes," he says, shifting away from teasing my neck.

I meet his eyes first, then immediately gasp as I take in our surroundings.

We're so far above the roof, I can barely make out the candles flickering on the table where we had dinner. There is nothing beneath us but tons of sky, the stars twinkling around us like midnight silk.

"Kal." I breathe his name as he gently moves us forward, one of his hands shifting from my back to my hip.

"Too much?" he asks, genuine concern in his blue eyes.

I can't hold back my grin, can't hide the excitement rushing through my veins at the sensation. I let go of him, dipping backward as I extend my arms, feeling weightless and free in his secure hold. The wind in my blood sparkles to life, begging to be released, to be played with this close to the sky.

Kal chuckles as I draw myself back up.

"I love it," I say, laughing. It's so quiet up here, so peaceful. The real world is miles away. "Can we stay here forever?"

His eyes darken, and instead of answering, he crushes his lips to mine. I wrap my arms around his neck, sighing at the taste of him. He kisses me like it's the last time we have, all dominating strokes and searing dips until I'm breathless and rocking against him.

"Fuck, Rylee," Kal groans into my mouth. His hand moves from my hip to my thigh, hiking up my dress until he finds the lace between. "I've never been this starved for anyone." He tears the lace free of my hips with barely a tug.

"Do you understand that?" he asks. "Do you understand what you've done to me?"

I tremble against him as he glides his fingers through my warmth. His grin is this side of dangerous, this side of claiming as he slips two fingers inside me. "You feel that?" He curls his fingers, dragging a moan from my lips. "You may not want to say it, but you're starved for me, too. I can feel it here." He hits that spot deep inside me that steals my breath, makes me rock against his hand, silently begging for more.

"Yes," I breathe. "I do, Kal. I want you. All. The. Time." I enunciate the words in time to his relentless stroking, my body shaking. Part of my mind is trying to comprehend the sheer strength of this man, the way he's able to hold us suspended while doing delicious things to my body. The other part is spiraling away from reality, reaching that blissful state where nothing outside of us exists.

"Now be a good girl and come on my hand," he demands, pressing the heel of his palm against that sensitive bundle of nerves. It throbs against the pressure, sending jolts of lightning throughout my body. "I want you drenched for me."

"Kal." I practically keen his name when he adds a third finger, stretching me, filling me. Hot desire builds low in my core, and when he curls those fingers at the same time he presses down with his palm—

I shatter against him, my nails digging into his shoulders as my orgasm rips through me. Shivers skitter up and down my spine deliciously as I unravel at his touch. Gently, slowly, Kal works me through it before pulling his fingers back. His eyes are carnal as he captures my mouth in a quick, searing kiss. "Good girl," he says. The praise slides over my body like honey.

Then we're moving, shifting in midair so fast, my heart soars up to my throat. Fear is quickly replaced by sheer exhilaration as Kal spins onto his back, leveling out with me atop him. My head spins at the sight of the sky around us, stretching wide like an elemental blanket. In this position, all it would take is one wrong move, one careless shift, and I'd plummet to my death. An unfamiliar thrill radiates along my bones.

Kal flashes me a challenging look. "Can you handle more?"

I reach for the button on his pants. I grip his hips with my thighs, careful and

conscious of every single move I make. Goddess, I can feel the thin air kissing my cheeks, can sense the sky all around me even while my eyes are closed. The gift in my blood is singing, thriving, and more than anything, I wish I could share it with Kal. Show him. Trust him enough.

But I know I can't, so I give myself over to the instincts driving my body.

I lick my hand and wrap it around his shaft, working him up and down in slow, torturous strokes. Kal grips my hips, his powerful hands biting into my skin. I tremble at the touch, arching back on instinct, and nearly topple backward.

"Easy there," Kal says, righting our position so we're chest to chest, eye to eye.

I cling to his shoulders, eyes wide as an excited laugh tumbles from me. "What if I fall?"

Kal smooths some of my hair back, shifting beneath me, gliding his hard length through the slickness between my thighs. I tremble at the tease. "I want you to fall," he says, "knowing I'll catch you. I'll *always* catch you."

A warm shudder shakes my body. I know what he's asking, but I don't have an answer for him. Not now, maybe not ever. How can I possibly fall for him when I'm keeping so many secrets?

"Promise?" I ask instead, loosening my hold on him enough so that I can rock myself against his hardness.

He groans at the contact. "I promise," he says, running his large hands up my back, holding me close. "I'll always catch you, Rylee. Anywhere. Anytime. No matter what."

Goddess, this man. Slowly, I reach between us to guide him where I'm aching for him. I only allow an inch to slip inside before I pull him out, doing it over and over until he's groaning, kissing my breath away with a dominating force that has me tingling all over again.

"Rylee," he warns, an edge to his tone that is so rare, I tell myself it only exists for *me*. The power in it, the rush at driving him as mad as he's driving me, is more intoxicating than any drink or enhancement drug. "Tease," he playfully says. "Devious, delicious *tease*."

"How bad do you want me?" I ask.

Something flickers in his eyes as he looks at me—something serious, confident, unabashed. "More than the stars around us."

Finally, my thighs shaking, I sink down on him fully.

Kal groans, arching his neck. I lean down enough to nip at his throat, and his hips thrust upward at the contact. I falter for only a second, clutching his shoulders. It doesn't matter how many times we've done this, how many times he's slammed home inside me, it still takes me a few seconds to relax around his

sheer girth.

He claims my mouth, his tongue flicking against mine, sending shocks of need over my skin. I rock against him, slowly at first, testing out the new surroundings, then harder as I gain my confidence. Each roll of my hips is like a dream. My fingers start to tingle as I glide them over his chest, forgetting everything outside of the feel of him inside me.

Kal breaks our kiss to watch where we connect before he shoots me a smirk and leans *back.* I yelp at the slight tilt before he levels out, holding himself outstretched as if he were lying on a bed. “I want to watch you ride my cock,” he says, his tone rough.

Warmth pools low in my core, making me slicker as his eyes dip between my thighs again. I take a deep breath, adjusting as I move on him. I gather the skirts of my dress, hiking them up my stomach, bunching them beneath my breasts so he can see everything.

“Like this?” I ask, my voice thick with lust.

“Fuck, yes,” he groans, eyes flickering to mine for only a moment before he returns to watching me move on him. “Just like that.”

My thighs ache from rocking against him, but it’s a kind of delicious burn that only makes the prize that much sweeter. And Kal is the fucking prize. I know that, have known that for some time. I’ve never felt anything like this before, and I’m not sure if I ever will again.

Kal’s hands fly to my hips, gripping them and helping me move, lifting me slightly before lowering me, the powerful man completely in control. I lean back, fearless as he maneuvers my hips, lifting me or rocking me against him. I’m dizzy from the height, from my orgasm, from his power, all of it, and I love it.

I never want it to end.

“You’re so fucking beautiful,” he says. “Riding me. I love you like this.” He reaches up to drag a thumb over my bottom lip, then trails his fingers lower, palming one of my breasts through my dress.

“Kal.” I moan his name, rocking against him with more intensity, chasing what I can feel building again beneath my skin.

He releases my breast, working his way down and over the bunch of fabric I still hold, then lower until he reaches my aching heat. “This what you need?” His question is almost a growl as he lightly touches me there. “This what you want?”

“Goddess,” I groan, moving against him, desperate for that touch. “Yes. Please, Kal,” I beg. “*More.*”

Kal rises up suddenly, a move so effortless I have to marvel at his power. And it’s only a fraction of what could be if I choose him…choose them all, in the end.

“Remember this,” he says, a plea to his tone. We’re chest to chest again. I keep moving, keep relishing every time we clash together. “Remember I’ll *always* give you what you need.”

He presses down on that sensitive bundle of nerves just as I take him to the hilt again, and the motions collide in a burst of pleasure that makes me cry out his name so loud, I wonder if the city below can hear me. Waves of sparkling heat cascade down my body. I tremble against him, clenching around him so hard, he finds his release just after mine. Before I can catch my breath, he’s kissing me—a gentle, lazy sort of kiss that unravels me until every inch of my body feels limp and sated.

“Can we stay a little longer?” I ask when I’ve caught my breath.

He leans his forehead against mine. “As long as you want.”

My heart climbs up my throat as I wrap my arms around him. Lucky for me, it blocks the words my instincts are shouting at me to say, because it would do neither of us any good if I begged for *forever.*

20

Rylee

“I’ve brought in a selection of earring choices for you—” Mirren stops herself short as she rounds the corner, pausing with a velvet box in her hand. “You’re wearing red.”

I glance down at the dress I chose for tonight, running my hands over the fabric. The sleeves meet my wrists, but my shoulders are bare, the dress dipping slightly between my breasts before cinching over my torso and fanning out around my hips until it kisses the floor. A red leather belt adds some strength to the delicate details, the fabrics alternating between sheer red lace and luscious silk with elegant beadwork throughout.

“Do you think Kal will like it?” I ask, and not all the self-consciousness is for show. We’re in the room at the palace I stayed in that first night, dinner with the kings minutes away.

Mirren almost looks like she’ll smile, almost looks like she’ll give me an approving nod or a warm squeeze on the shoulder. But that’s not her, so instead, she purses her lips and crosses the room to meet me. “He might,” she says, holding the box out to me. “I’d wear these.” She points to a pair of ruby earrings that are simple and won’t take away from the dress.

“Thank you,” I say, putting them in. As usual, my blond hair is down, my mark covered. I made it an entire month with Kal studying every inch of my body and not noticing it. Makeup truly is a luxury I can’t afford to live without.

“Any advice?” I ask Mirren as she discards the box on my vanity and follows me toward the main doors of my rooms.

“Sit on Kal’s left,” she says as we pause at the door. “There will be options to sit near the kings, but the proper place of a mate is to the left.”

“What if all the Legends are present?”

“They won’t be tonight,” Mirren says. “But when they are, you’ll sit to the left of whoever has the open spot next to him.” I nod, my nerves tangling. “And if you can, be slow to react.”

I raise my brows.

“I quite enjoy your lack of filter,” she continues. “But not all the kings will appreciate your candor.”

My teeth grind together at the thought of the last time I met with the four

kings. Baydel's hands on my skin, entitled and sloppy and uninvited.

Memories flash through me of other uninvited hands, other unwanted touches, and I cringe. I wonder what Turner did when I didn't meet him that night at midnight. I wonder if he's read the royal post, seen the illustrations of my face paired with the Occuli's stories about me. More than once, I've worried about him racing to the palace to reveal my identity to the kings, to the Legends, but he hasn't. Or if he has, no action has been taken.

Apprehension tangles in my stomach, settling in a knot that is hard to breathe around. I force myself to work around it. If the time comes, I'll deal with it then. For now, I can only be thankful that Lumathyst is a large kingdom with countless enforcers who don't have direct access to the royals.

I have to stay on the path I've started.

One that leads me straight to the kings in a few seconds.

"One last thing," Mirren says, holding out a small vial of contraceptive tonic. I take it from her and quickly knock it back, then return the vial to her waiting hand.

"Good luck," Mirren says as I step through the doors. "I'll be here when you get back."I flash her a smile, trying to express how comforting her words are. Mirren may be feisty and harsh on the best of days, but she's been a constant in this new life I'm living, and I adore her for it.

I turn a corner and slow my steps at the sight of Kal waiting outside the golden elevator doors. He looks so striking at the end of the hall, his crimson-and-black suit cut to the perfection of his tall, powerful body. His dark hair is slicked back, showing off the chiseled features of his face.

It's only a heartbeat before he looks at me, nearly fumbling the small box in his hand. His blue eyes go wide as I reach him, and he places his free hand over his heart as if he's at a loss for words.

"I…" A smile makes up for the words he can't find. "You're stunning," he says, pride and warmth and something else beaming from him—something I can't put my finger on but can feel in my heart, feel down that connection that buzzes to life in his presence.

"You look edible yourself," I say, and he laughs. We stand there a few moments, but he doesn't reach for the elevator button. "I wanted to ask you," I say, still feeling slightly foolish for this. "Will you come with me tomorrow? At least for the first day or two?"

Kal dips his head. "I'll stay with you for however long you want."

I sigh with relief, happy to have that matter settled. I know Axl and I will need alone time together, but at least for these first few days, I'll have Kal's support.

"I had something I wanted to ask you, too," he says, eyes on the small box in

his hand. “I wanted to see if you might wear this tonight.” He tilts his head back and forth. “Or at least accept it.”

My heart races as he cracks the lid on the box.

I gasp at the sight. An oval ruby the size of a robin’s egg sits inside a platinum band with whirling details that flank the top and bottom of the stone.

“Kal,” I say, reaching for the ring but pulling my fingers back at the last moment.

“It’s my token,” he hurries to explain. “From me to you, reflecting on our time together, and a promise for the future.”

My eyes flicker up to meet his, and I choke on a response. Mirren told me about the Choosings before mine. None of the Legends have offered their tokens before. None of the potentials had earned it or they’d never given the princes the chance, rejecting them as soon as they could.

Does this mean Kal truly trusts me? Or is he doing it because he’s desperate for a mate after six years of failed Choosings?

“You’re not expected to *choose* me now,” he assures me, grounding me in the present, and I breathe a little easier. “Wearing this won’t mean as such,” he continues, “but it will signal to anyone who sees it that you are mine, even if you haven’t declared that I am yours.”

I close my eyes as emotions claw up my throat, and I inwardly search through them. Longing, pride, warmth, and desire with a hint of fear. If I was a normal girl from Cedar and Silk with no hidden powers to speak of, I’d take this ring without a second thought. Kal has shown me nothing but kindness, understanding, and a hefty dose of passion these last few weeks. If I was a normal citizen of Lumathyst, I wouldn’t hesitate to snatch this ring right out of his hand.

And that’s who I need to be…who I *want* to be in this moment.

I open my eyes, smiling up at Kal. “I’d love to wear it,” I say, tears threatening the backs of my eyes.

Kal looses a breath, his smile infectious as he slips the ring out of the box and reaches for my right hand. He slips it on the ring finger there, and the fit is perfect. I marvel at the slight weight of the stone, at the significance it bears. I’ve never owned a piece of jewelry before, and here I’m drowning in options, but this? This is special, coveted. I’ve spent enough time with Kal that I decide to wear it proudly.

“I’ll never take it off,” I say, and he draws me in for a kiss.

But you may rip it off my finger once you figure out what I really am.

I silence the painful voice, losing myself in Kal’s lips.

“Are you ready?” he asks, breaking our kiss too soon.

I nod, and he pushes the button. The elevator doors glide open immediately.

Kal loops my arm through his, his eyes darting to me every few seconds before he chuckles to himself.

“What is it?” I finally ask as we ride the elevator up and up and up.

“That dress,” he groans. “You’re always a challenge.”

“How so?”

“How am I supposed to sit through this likely boring dinner with you looking like that?” he asks.

I bite back a grin. “We could always come up with an excuse to leave early.”

“Fuck, Rylee,” he says on a whisper. “You have no idea—”

The doors slide open, stealing the rest of his sentence.

“Kal!” Jullian Erhart—Kal’s father—calls from the spacious dining hall, all glittering gold and sparkling diamond tones.

“Father,” Kal answers, ushering us through a foyer and into the elegant room. The double doors of the dining hall close behind us. A long, rectangular table large enough to host forty people dominates the center of the space, with smaller tables fanning out around the room’s edges. They’re all empty, of course, but I suspect this is where the kings host grand events for their beloved dukes and earls.

I try to put that out of my mind as Kal stops at the table, releasing me to greet his father with a hug. Brooks Bertrand—Pierce’s father—flashes me a soft, calculative smile as he stands next to Jullian Erhart. Baydel Lavine and Lucas Dawson stand behind their chosen seats in the middle of the table, facing us.

“Your majesty,” I say, nearly forgetting to bow and doing so quickly when Kal’s father turns his attention on me.

“Please, call me Jullian,” he begs, his hands gentle at my elbows as he urges me to rise. “And no bowing tonight.”

Baydel coughs harshly across from us, and I swear I see a hint of annoyance in Jullian’s eyes. “They’re here,” Baydel says flatly. “Let’s eat.”

I wait to sit until the kings have taken their four spots on the other side of the table. Kal elects to sit right across from his father, which puts me directly in front of Baydel when I sit on Kal’s left.

Perfect.

I try not to squirm as Baydel’s eyes linger on my neckline, then my breasts. He’s not making any effort to hide it, either. Jullian is too busy catching up with his son to notice, while Brooks and Lucas seem utterly bored as our dinner is served.

“Did you enjoy my son’s city?” Jullian asks once we’re well into the meal.

I slow my eating, swallowing the bite of roast duck before I answer. “It’s a

dream," I say, winking at Kal.

Jullian offers a genuine smile. "What was your favorite part?"

I set down my fork, contemplating. Flashes of my time in the city race through my mind, so many of those delights involving his son pounding me into oblivion. I highly doubt he wants me to say *that*.

"The food," I admit, and Jullian and Kal both laugh. Brooks and Lucas join in, but Baydel looks less than amused from behind his wine goblet. "I'm a sucker for a good meal," I say, indicating the plate before me while I take another bite.

"The food," Baydel repeats, setting down his goblet a little forcefully. "Not the resources he's acquired to keep us alive and fed during wartimes or harsh seasons? Not the Ruby Players, the musicians, or the artists that keep the city economically growing? Not the people who worship the ground he walks on?"

"Baydel," Jullian says in a warning tone, but Baydel just waves him off.

I have to bite the inside of my cheek to keep from responding, have to look down at the napkin in my lap to keep from glaring. The hatred and disappointment roll off Baydel in waves, yet I can't find a fuck to give. The man has never earned my respect, thanks to the way he treats the Ashlands, but he crossed a line the first night we met. We'll never agree, never see eye to eye, and never get along.

But in order to survive this, I have to play my part to perfection.

I clear my throat. "Of course," I say in a sugary sweet voice I only use when I need to appear weak to powerful men. "I'm fascinated at all Kal and his people have achieved. The increased production of that food I adore so much will be a *welcome* supplement to the lower cities who don't have as much as you do here. The way he and his people have learned new ways to grow healthier and more abundant crops is astounding. And his investment into those who wish to study and master the arts will continue to spread beyond Lumathyst. Those who might not believe they can provide for themselves by doing something they love will cross oceans to live in the Dreamer's territory." I flash adoring eyes at Kal. "I can easily see the great things he'll do when he ascends the throne." I meet Baydel's gaze on the last part, unable to resist. He blinks, almost a jolt as he interprets the meaning behind my words.

I choose them, and you're no longer the biggest bad in Lumathyst.

I giggle then, slipping into the role I've played so many times for the enforcers—a thoughtless, silly little girl. "But have you tasted the brioche toast at Constance's?" I ask. "The sugar-and-cream combo is to *die* for."

Jullian and Brooks laugh, the two of them giving me approving nods.

"Brioche toast," Baydel says, shaking his head as he tucks back into his meal. "What a winner my son selected," he mumbles between bites, rolling his eyes.

Oh, you have no idea, I think as anger rises beneath my skin. Even now, I can feel every facet of the air in this room, can sense how much there is and how easy it would be to steal and command as my own. One thought, and I could have Baydel choking for a breath that is no longer available to him.

I quash the idea, knowing his powers infinitely outweigh mine. I felt them that first night and have zero desire to feel them again—no matter how satisfying it would be to watch his pallid skin turn purple for even a few precious seconds.

The table falls into simpler conversation as Jullian asks what Kal showed me this past month. We're halfway through a delicious vanilla-and-berry concoction when the doors swing open.

"I'm sorry to interrupt dessert," an enforcer says as he sprints to Baydel's side, his facial expression looking like he doesn't care in the slightest that he interrupted dessert. In fact, he looks as if he was *instructed* to be here at this exact moment.

My eyes wander to the back of the room, where the kings' elite enforcers stand at attention near the bank of windows that allow glimpses of the royal city. The men don't budge at the sudden intrusion.

"You wanted to be informed when this information came through." The enforcer hands Baydel a scroll with a black wax seal. He takes it, dismissing the guard without even a *thank you*.

"Something important?" Kal asks, casually pushing away his dessert and shifting his thigh toward me under the table.

Adrenaline spikes in my blood, my senses feeding off Kal's position. Are we going to have to run? Fight? Is this another test for my potential mate status?

Baydel swipes his finger beneath the wax seal, breaking it before skimming the thin black writing on the scroll we can't see. "Quite," he says. "I had our researchers do some digging into your potential. Figured you'd want to know more about the woman you've been doting on, as do we all."

My skin tightens, and I go deadly still.

On the outside, I don the mask of the thoughtless girl with a smile on her face. On the inside?

I'm spiraling.

This is it.

I'm finished.

I can't stop myself from looking at the ring resting on my right hand. Kal gave this to me as a symbol of him choosing me. Maybe he'll see past the truth; maybe he won't condemn me for lying.

History begs to differ—an entire generation of demis condemned after a bloody war, their ancestors paying for their rebellion long after their bodies had

turned to dust. Generations of Ashlanders being the bane of Lumathyst's existence yet vital to their wealth.

My hopes are dashed as quickly as they rise. I heard Kal and the Legends speaking about the Ashlanders the other day. There is no escaping what's to come.

21

Rylee

Baydel scans the scroll containing my background—and my doom. “Rylee Gray,” he says. I hate the way his voice screeches over my name. “Parents caught not paying their taxes three quarters in a row, so they were sent on a Never List mission.”

What? No, they’d been caught across borders…

“Deceased,” he continues to read, halting my thoughts.

Pain cuts through my panic. I’d assumed they were dead, but there’d been that small fraction of hope that they had somehow found a way to live in Erithmore when there hadn’t been a thick black mark through their names on the Never List.

“One sibling,” he continues, and my heart stalls.

Erin.

“Volunteered for a Never List mission. Active,” he finishes, and I’m holding that smile in place so hard it hurts.

Volunteered?

Active on a Never List mission? There were no records when I searched on the night of the Choosing, but maybe there’s another list? One I missed. And *volunteered*? There’s no way she would’ve done that. And the painting in the Ruby Aire… How could she have done that if she is on a mission?

The facts behind my parents’ names on the list are wrong. Could this be, too?

“Well,” Baydel continues. “Let’s hope your sister is faring better with her ambitions than you are with your food-obsessed ones.”

“Oh, I have no doubt,” I manage to say, my voice level despite the fear climbing. “She’s nothing if not resourceful.”

Kal gives me a sideways glance, surprise and a little hurt registering in his eyes at hearing the news. I try to give him a silent apology, but my focus is on the man across from me, my history in his hands. He’s about to read a much worse secret.

I shift in my seat. If I blast them with a wall of wind, I may clear this room, but I don’t have a shot of outrunning them through their own palace.

I glance around, noting the floor-to-ceiling windows. One of them is cracked open to let in the night air, and Baydel’s elite enforcer—the tall, broad-

shouldered guard with the number one emblazoned on his uniform—is standing just in front of it. If I could make it past him, I might be able to jump out the window.

Would Kal catch me? He promised he always would, but who is to say he'd keep a promise to a girl he never truly knew?

"Birthplace," Baydel says, and I feel the contents of my stomach climb up my throat.

How could I be stupid enough to believe I'd fool them—

"Cedar and Silk," he continues reading, and I have to blink a few times to make sure I haven't slipped the mental rung of sanity in my mind. "Lottery winner number 617805." Baydel's brow furrows, confusion flickering over his face. Almost as if he'd expected to read the truth I've buried.

Brooks leans back in his chair, the golden lights flickering over his dark-brown skin as the same calculating eyes that Pierce so often scans me with fall on me. I can't tell if he's surprised or disappointed, but I'm too panicked to care.

Jullian smiles softly at me, then Kal, returning to his dessert. Lucas strikes up a conversation with Brooks as if he's used to ignoring Baydel when he's on a tangent.

How in the goddess-damned sky does his research into my past say that?

Ivy?

She's a master forger, but would she risk the repercussions of getting caught tampering with official royal documents?

She would.

In my heart, I know she absolutely would. We're sisters not by blood but by soul; Layce, too. My chosen family. Erin used to round out our group, but that was before…

"When was the last time you saw your sister?" Kal asks.

"Over a year ago," I admit.

"So, your potential didn't even tell you she had a sister?" Baydel snatches up the opportunity. "Interesting. What else are you keeping from him?"

I weave a mask of innocence over my face. Baydel has been testing me from the second Jax chose me. I don't know if he's doing it because he wants the strongest mate possible for the Legends, or if he's doing it in the hopes he'll terrify me to the point of rejecting the Legends, leaving him in his ultimate position of power.

My money is on the latter.

I turn to Kal, sincere apology in my eyes as I lay my right hand over his, the ruby flickering under the golden lights. "I wanted to," I admit, and it's the truth. There were so many times when we were swapping stories that I wanted to tell

him about Erin, but… “It’s hard for me to talk about her,” I continue. “Missing her is something I’ve had to live with and accept every day for a year. And after what happened to my parents, I have no hopes that she’ll ever return.” Tears catch up with my words, pooling in the corners of my eyes.

If Baydel is telling the truth and she’s really on a Never List mission…then I won’t see her again. I knew it was a possibility, but the reality of the situation punches me right in the chest.

“I understand,” Kal says, squeezing my hand in his.

Of course he understands. What part of me hasn’t Kal understood this entire time?

Jullian looks between us, his eyes settling on me in a curious way. There is something in that look, something I can’t quite—

“Thank you all for dinner,” Kal says, sliding back from his chair. His dessert is half eaten, but he keeps my hand in his, urging me to rise as well. I do, more than ready to get out of here.

“You can’t rush off yet,” Baydel says, pushing away from the table.

Kal pauses our retreat.

“I wanted to get your potential’s take on something,” Baydel continues, snapping his fingers as he rounds the table.

Kal shifts in front of me so subtly, it’s hard to notice.

Baydel’s elite enforcer, *One*, moves with a deadly grace as he crosses the room, focused on a concealed corner with another set of doors. In seconds, he’s back, his gloved fingers gripping the hair of a man as he drags him across the marble floor.

Every muscle in my body tenses as two Occuli follow behind the scene, their pitch-black eyes on me, green flames flickering in their hands, no doubt savoring every reaction of the man who’s flailing helplessly in One’s grip. They’ll write about it later for the royal post.

“Tell me, dear Rylee,” Baydel says, his demeanor completely changing with the Occuli’s presence. He gestures a hand to the man who is now on his knees, a black strip of cloth shoved into his mouth, muffling his pleas as One holds him by the roots of his hair. “If you were chosen by the Legends, if you were made mate and eventually *queen*, what would you do in this situation?”

A test.

Another fucking test.

I swallow the knot in my throat, blinking at the scene. Waiting for him to explain further.

“This man broke the law,” Baydel continues.

Brooks studies the man intently, and Jullian crosses his arms where he still

sits. Lucas pops another berry in his mouth, his eyes lighting up like this is the first entertainment he's seen in a long time.

"Execution or life in the dungeons?" Baydel asks.

Kal's fingers twitch in mine.

"What is his crime?" I manage to ask.

"Does it matter?" Baydel drops his hand to his side. "He broke the law."

The Occuli turn their unblinking stares on me, their pure black eyes somehow focusing on me. I'm used to their unnerving attention by now, but this situation is something else entirely. Baydel is testing me once again, and I feel like no matter what I answer, it'll be wrong.

"Laws vary," I say, forcing myself to concentrate. "So should the punishment. What is his crime?" I tip my chin ever so slightly, wanting the Occuli who will report on this later to not see an inch of my fear.

Baydel's eyes narrow. "He's a demi," he says. "One who decided to use his powers to steal from us, keeping precious jewels that he found in the Ashlands for himself, his abilities allowing him to conceal them from the enforcers who collect goods at the end of every shift. One of his neighbors turned him in for a generous reward."

Fear becomes a tangible, living thing in my chest.

The man in question looks down in shame, the truth of that crime evident all over his face.

"And if that isn't enough," Baydel continues, casually folding his hands before him, "he's since tried to kill me with the little power he has."

The man glares up, then thrashes out of One's hold. He races toward Baydel, tied hands outstretched like he'll strangle him. One snatches him back and forces him to his knees again.

Baydel grins triumphantly, never once flinching from the attempted attack.

"You see?" he asks, pointing at the man on the floor.

"What power does he have?" The question slips free before I can think to stop it. Each king is staring wide-eyed at me now, but even their scrutinizing looks can't penetrate the terror lashing through my soul.

That man could be *me*.

I could be in One's grip, desperate to be heard, to be freed.

"Why does it matter?" Baydel asks.

I'm shaking. My muscles are trembling from the adrenaline coursing through me, and there is no way Kal doesn't feel it, doesn't notice the shift in me. He leans deeper into my side—the slightest show of support. Goddess, he probably thinks I'm terrified of what's to come.

If Baydel loves anything more than his power, it's a good public execution,

even if we're the only audience.

I look directly at the Occuli, wanting them to quote me in the story but unsure if they will. "If his power poses a *true* threat to the kings of Lumathyst, then he's a threat to everyone in Lumathyst—"

"He's not a threat, little bug," Baydel says, then straightens as he glances at the Occuli, remembering the performance *he* started. He laughs, a light, dismissive laugh that makes my stomach turn. "No one is a threat to us." He motions to the other kings. "But he *tried*. Now, what do you say? Execution or dungeons?"

My eyes drop to the man on the floor. Sweat beads on his brow, but he's stopped trying to break One's hold. I look to One, scanning the mask covering his face as I try to meet the cold eyes of the guard. He doesn't bother looking at me, doesn't bother doing much of anything beyond what he's told.

"Dungeons," I say, my voice cracking over the word.

"On what grounds?" Baydel asks.

I have none. No solid evidence to stand on. The prisoner clearly just tried to attack Baydel, but still, there is a part of me that wonders if he'd been provoked. I'd wanted to lash out my first night in the palace when Baydel put his hands on me without my consent… That could be *me*, and if it were, I'd want someone to hear my side of the story. To give me a chance. "On the grounds that I don't relish death," I finally answer.

"He tried to attack one of your kings, and you would spare him?" Baydel flicks his wrist toward the man in question.

I don't get a chance to answer.

"He dies," Baydel says, and the man hauls himself to his feet with jagged movements. One releases him immediately, and bile climbs up my throat as I realize what's happening.

Baydel is controlling him.

The man *leaps* across the marble floor like he's rehearsing a dance. The Occuli sweep their green flames in time to his movements, never missing a single step as the man twirls and spins, all the while grunting with wide, panicked eyes.

I try to move—to do what, I'm not sure—but Kal holds me in place.

"A threat upon the life of a king is a forfeit of the life who dared it." Baydel's voice is laced with pure, undiluted delight as he maneuvers the criminal around the dining hall, each grand dance move more jagged than the next, each one bringing him closer and closer to that open window I thought about jumping out of earlier.

Oh, goddess, he's going to—

The criminal spins in tight pirouettes, over and over again until he jerks to a

halt and dips in the most forced bow I've ever seen. His eyes are filled with raw terror, the kind that has me swallowing icy breaths as my heart races.

Brooks shifts in his seat, like he wants to get a better view of the scene, and the criminal's eyes soften just slightly, as if he's fully accepted his fate—the calm of death washing over him with a tragic numbness that prickles my insides —

And then he leaps out the window, the muffled sounds of his screams echoing throughout the room as he disappears from sight.

I close my eyes, unable to stop my reaction. I know I should hold my mask, should smooth my features, should pretend like I'm okay with what happened, but I allow a few precious seconds to collect myself while the Occuli are still focused on the man falling to his death.

When I open my eyes, Baydel is watching me with a satisfied sort of smile that makes my legs shake.

Kal slowly turns us toward the doors, a casual move to initiate our exit.

"Now that that's all settled," Baydel says as we reach the doors, his voice too chipper for the gruesome scene he just directed. "Kal. Do me the honor of allowing me to escort your potential back to her rooms." He's not asking. Not after what just happened. Not after the power he just showed. "I'm sure you've already said your goodbyes."

I can see the battle on Kal's face. He's actually contemplating arguing with Baydel—the king who just made a man dance to his death without showing any proof of his crimes. Kal's silent concern fills my heart in a way I'll never be able to fully express, but he has no business going toe to toe with Baydel. Not when his powers are no match for the king's.

And besides, we've already agreed he'll come with me tomorrow. No need to fight Baydel when this isn't goodbye.

I force a smile to my lips, grinning up at Kal as I slip my arm from his. "I'll see you when you visit the Sapphire Cove, yes?"

Kal nods, planting a quick kiss over my lips before reluctantly striding through the doors.

Baydel extends his arm, and I can't help but glance back at the other kings. Jullian is standing, almost hovering near the edge of the table, Brooks near his side, with Lucas content, finishing his dessert. How can he eat after what just happened?

I slide my arm through Baydel's because I'm in no position to refuse his offer, my skin crawling at every place of contact as he leads me through the doors and into the foyer. I half expect to see Kal lingering there, but if he is, it's not where I can see.

The elevator doors open for Baydel once we reach them, as if they sense his presence, and quickly close behind us. He doesn't drop my arm, and though he's only an inch or so taller than me, I feel two feet tall, trapped in a golden cage with a ruthless killer.

His power is a threat I can feel biting at my skin, so much so that I have to hush mine in response to it.

"You know, I'm usually very good at reading people," he says as the elevator takes us down. "Especially potentials."

"That's a neat trick," I say, keeping my tone in the sweet zone, blinking frequently as if I have no cares in the world. As if I'm not panicking over what just happened, what he just did.

"You, though," he says, ignoring my comment. "You're much harder to read."

"Huh," I say, practically squeaking. I count the floors as we descend, the breath easing in my lungs as we reach my floor.

The doors slide open, and I move to step out, but Baydel jerks me back with nothing but his power, punching the button to close the doors and lock them there.

I try to move, but I'm immobilized. My mind whirls as it tries to scratch and claw its way from his hold.

Baydel walks in front of me, delight shining from his eyes at my frozen position. "I'm so glad to know you have a sister," he says, his voice sugary. "It's wonderful to have family you care about, and I can tell you care about her a great deal." He smiles, looking me over. "Family is important. We're nothing without our legacies…" His eyes shift to the side. "Even if those legacies disappoint us from time to time."

He's talking about Jax, but I have no clue how he could ever think him a disappointment or why he feels the need to immobilize me to say these things. Power-hungry bastard.

"I hope I'm wrong about you." He inhales quickly through his nose a little too close to my neck for my liking. If I could cringe, I would. "Hope my son is right about you. For the sake of both our families," he finishes, and his power releases my body so fast I almost tumble into him.

I right myself, my breathing shaky as he comes so close I can feel his breath on my cheeks. I want to back away, want to fight and cringe and get the fuck out of this elevator, but I can't give him the satisfaction of the reaction he wants.

"Do we understand each other?"

Not even a little bit.

I swallow around the razors in my throat and nod.

"Good." A slow grin spreads across his lips. "As you just witnessed, there is

nothing in this world I cannot use to my advantage," he says. "Nothing will ever stand in my way if I do not wish it to. Not even a potential."

My comment earlier about choosing Kal, about what he'll do when he's on the throne, provoked this. My fucking mouth. My need to rise to every challenge. Goddess damn it, his threats are vague at best, but I might've inadvertently put Erin in harm's way.

But if my records were changed, maybe whoever changed them changed Erin's, too. Maybe she's simply out there, living a life with someone she fell hard and fast for. Who knew one of my biggest fears could be one of my ultimate dreams?

I study Baydel as carefully as I dare, but he's immortal and has played this game infinitely longer than me.

The doors open, and I step through them quickly.

"Who knows, Rylee," Baydel says as I turn to face him where he remains inside the elevator. "If you're smart, we may have a combined family. Perhaps I'll find your dear sister so she can join us in the end."

The doors close, and icy shivers skate across my skin.

He may have thought he veiled his threats, but I feel them with crystal clarity.

I can't run my mouth again, or else Erin will pay the price.

THE SAPPHIRE COVE

22

Axl

“I knew you were a feisty little kitten from the second I saw you dancing with Jax.” I laugh as I take her hand, eyeing Rylee’s emerald green tunic and white leggings. She’s a fucking knockout, for sure, but those are Pierce’s colors she’s wearing.

I lead her away from the main road, Kal following behind, after they’ve discarded their shoes in the carriage where Mirren waits. The Occuli linger not too far away.

We head down a set of stone steps that are as old as the kings. Their surface is cracked in some spots, the rock laid right into the solid earth and leading all the way down to the white-sand beach far below.

Rylee tips her chin, barely biting back a grin as we pause on the beach. Awareness ripples between us, a tightening tension I’ve felt every time I’ve been around her. My muscles flex at the challenge in her eyes, but there are smudges of purple beneath them, like she didn’t sleep at all last night.

I glance at Kal, a silent conversation passing between us that I understand well enough—this morning’s royal post account of last night’s execution had been brutal. No doubt witnessing the real thing kept Rylee up all night.

Fucking Baydel. His displays of power are getting out of hand, not to mention getting old. The bastard always comes up with new ways to fuck with the potentials, but this seemed…personal.

Neither she nor Kal wanted to talk about it when they first arrived, so we’re all playing the denial game like pros.

“I bet you love things with claws,” she says with an irresistible smirk.

Fuck me.

“Depends on whose claws they are,” I answer. She smiles, but it doesn’t reach her eyes.

Kal shifts away, giving us some space as he admires the ocean at my back.

I reach down and swipe my thumb over Rylee’s cheek, studying those blue eyes of hers. There’s more happening in them than what occurred last night, and part of me wonders if that’s why Kal is here, too. Not that I mind. “You weren’t worrying about coming here, were you?”

Concern gnaws on my gut. In the past, some of the potentials have been

outwardly scared of me—my size, for one. I can't help it that I'm a six-foot-six giant with over two hundred pounds of pure muscle. Give that credit to my goddess of a mother, Tareena. Add to that my control over water, and more are sent running from me than *to* me.

"Not at all," she says without a hint of hesitation, clearing some of the worry from my chest. She glances at where Kal has wandered closer to the water, his feet bare in the white sand. "Asking Kal to come with me wasn't about you," she continues. "It felt impossible to cut our time, despite the month being up."

A slow grin stretches my lips. "He was that good to you, huh?"

Her eyes practically glitter. "*Very* good to me."

Heat slices through my veins, and the image of Kal fucking her senseless splays over my eyes. That quickly, I want her.

I lower my voice, gliding my hand down her arm. "I bet he made you scream in public, didn't he, kitten?"

A shudder trembles her body. "Maybe," she whispers. "Maybe I know how to be quiet when I need to be."

I laugh, a pure shot of adrenaline bursting beneath my skin at her words. She's not timid, this one, and I love it. Maybe we won't break her.

"Does it bother you?" she asks more seriously. "That I asked him to come?"

I smirk. "There's very little that bothers me, kitten," I explain. I glance at Kal, then back to her. "And sharing you certainly isn't one of them." I take the smallest step away from her, needing the space. If not, I'll throw her over my shoulder and take her on the closest available surface. "You choose," I say, clearing my voice and doing my best to get the image of me and Kal taking her at the same time from my mind.

It's impossible.

The instinct to mark her as mine is *that* strong. Fuck, it's never been like this before. Maybe that's because the kings are putting on all the pressure this time, but it feels…different.

"I just want you to be comfortable," I tell her. "This is all new to you. I know it can be overwhelming."

"You two aren't," she says, motioning to Kal, then me. "But there are elements that certainly are," she continues, turning to look back toward where the two Occuli linger on the main road that winds through my coastal city. Mirren is standing outside the carriage, dutifully ignoring them and waiting on us with a practiced patience that's come from years of taking care of our chaotic asses.

I smile and wave at her while she gently smooths her hand over one of the horses hitched to her carriage. She gives me a tight smile, but there is real love in her eyes. She'll never admit it, but that woman is closer to a mother to us than

our own.

A spike of sadness ripples through me. It's an old kind of hurt that's claimed a solid, raw spot on my soul. I barely remember my mother—only snippets from before she went to sleep.

"Kal told me what happened in the Ruby Aire with the Occuli," I say. "That won't happen here." I make sure she sees the truth of that in my eyes, and Kal comes to stand at my side, gaze on Rylee, too. "Fuck those conjurers," I continue. "They try to scare you again, they'll find themselves in the deepest pits of the ocean."

Her eyebrows rise, but that's not fear churning in her eyes; it's something else… Excitement?

Fuck me, maybe she's Legend material after all.

"That's only if I haven't dropped them from a mountaintop first," Kal adds, and I grin at my friend.

We're almost always on the same page, despite my impulsive instincts and his calm, careful ones.

"What do you think?" I ask, motioning to the ocean behind us and then my city in front of us.

"It's so different than the Ruby Aire," she says, eyes on the clusters of colorful buildings. Narrow cobblestone roads split up the townhomes that seem to stack atop one another, all situated on a jutting cliff that overlooks the ocean. "It's… cozier," she says, returning her focus to the descent. "No offense, Kal," she adds, smiling up at him.

"None taken." He waves her off, eyes trailing the view. "I've always thought that, too."

"I love your city," I admit to Kal. "But I'm a sucker for the beach and the camaraderie you get from a small town that works together."

"Small," she says, laughing. "You think this is small?"

"Compared to the Ruby and Obsidian Cities? Yeah," I say. She shakes her head, eyes marveling. "I guess Cedar and Silk is smaller by comparison." I forget that she isn't like the other potentials we've known—isn't from a booming royal city that has flourished and thrived for generations. It must be an adjustment.

"Right," she says as we walk farther onto the soft sandy beach, closer to the water as we turn to face it. "*Wow.*" She takes in the luscious sapphire ocean stretching out ahead of us. It touches the horizon, the sun high and bright above it. The cresting waves glisten like jewels.

My heart expands as I watch her take it in. The ocean is my home more than the villa I own on the highest peak of the cliff behind us. Her reaction to the

water will tell me everything I need to know about her. The vastness of it can be overwhelming—consuming, even. But if you're able to appreciate its infinite strength and respect it, then there is an endless well of power in it.

"Axl." She says my name on an exhaled breath, and my senses heighten to the tone. Soft but sharp, awed but intrigued. She turns to face me, lifting her chin so she can meet my eyes. "This is unfair."

"What is?" I tilt my head, my long black hair sweeping over my shoulders.

She waves an arm to the ocean. "You get to live here every single day? Get to see this, spend time with this every day? How is any other city supposed to compare?"

I laugh. "Every city in Lumathyst has its qualities." I cock a brow at her, leaning down slightly. "But mine *is* the best."

"A close second," Kal argues.

She laughs then, a real, raw laugh that wafts along my bones and shakes away the darkness clinging to us from everything we're not talking about—the execution; the secrets we know she's hiding, thanks to Jax's lie detection powers; the very real fact that she may not choose us in the end.

"Your highness," someone calls to me from behind, and I turn toward the person. "I'm so sorry to bother you, but…" The young man hesitates as he looks from me to Kal and back again, bowing at the waist.

"It's all right," I assure him when he continues to hesitate. I hate that my people have been trained to react this way. Schooled by my father to bow, grovel, and fear my presence. I've tried to undo that damage for years. "What's wrong?"

"I work on the *Sapphire Six*, your highness," he says, breathless and still bowing.

"Has something happened to your ship?" I ask, instinct roaring.

Kal straightens at my side, as if he can sense the shift in me, too.

The Faders have been breaching more territory lately, and I've worried it was only a matter of time before they started attacking my ships. Our fishermen are vital to the survival of Lumathyst—their catches ensure we have food, not to mention the trade we do with allied kingdoms across the sea.

"Something caught hold of one of our largest nets," he hurries to explain, and I release a tight breath. Not the Faders, thank the goddesses. "We lost it. A few of our best swimmers tried to retrieve it, but they couldn't make it down far enough." He wrings his hands, hesitance written all over his features.

Fuck me, the news of the execution last night must have this man on edge. I know my people respect me—something I've worked hard for—but they still fear the kings, and with good reason.

“I worry that if it’s left down there, an animal could get caught and—”

“I understand,” I say, cutting off his worried words. “I’ll take care of it. Give me the general location.”

Relief loosens his tight muscles so quickly, I worry he’ll topple over. He manages to stay upright but bows over and over again after giving me the details. “Thank you, your highness. Thank you so much.”

“Not a worry,” I say, waving off the young man. He hurries off the beach and up the stairs like he’s scared my generosity will wear off. Regret settles heavily inside me, but I wash it away with the hope I have for the future.

One day, my people will not cower in fear at the sight of authority.

“So, we’re going swimming?” Rylee asks, looking at Kal and then me.

“*I’m* going swimming,” I answer. “You heard the kid. It’s deep—”

“You don’t think I can keep up?” she challenges, and fire licks through my veins.

“You think you can keep up with me?”

She bites her lip. “Only one way to find out.”

I flash Kal a questioning look.

He smirks, giving me a subtle nod. “You’d be surprised what Rylee can handle,” he says, and she beams up at him.

I smile, folding my arms over my chest. “You do know what I can do, right?” I ask, drawing her attention. Before she can answer, I call to the water behind me, shooting it up in pillars so high, they look like they scrape the sky.

Her eyes follow the pillars, widening with a sort of awe that makes my chest swell.

“That’s fairly impressive,” she teases.

I let the water pillars drop. “And yet you want to swim with me?” I can’t help but ask for clarification. Not one potential ever dared come into the water with me, no matter how many times I asked. They were too afraid of what lurks in the ocean, or too afraid of my control over it.

“I do,” she says. “If I can’t keep up, then I’ll just tread water and wait for you.” She turns to Kal. “Or I’ll just surface and call for you. You’ll come get me, right?”

“Always,” Kal says, his tone drenched in a trust and longing I can’t fully understand yet.

I really shouldn’t let her come out this far—it can be dangerous to anyone who isn’t me—but it’s hard to resist her when she’s looking up at me like that, all big blue eyes full of challenge and fire. Fuck, she’s going to get me into so much trouble.

But she’s right. If it’s too much for her, Kal can fly her out in seconds flat.

Between the two of us, she's more than safe.

"All right, kitten," I say, nodding toward the stairs. "Go change into a suit. My boat is just down the beach."

"Yay!" She claps, her words practically a squeal as she rushes toward the steps, bounding upward to where Mirren waits at the carriage with her effects.

"Oh, Rylee?" I call to her, and she halts, spinning around to look down at me. "Want to make this more interesting?" I climb the steps, stopping beneath her when we're eye to eye.

"Always," she immediately responds, and I swear the word goes straight to my cock. Who is this woman?

"I'll make you a wager," I say. "You beat me to the net, and I'll give you anything you want."

Her eyebrow arches in the sexiest little way. "Anything?"

"Anything."

"What if what I want is illegal or could get you into trouble?"

Curiosity spikes through me. "Don't care," I say and mean it. "As long as it doesn't hurt my people, I'll do it."

"And if you win?"

I smirk. "If I win, you'll let me and Kal take you right here on this beach." I cock a brow at Kal behind me before turning back to her. "And the last thing I want is you being quiet."

A flush dusts her cheeks, but she grins. "So, basically I win either way."

I blink at her, shock rolling through me at her casual, eager response. Normally, that would make a potential pause and sputter out an answer, but not Rylee.

"Deal," she says, then spins on her toes and dashes up the stairs.

Goddess damn me, she's got a brilliant ass. I can't help but watch it the entire way up as I wait for her. She's turning me to nothing but the baser instincts I can't ignore—take, claim, possess, protect. It's never happened this fast or hard before, but I can't complain. Not when everything inside me is screaming for her, reaching for her in a way that gives me hope.

Maybe she really could be the one to finally accept us all.

Maybe she could be the one to change things forever.

"I get it," I say as I head back toward Kal.

"Get what?" he asks.

"What you were saying at the last Legend meeting. She's different."

Kal sighs, something like contentment written all over his face. "You have no idea," he says, eyes lighting up as he spots her returning. "I'll hang here on the beach while you two go out," he continues. "Don't let anything happen to her."

I tilt my head at the protective edge to his tone. “You know I won’t.”

He nods. “You’d be saying the same thing if I took to the skies with her.”

Shit. The thought of her in his arms, high above the water, does make a protective instinct surge inside me.

What is she doing to us?

Rylee makes her way down the stairs, her swimsuit made up of tight red shorts and a sleek ruby tank top that accentuates her delicious breasts. Kal groans next to me, and I’m right there with him.

Fuck me, how can she look that good bounding down the stairs, a smile on her face like there’s no place she’d rather be than with us?

“Ready,” she says, bouncing on her bare feet.

I swallow down the hope rising in my throat, the excitement sparking beneath my skin. I can’t look at her like she’s the one. Not this soon. No one has ever stuck around long enough to choose *us* at the end of this thing—partly because of who we are and partly because of what the kings constantly do, like the horrific stunt Baydel pulled last night. I have no reason to believe things will change now.

“I’ll sit this one out,” Kal says before giving her a quick kiss.

She smiles up at him before turning to face me.

“Let’s go win me a wager.” I turn on the beach and head toward a wooden dock lined with tiny rowboats. I spot mine and climb in, turning toward the dock to help Rylee—

“I’ll be the one winning,” she says, easily stepping into the boat, not thrown off for even a second by the dips from the weight change, and taking a seat on the opposite end, one leg crossed over the other as she stares longingly out to the ocean. “I’ve always wanted to go on a boat,” she says.

The wall of self-control I’m trying to build crumbles.

Fuck it.

If she tears me to shreds, at least we’ll have some fun first.

“Wait till I take you on my ship,” I say.

I propel the water to move the boat, easily guiding us toward the open ocean. The more water surrounds us, the more my power soars, dancing beneath my skin like raindrops on leaves. Rylee grins, chill bumps rising on her exposed arms and legs when she feels it.

I wait for her to cower, to flinch, to look at me in terror, but she doesn’t. In fact, she looks downright *hungry* when she casts her eyes over me, watching as I grab my tunic and haul it over my head. Her lack of fear makes me wonder if she’s been around power before or if she’s simply grown accustomed to it from her month with Kal.

“I like your ink,” she says, reaching across the space between us and gliding her fingers along one of the tattoos sprawled over my chest.

Her touch is like a brand, hot and aching. There isn’t enough space to properly claim her in this tiny boat, but I’m thinking about it. Especially when she continues her exploration, following the dips in my muscles, tracing every line of black she can reach.

“Do you have any?” I finally ask.

She blinks a few times, withdrawing her hand like I’ve burned her. “No.”

I tilt my head at her almost startled response, then smile as I lean closer. “If you want one, I know someone who would love to tattoo you.”

“I wouldn’t know what to get,” she admits.

“Think on it, kitten,” I say. “But in the meantime, you can keep admiring mine all you want.” Rylee laughs again before I nod toward the ocean. “There is a slight drop-off here,” I explain. “I’ve carved it out so larger ships can make it there.” I point toward the much larger dock where my fleet gathers. “Those ships ensure all of Lumathyst is fed and stocked with trade supplies.”

Rylee studies the fleet lining the shore. “Not all of Lumathyst,” she says. “Not the Ashlands.”

I wet my lips, my muscles tensing. The Ashlands have been a point of argument between me and my father for years. “Right,” I say, clearing my throat. “Except them.”

Something sharp colors Rylee’s features. “You said there’s a drop-off?”

“Yeah,” I answer, suddenly wondering what I’ve done to piss her off. “The net is likely snagged on a craggy collection of rocks on the bottom.”

“How deep?”

“Twenty or so feet,” I say, then soften as she studies the water. “Hey,” I say. “We don’t have to do the wager—”

“Oh, we’re doing it,” she says, her grin returning to wash away the previous sharpness.

I carefully stand as I discard my pants, leaving me in nothing but my underwear. “If you run out of air or get tired, just come back to the boat. I’ll happily collect my winnings when I’ve handled the net.”

She stands, too, shifting closer to me, placing her hands on my bare chest again. For fuck’s sake, she’s so close, the tips of her breasts graze against my body. She leans her head back, flashing me a look filled with promises of sin—delightful, *devious* sin.

I may be the Player through and through, but *fuck* the wager.

I slide my hand down her arm, settling it on her waist as I draw her against me. She sighs when my cock brushes against her. Her fingers dip to my chest. I

lower my head, ready to suck that pretty pink tongue into my mouth—

She dives into the water.

It takes me a full ten seconds to register what she's done—distracted me so thoroughly, I'm standing on the boat while she's racing toward the net at the bottom.

"Clever kitten," I say, then dive headfirst into the water.

23

Rylee

The water is warm on the surface but turns cold the deeper I swim.

It takes my eyes a few moments to adjust to the sting, but soon I can see the buttery sunbeams as they break the surface and brush the ocean floor. My heart pounds in my chest, not from the dive but from Axl, from the way I teased him on the boat.

I hold back a laugh. How else am I supposed to beat him?

And I *have* to beat him.

Last night flashes through my head—the execution, the way Baydel had dangled Erin's fate in front of me like a cat playing with its food. I need to find her, if only to warn her about the kings' sudden interest in our family. But if she's not on a Never List mission…if that part of the record was forged like my parents' cases and my birthplace, then wouldn't she have seen the royal posts? Wouldn't she know I was chosen?

And if she did… Why wouldn't she have tried to come find me?

Whenever I think I've come to terms with her disappearance, more questions arise that I can't ignore.

Axl just offered me a perfect way to get some answers. The Player loves to make wagers, loves to push boundaries. I have no doubts he'll honor a bet placed between us.

And even if he didn't, I'd planned on asking for Kal's help tonight, too. Either way, I've got to try.

I spear my arms, pushing myself farther down. My lungs don't burn, not in the way Ivy and Layce have described holding your breath for too long whenever we swam in the lakes of Cedar and Silk. I've siphoned enough air with my powers to hopefully beat Axl, but that's only if my distraction worked.

Goddess knows I could use a distraction myself, because I haven't had a moment's peace since last night. I kept reliving the memory over and over, not sleeping, instead trying to change things with the power of my mind. And it's not like I haven't seen Baydel's executions before; I have. They're always brutal, always leave fear and a bitter taste in my mouth. But this one hit harder because I was right there…I was right there and couldn't do a damn thing about it.

And maybe the man truly was guilty. He did try to attack him right in front of

us. Despite my dislike of the kings, no one deserves to be murdered, right? If he attempted to murder one of them, then he certainly knew the risks…just like he did if he was concealing jewels, too. All of Lumathyst knows the risks of breaking the laws. Still, it doesn't sit right with me. And he was a demi… He was like me. Or Baydel claimed he was.

What if it had been Ivy or Layce? Not that they'd get caught doing something as obvious as stealing from the mines, but still. What if it had been them?

My blood runs cold. I would've died. I would've fought and clawed and shredded my way through Baydel to save them.

I force the fear from my mind, burying the guilt of my absolute inability to help the man last night deep into a space inside me that I know will one day overflow.

But not right now.

Right now, I'm all too happy to dive headfirst into this wager with Axl as a form of selfish distraction. And the fact that Kal is here with me, waiting for us on the beach, is a level of comfort I never thought I'd be afforded when Jax chose me that night.

Having Kal here has relieved some of the pressure, and with his support, I'm more than excited to dive into all things Axl—his city, his antics, his body, whatever it takes to survive this.

The cluster of rocks on the seafloor Axl mentioned comes into view. A massive net is strung across them. It's a tangled mess, but victory is a few strokes away.

A pulse of awareness ripples behind me, and I turn to see Axl diving into the water from the boat above. He's beautiful. A bronze masterpiece of muscles, ink, and bravado that has me aching in all the right places. He's a god in the water, the liquid folding around his body like it bends to him and no other.

I jerk my eyes away from him, focusing on the target. A few more strokes and I'll touch the net, winning what I so desperately need—

A sound echoes through the deep water, a wounded sort of cry that is both heart-wrenching and mystifying. I've never heard a sound like that before, but it only takes me a few seconds to see what's making it.

Something struggles in the net at the base of the largest rock. A creature bigger than the dogs that roam the streets of the Ashlands, its coat dark and rubbery-looking, with whiskers flanking its wide nose. The sound happens again, this time paired with the jerky movements of the animal.

Wager all but forgotten, I push my muscles to the brink, maneuvering myself through the water as fast as I possibly can. I reach the creature in no time, hesitating only a moment as I take in its tangled position.

It’s stuck. Trapped.

I hurry to grab handfuls of the net, working it in and out of the rocks as I try to free the creature. A glimpse of sharp teeth makes me pause and wonder if this thing will bite my head off once free. But my heart races with each panicked cry, pushing me to work faster. Goddess, I wish I had a knife.

My arms ache from lifting and pulling and shifting the net, but I work through the pain, almost there—

A burning sensation expands slowly inside my chest. I furrow my brow, my vision going blurry for a few seconds. Oh no—this is what it feels like to run out of air… I didn’t take enough, and not even my powers can pull air from down here. Panic spiderwebs its way through me as I move toward the surface on instinct—

The cry sounds again, and I snap out of it, forcing myself back down to where I almost have the net clear of the creature. If I could just get this last…line…

My thoughts come slow and thick, like they’re coated in syrup.

A shadow looms over me, so large I think I’m passing out, but one look and I see it’s Axl, eyebrows scrunched together, golden eyes blazing as he looks down at me.

The burning intensifies, but I ignore it and keep tugging on that net, keep trying to set the creature free. Another tug, and the creature is freed, swimming the opposite direction as fast as it can.

Axl waves an arm in front of me—

Water swirls around me in a spiral, driving me toward the surface at a gentle yet accelerated pace. A blink and the blue sky replaces the ocean, the water keeping hold of my hips as it races me toward the beach.

Kal is on his feet in seconds, catching me in his arms as the ocean finally lets me go.

I gulp lungfuls of air, the oxygen so damn sweet.

“What happened?” Kal asks, looking me over.

“I—”

“What the fuck were you doing?” Axl stomps out of the ocean and along the beach until he reaches us, looking very much every inch of the Legend he is.

I shift against Kal until he lets me on my feet, and I turn to face Axl. His eyebrows are drawn together, and there’s panic in his eyes.

“The creature,” I say, breathing easily now. The power in my blood dances at no longer being suffocated, the sensation downright intoxicating. “I couldn’t let it die—”

“At the cost of your life?” he cuts me off. “You could’ve died! I saw how long you held your breath, Rylee. It was too long.”

I feel Kal’s strong chest shift behind me, and I twist to look up at him with a silent assurance.

“I’m fine,” I say first to Kal, then focus on Axl in front of me. “I promise.” I gently smooth my hands over his forearms, trying to coax some of the tension out of his muscles.

“You were reckless—”

“And you love it,” I fire back, and his golden eyes widen. His black hair is soaked, sticking to the sides of his face, his powerful jaw, and down over his shoulders. He looks almost otherworldly, like some sea king in his own right. “Admit it.”

Axl parts his lips like he’ll argue, glancing behind me where Kal stands, giving him a confused, incredulous look before he returns his focus to me.

“Fuck me,” he growls. “Is she always like this?” He aims the question at Kal.

“You mean fearless, compassionate, smart, and downright fuckable at all times?” Kal asks, making my heart swell and my cheeks blush. “Yep.”

Axl blows out a breath. “Good to know.” He slides a finger along my jaw, planting those golden eyes on mine. “Don’t scare me like that again,” he demands.

A warm shiver skates down the center of me. I can feel every hard inch of him pressed against every soft part of me. Our bodies are slick from the ocean, and I tremble from the shift in temperature. Add to it Kal’s warmth pressing against my back, and my head is practically spinning with the sensations.

“I make zero promises,” I answer, then smirk up at him. “I got to the net first,” I say proudly. “I won.”

His features shift from concern to awe in the span of a breath. And then he laughs, that infectious booming sound that is comforting and exhilarating at the same time.

“You did,” he says, nodding. “Let’s get you dried off first, and then we can talk about your prize.”

24

Rylee

While Axl takes care of the net he left behind to check on me, I dry off and change into a spare set of clothes in the carriage, Mirren dutifully standing guard outside of it. Loose white cotton pants hang low on my hips now, a crimson sleeveless top covering my upper half, my feet tucked into comfy slippers perfect for walking.

Axl, Kal, and I spend the next few hours exploring his coastal town, eating fried fish prepared fresh by the vendors lining the little cobblestone streets that cut through the colorful buildings.

I have two helpings as we walk, practically ravenous from the swim.

After tossing my empty food wrappers into a nearby bin, I sigh contentedly, running my fingers along a stone wall embedded with thousands upon thousands of seashells. They vary in size and color, ranging from smaller than a grain of sand to larger than my hand, shades of beige, coral, pink, and even blue scattered throughout.

There's an overwhelming sense of rightness as I walk with Axl on my left and Kal on my right, as if we've been doing it for years, not a mere few hours. We've chatted about the foundations of Axl's town and the importance of the trade route between his city and the southern realm of Cardrayton. They exchange wine and spirits and coveted steel for the delicacies found in his ocean.

Conversing with him is easy, but I'm a sucker for how Kal talks up the Sapphire Cove as if it's as much his city as it is Axl's. The admiration and respect and genuine friendship between the two has me swooning just a bit. And I can't help but settle into the more relaxed feel of Axl's coastal town. It feels different than the innovative Ruby Aire—less pressure, more fun. Kind of like Axl.

"Let's head home, kitten," Axl says after we've fallen into one of the comfortable lulls between conversations. He motions toward another set of cracked and weathered stone steps, these leading up the highest ridge of the cliffs. I walk where he indicates, climbing steadily with Kal following me. Thank goddess the demands of the Ashlands have kept me fit all these years, or I wouldn't be able to keep up.

"I can't wait to see it." I do my best to disregard the presence I feel trailing

behind us.

The Occuli. They waited for Axl's permission before they pursued our little trio, but it's still hard to ignore them.

I blush at the thought of the Occuli reporting to all of Lumathyst about the three of us on the beach, me sandwiched between the two powerful men, even if we were only talking.

What would they report if they'd caught all three of us on that beach doing something *other* than talking?

Heat streaks through me, images racing through my mind. *Kal behind me, Axl in front, their mouths on my body.* Think of the illustrations; the royal post would be scandalized. And with Kal's taste for public escapades, I'm worried my little fantasy may be inevitable.

That should probably bother me more than it does, but it's hard when I'm so wrapped up in them. In the way they make me feel—untouchable, claimed, desired, worshipped.

Stop.

I scold myself for getting lost in the idea that this can actually be my life.

It can't.

Even if I wanted it to…there are too many secrets between us already, all of which they'd send me packing for, or worse, if they uncovered them.

I blow out a breath, taking Axl's outstretched hand as we climb.

"I still can't believe you won," Axl says, the confession rolling off his tongue. He scrunches his face in the most adorably innocent way, the look so uncanny on an intimidating giant like him.

"What?" I laugh. "I bet that doesn't happen often."

Axl's long black hair hangs in loose waves dried by the sun. "It doesn't." He nods to Kal behind me. "The Legends, maybe. But never…" His voice trails off, and I swallow hard. I hate that I compare myself to the previous potentials, but it's hard not to.

Is he making me feel special because he's desperate for a mate?

The same doubts I had about Kal spring up with Axl, and I cringe against the onslaught. It's not fair of me to compare them, either. Not one of the Legends is like the other, and I'm discovering that I like it…I like it a lot. These weeks with them certainly won't be boring.

"It feels kind of nice to lose for once," Axl says, and Kal rolls his eyes as we clear the last step, walking onto a curving pathway that leads to a stunning sandstone villa with a shimmering sapphire roof perched atop the highest peak of the cliff, overlooking the crashing ocean below.

"This is mine," Axl says as we reach a bright-blue door. He unlocks it, holding

the door open for me to enter.

The floors are a rich wood, the walls covered in pictures of the town, the people, and the ocean he loves so much. The entryway opens up to a wide space, a kitchen on the left and a sitting room with a fireplace on the right. Floor-to-ceiling windows frame the exterior wall, connecting to a balcony with the most gorgeous view of the now-setting sun. Bare wooden stairs lead up to what I can only guess is Axl's bedroom.

"I love it," I say, striding across the room and through the balcony doors, leaning against the sandstone railing to watch the sunset. Kal settles in on my left, and relief at the loss of the Occuli unravels some tension in me. The pair of conjurers is no doubt lingering outside in that unmoving way they do.

This is as much a dream as the Ruby Aire was, and I still have two more cities to explore. My heart jolts a little at the idea of entering the Obsidian City, but with how Jax treats me lately, he may not invite me in the end. Something about that makes me feel hollow in a way I have no right to be—I barely know him well enough to feel sad over his lack of attention.

I barely know Axl, either, but it *feels* like we've known each other a long time. Longer than the month it's been, longer than the few times we met as a group in the Ruby Aire. I don't know how to explain it, but I've barely been able to explain a thing since the night of the Choosing. Why start getting caught up in logistics now?

Axl follows us out, leaning his back against the railing to my right so he can look down at me.

Goddess, he looks amazing like that, the sun setting on the ocean behind him, the slight salty breeze blowing through his long black hair. Desire becomes a tangible thing in my core, burning my previous thoughts to ash.

"What do you want, kitten?" Axl asks, his voice all low and rough in a way that makes it sound like the salt from the ocean has rubbed his vocal cords raw over the years.

My pulse skitters, the possibilities racing through my mind.

"For the wager," he continues, and I blow out a breath.

Right. The wager. Of course.

Reality sinks over me like a lead weight, the panic from Baydel's vague threats cracking open in my chest. I'd wanted to tell Kal about Erin, but how could I reveal my biggest weakness to someone I wasn't sure would accept me for who I was in the end?

It doesn't matter anymore.

Kal hadn't scolded me for keeping my sister a secret this morning on our ride over to the Sapphire Cove, so I highly doubt he or Axl would have intentions to

do so now.

Either way, Baydel had made the choice for me. Axl and his playfulness have given me the shot I need at getting information without having to beg. Still, it's hard to work the request out of my mouth, my heart begging me to not expose myself in such a way.

Axl turns toward me, grazing a hand along my jaw, tipping my head to meet his eyes. "It can't be that bad, kitten. Tell me."

His golden eyes almost look worried, but I take a breath, then finally speak. "I have a sister," I say, and his eyebrows rise as I shift so I can face both him and Kal.

"I'd love to meet her," Axl says.

Kal gives me an encouraging smile.

I huff out a laugh, wondering for the first time what Erin would make of him, of Kal and Pierce and Jax. I wonder if she'd think we were a good fit—

What am I thinking? Of course we're not a good fit. I'm a demi, an Ashlander—two of the things they loathe most.

"I wish you could," I say and actually mean it. "I wish both of you could." Despite the risks, the consequences, I'd rather Erin be here with me than not. "But she disappeared a little over a year ago."

Kal tilts his head, reaching down to squeeze my hand while Axl slides his arms around me, tucking me closer against him. "What happened?"

"I never knew," I answer. "Until *Baydel* brought her up." I grind out his name. "He said she volunteered for a Never List mission." I look to Kal. "Last night, at dinner." I can't tell either of them the reasons I don't believe it's true…that I saw the list and didn't find her name, that other parts of the records Baydel read weren't true.

A muscle in Axl's jaw ticks. "Okay, and what you want is…"

"I'd love to know where my sister is," I say, emotion clogging my throat. "I'm not sure if Baydel was telling the truth," I hedge, looking at Kal. "I saw something in the Ruby Aire—a painting I know my sister did."

"The cat painting," Kal says, clarity dawning in his eyes. "That's why you asked so much about it."

I nod. "You said it'd been painted in the last six months," I continue, looking to Axl. "I don't know how she could've painted that if she's been on a Never List mission. Either way, just knowing she's safe would mean everything to me." I swallow hard. "I wasn't ridiculous enough to ask Baydel…especially after the execution. He doesn't like me very much."

"It's good that you didn't ask him," Kal says. "You should always come to us. Baydel can be…"

“He lives with a stick up his ass,” Axl finishes for Kal. “I’ll do some research on her whereabouts.”

“Really?” I ask, hopes lifting. “What if Baydel finds out? What if he—”

“Fuck Baydel,” he says, shocking me to my core. It’s rare to hear anyone so blatantly insult a king. “It’s not like me looking into your sister will break any laws. And besides, we made a wager. You won. I never go back on a deal. This is what you want, so this is what you’ll get.”

“I’ll help, too,” Kal offers. “No wager needed.”

“I don’t know how to thank you both.”

The fact that Kal so readily wants to help shouldn’t surprise me, but it does. I can’t turn off my survival instincts that are questioning everything.

“You don’t have to,” Kal says, running his thumb across the back of my hand, and Axl nods his agreement.

I swallow hard, desperately wanting to get back to more neutral territory. “You know, with a nickname like the Player, I thought it meant you liked to play the field, but it’s more a nod to your wagers and playful attitude, isn’t it?”

Axl grins at me. “Definitely,” he says. “And while Kal and myself and Pierce and Jax are open to sharing you, we’ll only have eyes for you.”

I’ve never experienced such easy communication before, such honesty with needs expressed. “I don’t know what to say…about the wager.”

“One, you earned it, so you don’t have to thank me. I’m sure you know how much I love games like this,” he says, grinning mischievously at me. “Two,” he continues, smoothing his hand over my hip, “I hope you know what you’re asking for.” Hesitation flutters over his strong features. “You may not like what we find.” He eyes Kal with concern.

A lump forms in my throat, but I shove it down. “My parents died on a Never List mission,” I answer as calmly as I can. “I understand what you two might discover.”

“I hate to hear that, kitten,” Axl says, fully enveloping me in an embrace.

Kal gently releases my hand, letting me fully sink into Axl. I inhale his sea-and-salt scent, allowing myself to believe everything will work out in the end.

Too soon, Axl shifts me out of his arms, motioning inside. “The villa is yours,” he says. “Make yourself comfortable. We’ll be back in an hour.”

“Wait, what? You two are going *now*?” I ask, following him and Kal inside the house. Axl slides his feet into a pair of black boots, grabs a black leather jacket —the one with the Legends’ crest embellished on the back, identical to the one they all wear—and slips into it.

“You want answers, and I want to give them to you,” he says, striding over to me and planting me with a toe-curling kiss. He nips my bottom lip, sucking it

into his mouth for a second before he pulls away, leaving me completely stunned and buzzing with need. “When I come back, I want you sprawled naked on my bed so Kal and I can have our way with you.”

Kal chuckles where he waits for Axl, shrugging as I arch a brow at him.

I stutter a breath, barely able to form a response before they’re out the door. I don’t, in fact, get naked and lie around waiting for Axl. Not that the idea isn’t splendid, but my nerves are too shot.

It’s been over three hours, the sun giving way to the moon over the ocean long ago. I tried to eat, tried to browse the books on the shelves surrounding his fireplace, but I can’t concentrate. All I can think is that with Axl and Kal’s digging, they’ll unearth the truth about me and that will be the end.

I graze my fingers along my neck, wondering if they’d let Baydel publicly execute me like he did the supposed demi yesterday. Like they did when demis attempted to start a revolution. A chill skirts along my skin at the image of the Legends looking at me in disgust while Baydel choreographs a dance to the tune of my death—

The front door swings open, and I yelp, shaken by the scenario playing out in my mind.

“Cover up, kitten! We have two more than expected!” Axl calls as if he expects me to be doing as he told me—lying in his bed in wait. “Oh,” he says when he rounds the corner, finding me tucked on his blue velvet couch, my arms around my knees. “You didn’t listen to me,” he says in a gravelly tone. “Guess I’ll have to punish you later.”

Warm tendrils of relief swirl inside me, not an ounce of fear of whatever punishment he may have—not when he’s looking at me like I’m his favorite treat. My heart lifts to my throat as footsteps sound behind him, and Kal rounds the corner, then Pierce, then Jax.

Kal immediately wraps his arms around me, and I sigh against the touch as he lifts me off my feet, holding me to him.

“Easy,” Axl warns in a playful tone from behind me. “You’ll make me jealous. That’ll be another punishment.”

Heat pools low in my core. Hearing his words while Kal is holding me against him is almost too much to take without whimpering. I manage, and Kal sets me on my feet. I settle back onto the couch, Axl slipping an arm around my shoulders as I lean against him. I eye him curiously before watching Pierce and Jax take up the opposite armchairs closer to the fireplace, with Kal closing me in on my open side.

“Legend meeting?” I ask innocently, my pulse skyrocketing in the presence of all four of them. Axl’s house isn’t as large as Kal’s—it’s cozier, more minimalist

—and their powers fill the room so much, it's hard to breathe. It's like being outside right before a massive thunderstorm. I can feel the intensity in my bones.

"Sort of," Axl says, flashing me an apologetic look.

My heart drops to my stomach.

They know. Axl and Kal brought Jax and Pierce here to deal with me. The punishments are real, not some sexy innuendo.

The power in my blood rises, panic clawing up my spine in a desperate rush to get out.

For some reason, some buried instinct or pathetic imagined attachment, my eyes go to Jax's. I want his searing indigo eyes to be the last thing I see before they deal with me.

"Here's the thing, kitten," Axl says, his voice calm, smooth. He waves an arm toward Kal, Pierce, and Jax. "We share everything, as I'm sure you've realized. It's how we operate. If you're going to stick around," he says, then moves his lips to my ear and whispers, "which I hope you do…"

Chills erupt on my skin, skittering down my neck and settling deep in my core.

"Then you'll have to accept that," Axl continues at a normal volume. "We don't keep secrets from one another. Not with stuff that matters."

I can't find the words to respond, so I merely nod.

Is he talking about *my* secrets? Secrets he discovered while searching for information on Erin?

"You asked me and Kal to find information on your sister after what Baydel read at dinner," Axl says.

A muscle in Jax's jaw ticks, and he leans back in his seat, unsheathing a blade from the holster beneath his leather jacket and flipping it end over end.

"But what I've found needs to be said in front of all of us."

Oh goddess. I'm so fucked.

How am I going to explain lying? How can I explain keeping the fact that I'm a demi from them? *Wait*. There is *no* way anyone would know I'm a demi… The only other souls alive who do are Erin, Layce, and Ivy, and they'd never sell me out. No, he can only know about the Ashlander part—

"I'm sorry, kitten," he says, drawing me back to the present. "There is no record of your sister ever accepting a Never List mission. Either Baydel made that up or he had a false record."

My stomach catapults to the floor.

She's gone.

She *actually* abandoned me and never looked back.

Relief and grief mix together in a wave I let ride out inside me.

This is good. This means Baydel was using the information to give credit to

the vague threat.

"But Baydel said…" I finally murmur, expressing the proper reaction instead of revealing the cards playing out in my mind.

"Exactly," Axl says. "Why would he say that to you if it wasn't true?"

"He hates me," I explain, looking directly at Jax while I say it. "Ever since I denied him that first night. Ever since he learned I'm…from one of the lower cities."

Kal smooths a hand over my thigh, supportive, claiming, comforting.

Jax tracks the move, visibly swallowing as he returns his focus to the blade in his hand.

"Baydel hates everyone," Jax says, that slick, sardonic tone dripping over me like warm honey. Damn him. How can he basically ignore me every time he sees me and still affect me so badly?

"I seem to bring out the worst in him," I answer, settling deeper into Axl and Kal. My fun place, my safe place.

"It does pose the question," Pierce says, head tilted in that signature calculative way of his. Goddess, he looks so much like his father when he makes that expression.

He wears an emerald green shirt beneath his leather jacket, and I blink a few times to appreciate that this is the first look I've gotten at him out of the suits. I like him in both, but there's a strategic set to his brown eyes right now that makes my fingers tremble.

"To what end would he deliver this information to our dear Rylee?" he continues. "What does he gain from the lie?"

"Control," Jax says, catching the blade in midair.

"Why would he want control over Rylee?" Kal asks.

Jax smiles that brutal, lethal smile of his. "He's scared of her."

My eyes widen.

Jax leans his elbows on his knees, the position making his focus on me intensify. Something crackles against my skin—not like lightning but something deeper…a *pull* on my soul I can't explain. His indigo eyes are searing as they hold mine, and I have the oddest impulse to stand up, cross the room, and drop to my knees right there in front of everyone. Maybe talk some sense into him, make him remember why he chose me in the first place.

I don't, and the second I blink, glancing to Axl and then Kal, Jax goes slack in his seat again.

"You believe Baydel thinks she's the *one*," Pierce says, not asks. "Intriguing."

Jax returns to playing with his blade.

"If she's the one, then she's a threat," Kal says, almost as if he's forgotten I'm

sitting right exactly here. “Despite Baydel’s insistence that he wants us to unlock our powers to keep the offerings to our mothers strong. Why does he see Rylee as a threat and not the others?”

“Indeed,” Pierce says, looking at me more closely. We’ve spent the least amount of time together, but there is something there, pulsing behind his intelligent eyes, that has my instincts reaching for him.

Maybe that’s it.

Maybe the only reason Baydel fears I’m the one is because I don’t react the way the other potentials did. I’m not coy or shy or timid. Not skittish around their powers. Not when I’ve grown up around power my entire life—Erin and Ivy and Layce—each of us carrying a heavy dose of power in our own right.

Goddess damn it. My plan to make them fall for me has made me an even bigger target for the kings.

“Maybe he buried the information,” I hurry to say before I can spiral too far. “Maybe he knew I’d ask you to look for my sister.”

“It’s possible,” Pierce says. “I wouldn’t put it past him to fuck with us on this.” The curse word sounds elegant coming from his lips, and a deep shiver tickles my insides. Pierce winks at me like he senses it.

“Why would he go out of his way to intimidate her after pushing you to make a good choice this year, Jax?” Axl asks.

Jax’s eyes follow his blade into the air and back to his hand, contemplative. “Why does he do anything he does?” he asks, snatching the blade out of the air and slamming it down into the arm of the chair.

“That’s the fourth chair you owe me,” Axl says, seemingly unsurprised by Jax’s behavior.

He jerks the knife out of the woodgrain, standing and bowing slightly to Axl. “Put it on my tab.” He sheathes the knife, striding out of the room and around the corner, the front door slamming on his way out.

Before I know what I’m doing, I’m off the couch and following him through the front door, racing after him with my bare feet hitting the stone path in front of Axl’s house.

“Jax!” His name is a plea from my lips, the unanswered questions, the avoidance all building to a crescendo inside me. “Jax, wait!”

He halts at the edge of the stone path but doesn’t turn around.

Heat—*searing*, raging heat—slices through my veins at his dismissal, at his complete lack of empathy with regard to the choice he made that night.

I stomp toward him, no longer caring that he’s the Nightmare and I should tread carefully. I’m already in way over my head here.

“Why didn’t you rescind your choice?” I ask, gripping his arm and forcing

him to turn and face me.

His glare is harsh, his eyes narrowed as he looks down at me. The night sky stretches behind him, and his blue-black hair is slicked back and away from his face, highlighting his sharp features—the lean cut of his nose, the strong jaw, the full lips with a smirk that could surely kill.

"Rescind my choice?" he asks, his tone half mocking, half serious.

"Yeah," I say, breathless. Adrenaline is racing through me, demanding I fight or flee or fuck. I'm not sure which. "You keep calling me a liar—"

"You *are* a liar," he cuts me off. He tilts his head back and inhales deeply, closing his eyes for a moment as he shudders. "Every time I'm around you," he continues, eyes locking on mine. "Your lies *hum* against me. Constant. Buzzing. Butterfly."

I swallow hard, defiant as I glare up at him. "I could be lying about my favorite color or hiding the fact that I think most royals are pompous, entitled assholes."

His grin is lethal. "That was the truth."

"If you regret choosing me so damn badly, why not stop it right there? *That* night? Why not go to the kings and tell them to choose for you—"

His hand gently curls around my throat, stopping my words. The touch is soft but claiming as he holds me there, inching closer as those indigo eyes roam over every line of my face.

"I don't regret my choice," he says, his words washing over me like the sweetest caress. His fingers flex on my neck, just the slightest pressure that sends a bolt of heat throbbing between my thighs. "But I told you before: I *hate* liars."

He releases me, the move so jarring I gasp like he was truly choking me. He takes a few steps back, eyes knowingly on Axl's door. Not a second later, Pierce ambles through it, focus darting between the two of us.

"I've been dismissed," Pierce says when he reaches us. He takes my hand, planting a kiss on the back of it. "Until next time, my darling."

A flutter of heat makes my head spin.

"You coming?" Pierce asks Jax, who is staring at me with that unrelenting gaze.

Stay with me.

Choose me again.

I want to shout the words at him, but he flinches like some invisible force has shoved him. He nods to Pierce, silently turning to follow him away from Axl's home and down the steps, disappearing into the night.

I stand there for a few moments, collecting my thoughts and shaking my head

at the man I can't even begin to understand. He doesn't regret choosing me but says he hates me in the same heartbeat?

After a few deep breaths, I shake off the interaction, more than ready to go back inside and find a way to forget all the worries bouncing inside my mind. I close the door behind me and lean back against it with my eyes closed.

"Kitten." Axl's voice is coated in demand, making every worry and doubt disappear.

"Axl," I reply, opening my eyes to find him and Kal standing in the entryway.

"About your punishment," he says, smirking. "You have two options."

A thrill rushes through me as I look between them.

"One, you can come back to the couch, and we'll spend the evening hashing this out together, going over every strategy until we're exhausted…whatever you need."

I dip my chin, warmth radiating through my chest at the offer.

"Or two," he continues. "You can walk that sweet ass upstairs and do as you were told earlier." His grin is devious, and Kal's is the same. "Maybe if you do it fast enough, we'll go easy on you."

I wet my lips, my heart racing at the options laid before me. Sure, we need to figure out what Baydel wants, where his true intentions lie, but I'm exhausted from worrying. And since they didn't find anything on Erin, part of me believes she is living her best life, happy, safe, far away from the king's reach…even if it's a betrayal of me, her fucking *sister*.

So, right now? I just want to *be*.

"What's it going to be, Rylee?" Kal asks, blue eyes flickering.

My choice. It's always my choice with them.

I bite down on my smile, holding up two fingers before I bound up the stairs.

25

Rylee

A sharp rush of anticipation hits me as I stop for a second, taking in Axl's loft bedroom. The space is wide and open and airy, with a massive bed pressed against the back wall, royal blue nightstands framing it on either side. There is a cushioned bench at the foot of his bed, and a small shelf of books is tucked in a far corner next to an armchair with blue and gold details. Marks from Jax's blades are easily identifiable in the wood armrests, and beyond that, next to the shelves of books, is a door connecting to a bathing chamber. A plaster half wall completes the room, overlooking the rest of the house below.

I hear slow, heavy footsteps on the stairs behind me, sending a jolt of pure excitement down the center of me.

"Ready or not, here we come," Axl calls, his voice wolfish.

I grab the hem of my top and haul it over my head, making quick work of the cotton pants next. He told me to be naked and sprawled on his bed, but I feel like pushing his limits. So, instead, I lean against the armrest of the chair in the corner.

Axl appears first, Kal right on his heels.

A low growl rumbles from Axl's chest when he finds me leaning against the chair. "Naughty kitten," he says, sucking his teeth and shaking his head.

Heat courses through my veins. My breasts feel full and heavy, desperate to be touched.

Axl slowly peels off his clothes, glancing at Kal, who does the same. Soon, both are bare to me, hard and ready. The sight, not to mention the power mounting in the small loft bedroom, makes my breath catch in my lungs. My core throbs with anticipation the longer they stand there. My body knows exactly what Kal can do to me on his own…but him and Axl together?

Goddess save me.

Axl twirls his finger in the air. "Turn around, kitten," he demands, and my muscles go liquid. I do as I'm told. "Bend over the arm."

I'm trembling as I grab a pillow from the center of the chair, positioning it on the wooden arm before I drape myself over it, unable to see them, my body totally vulnerable in this position. I flash a glance over my shoulder, finding them both looking at me with greedy, hungry expressions.

Axl tilts his head toward Kal. “You want first take?”

Kal’s eyes rake over my body. “You know I like to watch,” he says, and the words send tendrils of heat spiraling through me. He nods toward me, urging Axl to cross the space between us.

Axl lightly drags his fingers down my spine, over my hips, and back up toward the base of my neck. Slow, torturous touches that raise chills along my skin. “You disobeyed me twice,” he says before stepping behind me, folding his body over mine. His powerful chest presses against my back as he brings his lips to the shell of my ear. “Do you think you can handle the consequences?”

A warm shiver has me quivering against him, wiggling my hips to try and feel *any* part of him. I turn my head, eyeing him over my shoulder. “I can handle whatever you two can give,” I say, my voice more confident than I’ve ever heard it before.

What are they doing to me?

Axl reaches up and tangles my hair in his hand, winding it around until the pressure tips my head back. A blast of panic soars through me at the exposed position—one good study, and he’ll see the cloud mark on the back of my neck. The makeup covering it no doubt washed off in the ocean earlier.

I could stop this right now. I know Axl would back off if I told him to. But my body is buzzing, my soul stretching taut, the connection to both the men in the room so solid and strong, I don’t say a fucking word.

If this seals my fate, then so be it.

“Let’s find out,” Axl says, grazing his bearded cheek against mine before drawing back to stand behind me. He keeps his grip on my hair, successfully ensuring I don’t break his hold before he smooths his free hand over the globe of my ass.

Then he smacks it with enough of a sting that a blast of pleasure rocks through me. I sigh, pushing back against him, desperate to feel him between my thighs.

“That’s one, kitten,” he says, then teases my other cheek before smacking it, too.

This one draws a moan from my lips, and I grip the pillow so hard I can hear the fabric scratch beneath my nails.

“Two,” he says, unwinding my hair and letting it fall in messy waves over my back. He shifts behind me, kneeling as he palms my ass. “Look how beautiful her skin marks, Kal,” he says, and I spare a glance to where Kal is intently watching us.

Kal wets his lips, eyes on my skin, which I’m guessing is puckered and red from Axl’s hands. “Almost like she wants our marks on her,” he says, his voice guttural.

I shiver as Axl plants a kiss over the sting, gliding his tongue over each mark before nipping gently at the hurt. I arch against the contrasting sensations, my pulse skittering as he slides his hands over my ass and around my hips.

"Fuck." Axl glides a finger through my heat. "You're drenched, kitten."

"Axl," I beg. *"Please."* I rock against his hand, trying to soothe the throbbing ache.

"Such manners," Kal says from behind us. "That should be rewarded, don't you think, Axl?"

"Absolutely," Axl answers, teasing me with his fingers.

Goddess damn me, the way they speak to each other with such effortless confidence and control has a white-hot knot tightening in my core.

"You want to come, kitten?" Axl asks, working his fingers in tight circles over my swollen flesh.

I nod, breathless.

Kal strides over, shifting me as he sits in the chair, so I'm now facing him at eye level. I brace my hands on either side of the chair, with Axl still behind me. Kal's lips are a mere inch from mine, those blue eyes roaming over every part of my face before flicking to Axl. "Make her come, Axl," he orders. "I want to watch her unravel in your hands."

His words set me on fire, and Axl dips one finger inside me, then two, stroking with a slow, torturous tempo. His free hand roams over my bare back before swinging around to my breasts. He palms one before pinching my nipple at the same time he presses the heel of his palm against that sensitive bundle of nerves, curling those two fingers inside me in a come-hither motion.

"Axl." I breathe his name, my muscles winding tight as I clench around him. I'm looking into Kal's eyes, watching him as he watches Axl fuck me with his hand, and it's the most exhilarating thing I've ever experienced in my life. My skin hums, my head spinning as Axl pushes me toward the edge. I've never been so happy I asked Kal to come with me. The two of them together are… perfection.

I rock back against Axl's hand, gripping the armchair for stability as I feel like I'm about to spin right off this plane. Kal dips his head, sweeping his tongue into my mouth at the same time Axl presses against my center, and the sensations consume me in a way that shoves me right over the edge in a free fall. I moan into Kal's mouth, my orgasm ripping through me in a delicious tear that makes me shake and clench around Axl's fingers.

I can barely catch my breath while Kal kisses me, claiming my mouth in primal strokes. Axl gently pulls out of me, spreading my wetness on my oversensitive flesh before taking a few steps away. I hiss at the loss of contact,

cool air bursting chills over my skin in his absence.

"Stunning," Kal says, drawing his mouth from mine. He holds my chin in one strong hand, devouring me with his eyes. He glances behind me to Axl. "I could watch you make her come every single day."

The implications of that statement make me shudder. Does he mean it? Does he want this forever?

Stop, stop, stop. I will not ruin this hazy, lusty bliss with reality.

"You're about to watch it again," Axl says. "Bring her here."

I'm about to protest, about to say that I can walk, but Kal moves too fast. One second, I'm bent in front of him; the next, I'm in Kal's arms as he crosses the room, stopping at the bench that rests at the foot of Axl's bed.

My heart pounds in my chest as Kal settles me on the bench on my hands and knees, my ass pointed toward Axl, my mouth eye level with Kal's length.

Axl leans over, planting a row of kisses down my back. Sparkling bubbles tingle in my blood at the soft, teasing touch. "You're going to take us both now, kitten," Axl says against my skin, dragging his teeth down and nipping my ass before he rises up behind me. "And you're going to take every last drop we give you. Understand?"

My core throbs in response to his words. I've never been more on board, more ready to dive headfirst into whatever they want. It's exhilarating, being spoken to and taken care of in this way.

"Give me all of it," I answer.

Axl nudges my legs apart with his thigh, wasting no time at all to sink fully inside me. I moan from the force of it, shivering around him as he glides in with ease.

"Fuck," he groans. "Kal, this needy girl fits me so well."

"I know," Kal answers before glancing down at me. "Open your mouth, love."

I do as I'm told, trembling as Kal tangles his fingers in my hair and guides his shaft into my mouth.

Goddess, they both fill me so completely, I can hardly breathe around the sensation. Kal works himself in and out of my mouth, making my eyes water. The position I'm in doesn't allow for much leverage or movement. I'm entirely at the mercy of these two powerful men, and my body *hums* at the submission.

"Her mouth," Kal says, his fingers tightening in my hair.

Axl grips my hips, slamming into me from behind, each stroke winding me into tight knots of heat. "Next time," he says. "But right now, I want you right where I have you. I'm going to mark you again and again."

I moan around Kal, my orgasm building.

"Fuck." Kal growls at the sensation, so I do it again, relishing the way he

shudders. My jaw is straining, and the pain only adds to the pleasure.

Axl increases his speed, as if Kal's loss of control spurs him on, until they've both found a rhythm that leaves me breathless. And then Axl reaches around and touches my most sensitive spot before a small burst of water swirls around the swollen area with the perfect amount of pressure. The sensation is such a shock, it ignites a spark inside me that *shatters*. I clench hard around Axl, his thrusts drawing out my orgasm so much, I whimper around Kal.

"I'm coming," Kal says, shifting away, but I grab his thigh and pull him deeper. He groans before he spills himself into my mouth, and I swallow every drop of him down just as I was told.

"*Fuck.*" Axl ups the pace of his water swirling against my sensitive flesh while pounding into me from behind. "That was hot to watch."

The relentless pressure is winding me up all over again. My body is a mess of tingles and sparks as I come, this time with an almost sharp brilliance that makes me gasp for breath as Kal slides out of my mouth.

Axl pistons his hips, following my release with his own. The water vanishes as he slows his thrusts, working us down from the high, all while Kal watches with a hazed sort of satisfaction.

"You're such a good fucking girl," Kal says, gently gripping my chin. His praise sends warmth rippling all over my delicate nerves.

Axl pulls out of me, and before I can stand I'm in Kal's arms, being swept toward the bed. Axl disappears for a moment and reappears with a warm cloth to clean me up, then himself, then Kal.

Watching him take care of all of us has my heart in my throat and my head in the clouds. My body is entirely spent, exhaustion settling in my muscles so much, I'm not sure I can move. But seeing him do that… It makes me want them all over again.

How is that possible?

Axl deposits the cloth in the bathing chamber, returning to the bed just after Kal has made sure I drink some water. I lie against Kal's chest, and Axl snuggles close behind me, enveloping me in the most amazing, powerful embrace I've ever experienced.

"If that's my punishment for being bad," I say, my voice full of a sleepy sort of lust, "you're not giving me much incentive to behave."

Axl's laugh rumbles against my back, sending warm shivers dancing over my skin. "I'll have to go harder on you next time."

I bite back a smile, glancing over my shoulder. "Promise?"

His golden eyes blaze with amusement. "Brave little kitten," he says.

Kal runs his fingers through my hair, the touch so caring, so relaxing, my eyes

grow heavy. “Rest up, love,” he whispers. “You’ll need it for the morning.”

Awareness cascades through my body, but it’s not enough to haul me from the deep state of relaxation they’ve put me in, and I fall asleep with their scents and the sounds of their breathing ensuring no nightmares come to haunt me.

26

Axl

“Throw that up here, will you?” I call down to Pierce, who walks barefoot on the beach, his suit pants rolled up over his ankles and his jacket tossed over his shoulder as he approaches my ship.

He rolls his eyes but hefts the wooden crate sunk in the sand and hands it to me. He could easily use his powers to lob the thing at me, but I’m grateful he doesn’t. I grab the box and pass it to Kal, who is already on board and helping me stock the vessel for next week’s mandatory kings’ dinner.

Jax follows behind Pierce, grabbing another crate off the beach and hauling it with him as he boards.

“Four cases of sparkling wine seem a bit much, yes?” Pierce asks as he stops before me.

“Not when the kings have invited a slew of nobles to this dinner.”

Pierce arches a dark brow. “Don’t they usually like to keep the focus on themselves at these things?”

“Yep,” I say, almost growling as I move the cases he and Jax brought up to the other side of the ship. I don’t mean to be short, but my nerves are shot, which is really fucking up the amazing three weeks I’ve had with Rylee.

Fuck, even thinking about her has my body tensing with need. I’ve fucked her senseless countless times, and I still want her. I wake up craving the taste of her on my tongue and go to bed with her scent drenching my skin.

It’s not enough.

And when we aren’t fucking? We’re *talking*. And not the kind of conversations that past potentials have had with me. Rylee doesn’t speak in a scripted format handed down from parents or the kings or the mass nobility who *live* for the sole purpose of attending the Choosing events and scrutinizing every single detail—as if they can crack the code on what it takes to be the perfect mate, to be the one that finally becomes queen.

Rylee speaks from her heart, even when her mouth threatens to get her in trouble.

Like when she says things about the kings—Baydel specifically—that would get her thrown in the palace dungeons if she wasn’t under our protection. At least she’s never said anything like that in front of the Occuli, but damn, the

woman is fearless. I'm worried it's only a matter of time before she crosses a line she can't come back from.

But it's not like I disagree with her disdain. Baydel is one of the worst people I've ever met, and seeing as my own father is a piece of work, that's saying something. I know better than to say so aloud, though. Better to keep your cards close to the chest than air out your intentions for everyone to hear. Something I've been trying to teach Rylee these past weeks, and she listens—I know she does—but she still keeps herself guarded in some areas.

We've grown close. Closer than I've ever been with a potential. We laugh and talk until we're exhausted. And I know she feels safe with me—that much was proven when she told Kal it was fine if he needed to return to the Ruby Aire not three days after he'd come here with her. It meant everything to me.

But Jax is right—there's something she's keeping from me, from us. I can sense it in the same way I can sense whenever she's close—some connection I can't quite explain. I don't know if it's my power locking on to her signature in a way it's never done before, or if it means she's really the match we've all been waiting for. Either way, I can't stand the thought of Baydel being anywhere near her for the dinner, but I'm powerless to stop it.

I just hope the asshole doesn't concoct another public execution to scare her into submission.

I finish stocking the kitchen, prepping it so it'll be easy when the servers arrive next week to facilitate the party, and head back to the deck, where the guys are waiting for me.

"You find anything new?" I ask Jax, who is sitting on one of the benches lining the ship's starboard side, one ankle crossed over his knee.

He nods, and I take a seat next to him, Kal and Pierce following suit. "Rylee's records were tampered with," he says.

Shock blazes through me. "What the fuck do you mean, *tampered with*?"

"Exactly what I said." His voice is as cold and sharp as the blades he likes to play with. Something is bothering him, but I know better than to ask what.

"Did you find the source?" Pierce asks.

Jax shakes his head. "My source could only tell that the records had been altered. He couldn't see what exactly had been changed, only that the scroll had been replaced."

"Fuck. Baydel?"

Jax shrugs.

Kal leans forward, elbows on his knees. "You think it's like we suspected?" he asks. "That he made up the Never List information about Rylee's sister to have some kind of hold on her?"

“Or,” Pierce offers before any of us can respond, “did he merely erase the specifics of her sister’s mission so none of us would find out?”

Either could be true, but the reasoning behind his actions is more disturbing. I’m leaning more toward Baydel wanting her under his thumb, either so she gets spooked and doesn’t choose us in the end, or she’s *forced* to choose us in the end.

I wouldn’t put it past him, but there has never been any proof of it in the past Choosings. Those potentials were either terrified of us on their own or hated us, which had not bothered me because I never grew attached in the way I have with Rylee. Sure, most of them were nice enough, but they didn’t understand me. Not in the way she does.

If Rylee rejects us in the end… Fuck, I don’t know if I’ll survive it.

I shove the thought down, burying it beneath the ocean where it fucking belongs.

“Maybe it’s neither,” Jax says, his eyes distant as he stares at a spot on the deck as if he’s seeing something else entirely. “Our potential is a little liar. I’ve told you all that.”

Cold dread sluices through my veins. If I didn’t know Jax better, I’d say he was manipulating my emotions to fuck with me, but we have a pact to never use our powers on one another unless in a life-or-death situation.

No, the fear tumbling through me has everything to do with the instincts I haven’t been able to ignore the closer I’ve grown to Rylee. She’s definitely hiding something, but who is to say it’s anything damning?

I flash a silent glance to Kal, and he dips his head slightly. He feels it, too. He’s just as linked to Rylee as I am, and we’ve all three shared more than a few intimate experiences these past weeks. If anyone can understand the concern I have for her well-being, it’s him. But he also knows we can’t push her without running the risk of her deciding we’re too overbearing and leaving us high and dry at the end of all this.

“Have you figured out what specifically she’s lying about?” Pierce asks, his eyes sharpening on Jax. They’re as close as Kal and I are. Sure, we’re all closer than blood, but he gravitates to Jax the way I do to Kal. They even have the same silent communication we do. Not that Pierce needs it. If he wanted, he could slip into each of our minds and make our thoughts his own.

“Have *you*?” Jax fires back.

Pierce cocks an eyebrow at him. “I’ve told you before. Her mind is guarded.” The intrigued look churning in his brown eyes says that fact excites him more than it troubles him. And why wouldn’t it? With his power, he can dip into anyone’s thoughts as easily as breathing. Rylee offering him a challenge for once

must be…exhilarating. “More than anyone I’ve come across before, save for the kings and you lot.” He narrows his eyes at Jax, that penetrating gaze of his falling over Jax’s features. “Have you even tried to speak more than ten words to her to sort truth from lie?”

Jax sends him a warning glare. “Stay out of my head.”

Pierce laughs. “Your head is the last place I want to be,” he says, feigning a shudder. “Cold in there.”

Jax cracks a sharp grin. “What do you think next week is all about?” he asks, waving to my ship. “Inviting the nobles to an exclusive dinner? To test Rylee again?”

The way he says her name gives me pause—there is a sense of familiarity there he can’t possibly have, since he hasn’t spent more than an hour or two with her at a time. And the sense of devastation that accompanies it makes me swallow a bit harder. I’ve never seen Jax so tangled up before, and most certainly not over a potential. We’ve practically had to carry him to all the events in the past Choosings, puppeteering him in the way only we can in the hopes of finding a match.

We *need* a mate. A partner in the plans we have for the future. A confidant who will not only love us for who we are but be capable of handling us at our most powerful.

But Rylee… It’s not just a means to an end with her, and that scares the shit out of me. Jax can say he’s staying away from her because she’s lying all he wants, but I can see it. There is something different in him. Could he be feeling what we all are? An undeniable connection none of us can explain?

“I wouldn’t put it past the kings to switch things up,” Kal says. “In the past, they’ve stuck to the rules the goddesses laid out in the beginning, but now?” He sighs. “There’s something more going on. You can sense it whenever they’re all together.”

“Plus, the mention of the threat overseas,” Pierce adds. “And the recent attacks from the Faders.”

My hackles rise at the mention. The Faders have remained quiet over the last month and a half, but their lack of action almost makes me more nervous than when they’re outwardly trying to irk us. It’s not like we haven’t had groups challenge us before. We have, plenty of times. But we Legends always put them in their place.

Our ruthless ability to stop outright war against our people in its tracks has been the one thing keeping peace between the Lumathyst cities. But the Faders…they’re different than anything we’ve come across. Too elusive with their endgame, too familiar with the ins and outs of Lumathyst. They know

exactly where to disappear, know exactly where to strike when we're too far away to stop them. It's fucking unnerving.

I rub my palms over my face, tipping my head back and letting the hot sun wash over me.

"The kings don't care about the Faders," I grumble. "They think they're nothing more than misguided youths making a name for themselves."

I don't believe it for a second. They're too organized to be young people playing at being bad, especially when we've been clear with anyone who threatens our innocent citizens before.

We Legends operate on a strict *two strike* basis.

You get one fuckup and one chance to redeem yourself. If you don't? We make sure you never fuck up again, and we do it in a way that sends a message to anyone else even thinking about messing with the people we're charged to protect. Do we have to get our hands dirty sometimes to ensure that protection? Sure, but that doesn't make us the bad guys.

Not all bad, anyway.

"That may be true," Pierce says. "But they're the first organization to evade us. It's troublesome."

I roll my eyes, folding my arms over my chest. "It's annoying as fuck."

Jax raises a hand toward Pierce, eyes narrowed. "Don't call them an organization. Don't give them the credit."

Pierce crosses one leg over the other, his arms stretching over the rails of the ship as he gazes toward the horizon. "I'm incapable of calling anything other than what I see. Discrediting them won't weaken their attempts to break the laws in any of our territories."

Jax leans down, pinching the bridge of his nose. "Why do you always have to be so goddess-damn serious?" His tone is as playful as Jax ever gets, which makes the rest of us laugh.

"I apologize," Pierce says. "It's in my nature, just as yours is to brood, mope, and cut into things."

"I don't mope," Jax fires back.

"I'd say you mope quite a bit." Rylee's voice sounds from the stairs of the ship. We all turn in sync to watch her as she clears them and boards. There's a small wooden crate tucked beneath her arm, no doubt the last from the batch on the beach.

Her feet are bare. White grains of sand cling to her toes, which are painted ruby red, no doubt putting the smile on Kal's face right now. She wears neutral colors today. White linen pants hang low at her waist, and a cream-colored sleeveless top clings to her breasts so tightly, I can see the moment her nipples

peak.

I'm self-centered enough to believe that *that* happened to her at the sight of me.

I cast a sideways glance at Jax, each of us silently awaiting his retort. There's a brightness in his purple eyes that wasn't there moments before, and the tense set of his shoulders loosens at the sight of Rylee.

So, he does have feelings for our potential mate, no matter how hard he tries to dismiss them.

"You barely know me, butterfly," he says, the sharp edge of his voice smoothing out into a low tone that has Rylee's throat bobbing.

She sets down the crate and strides toward Jax as if the rest of us don't even exist. Leaning down to meet his eyes, she arches a brow, her stunning blue eyes as sharp as a hawk's.

"I may have secrets," she says, outright challenging him with her defiant look, "much to your horror. But I know you dance like smoke on glass," she says. Jax flinches. "I know you like dark fairy tales as much as I do." She boldly reaches for him, sliding her hand beneath his jacket and retrieving a knife from one of his many holsters.

Holy shit, I've never seen him allow *anyone* to touch his blades before.

Kal shifts in her direction like he's prepared to put himself between her and whatever retaliation Jax will have for her crossing a line he's drawn with everyone in existence. I'm right there with him, the water in my blood rising from the ocean behind us, ready to create a wall if need be.

"I know this is your favorite toy," she continues, not realizing the momentous error she's made. Jax's blades are like his babies—he covets them the way I do the sea or Kal does the sky or Pierce does knowledge.

She twirls the blade in her hand, studying the obsidian laid into the black walnut hilt. I hold my breath, anxious with the way she handles it, worrying she'll slice off her finger.

As she flips it end over end, Jax watches her movements intently, holding us all on a tightrope while we wait for him to react. Rylee catches the hilt perfectly each time while Kal, Pierce, and myself hiss in response, waiting for the inevitable slipup and cry of pain, the spilling of our potential mate's blood all over the deck of my ship.

But she doesn't wail, doesn't miss a gentle toss until she finally stops, nothing but a wicked smile on her face that has me wanting to fall to my knees and worship her.

She effortlessly slides the blade back in Jax's holster. "I can see the draw," she says, giving Jax a sexy little shrug that reminds me of a lioness toying with her

prey. “So, tell me, Jax. Was I lying about knowing you?”

Jax eyes are searing as he looks from her to the knife she returned and back again. “Clever butterfly,” he says, low and icy as he leans forward. “I would’ve had to tear off your wings if you hadn’t returned my favorite blade.”

Rylee doesn’t balk at his words. In fact, a tremor visibly racks her body as she wets her lips. “That’s right. I almost forgot,” she says. “You’re the big bad Nightmare,” she whispers.

Fuck me, this woman likes to dance with death. Why does it turn me on so much, watching her take him to task? Maybe because I’ve never seen it before. Not once in my *entire* life. The only person who has ever had the balls to do so is Baydel, and that’s a whole different vibe.

Rylee leans closer, her lips a few inches from his. Pierce and Kal are watching with as much rapt attention as me. I can’t tell if she’s going to kiss him or bite him to draw blood, but either way, I’m so fucking here for it.

“You know who isn’t afraid of nightmares?” she asks, boldly placing her hands on his thighs to brace herself.

Jax glances at the touch, then focuses on her face, not bothering to move. I’ve seen him nudge plenty of girls off him before—mainly the countless ones in his club that are dying for a taste of his danger—but here, with Rylee? He doesn’t even seem aware that the rest of us are watching this scene play out.

“Who’s that, butterfly?” he asks, tilting his head in that lethal, predatory way he does.

Rylee leans in close, inhaling deeply like she’s trying to memorize his scent. Jax visibly swallows, watching her lips with a hunger I can feel in my soul. “People who don’t dream,” she finally says.

Jax aims that wide, maddening smile of his at her. The one that usually sends people running in the opposite direction, but not Rylee. She holds his stare, her blue eyes brightening as she studies his lips.

And then Jax laughs—not his threatening, sardonic laugh—his real, raw, unsuspecting laugh. He reaches up and tugs on a loose strand of her long blond hair. “Like I said.” He releases her hair. “Clever little butterfly.”

Rylee studies that smile for a few more moments before she pushes off his thighs, taking a few calculated steps away from him. She glances at me and flashes me a mischievous wink.

A laugh rips from my chest. Kal and Pierce join in, but Jax goes quiet, blinking a few times as if he’s just remembered they aren’t alone. Something passes between them, something I can’t read. But after a few heartbeats, they both relax as if they’ve come to some sort of agreement. It’s the first time I’ve seen them look at each other like they don’t want to rip the other’s throat out.

“Seems I’m not the only one who likes to play mind games,” Pierce says, dipping his head to Rylee in compliment.

She grins at him and does a little curtsy. “I’m excited to play with you,” she says, then cringes at the way it sounded, which has us all laughing again.

I reach for her wrist, gently hauling her into my lap. She falls against me with a little pleasant squeal as I wrap my arms around her, tucking my head over her shoulder. “Your month with me isn’t over yet,” I say, nipping at her neck.

Pierce stands up, sliding his hands into the pockets of his suit pants as he looks down at the two of us. “Be glad of it, Axl.” He reaches for her hand to plant his signature kiss on the back of it. “Because once I hold her, I may never let her go.” He grins seductively at Rylee, and my kitten *shivers*.

“Get off my ship,” I say playfully. “Before you steal my girl’s attention and I throw you in the sea.”

Rylee laughs, shaking her head at me. “Haven’t I proven I can share?”

Kal barks out a half cough, half laugh, following Pierce across the boat.

“You can,” I say. “But that doesn’t mean I want to all the time.”

She goes liquid in my grasp, soft and pliable in a way that has me growing hard within seconds. What is this woman doing to my control?

“We’ll see you in a week,” Pierce says before climbing down the stairs of my ship and onto the beach.

Kal smiles at Rylee before following him, leaving just us and Jax, who is staring out past the bow of the ship, contemplative.

“We still need to figure it all out,” Jax says, never once looking our way.

“I know,” I say, sighing.

“Figure what out?” Rylee asks, going a bit rigid against me.

Jax rises, crossing the ship and pausing before the stairs. “Everything, little liar. Every. Single. Thing.”

He’s gone in a matter of breaths, leaving Rylee with a confused and slightly fearful expression. She turns in my lap, shifting a leg so she can fully face me. “What did he mean, Axl?”

I smooth back her blond hair, staring into her concerned eyes, trying to break through the few walls she has left between us. Leaning in closer, I brush my mouth over hers, working her lips in a lazy sort of way until she relaxes against me again.

“I’ll tell you about it,” I say, and she leans her cheek against my hand. “But first, there is somewhere I want to take you tonight.”

She looks at me with a slow, easy smile. “Another date?”

I return her grin. “Can we have too many?”

Something serious flashes over her eyes, her features settling into a look I

can’t quite place—almost like she’s regretting something.

“No,” she hurries to say. “Never.”

I kiss her again, taking my time to trace the lines of her mouth. I gently smack her ass—not enough to mark her, just enough to make her squeal again—and lift us, gently setting her on her feet before I head to adjust the sails on the ship.

She follows me, curiosity making her eyes bright. “Where are we going?”

My heart expands in my chest as I finish with the sails. “You’ll see.”

27

Axl

“Axl.” Rylee gasps my name as I dock the ship. “I…I’ve never…”

After we disembark, I interlace our fingers, guiding her along the shoreline toward a bank of pristine marble steps that rest on a plateau ahead.

“I’ve never brought anyone here,” I say when she can’t finish her sentence. “It’s open to the public, of course.” I motion to the few people who climb the stairs and enter the wide-open building held up by smooth stone pillars evenly spaced around the entire rectangular structure. “But I’ve never brought a potential here.”

Rylee’s blue eyes glisten beneath the torches that flicker from sconces lining the building. The sun has fully set behind the horizon, leaving the sky an inky shade of black with the moon high enough to coat everything in silver.

We clear the stairs and walk between the pillars that are so tall and wide, they seem to touch the sky. I guide her across the sleek marble floors, the salty air crisp and warm in a way that shouldn’t be possible with an open-air structure.

The few of my people visiting dip their heads low and casually leave us alone, heading down the steps and out of the building with ease.

“She’s magnificent,” Rylee says, swallowing hard as she tips her head back to fully survey the structure before her.

The giant statue is made of nonporous stone. It’s a smooth, polished sapphire color with veins of the richest, deepest greens. A woman stands in a tall, proud position. One hand holds the folds of a long gown that has movement even among the stone, and the other hand is outstretched toward the high ceiling. The strands of her hair flow all around her heart-shaped face like she’s submerged in water, and a necklace of leaves hugs her bare neck.

A low power radiates from the statue, one that’s the same as mine—all earth and water and tangible connections to the world around us. It dances with mine, the soft humming like a lullaby I can’t quite remember. The old familiar longing pricks my chest, and I take a deep breath to soothe it as I look up at where my mother sleeps. Instinct beckons me to give a drop of my power, but I’ve given this year’s offering already.

“I come here when I feel lost,” I explain, cracking myself wide open for Rylee. We only have a week left, and I’ve made my decision. I want her in a way I’ve

never wanted anyone before. It goes beyond the fundamental need for it… I *love* this woman, even though it's way too early to say as much.

"Are you feeling lost now?" she asks gently, tearing her eyes from my mother's likeness to me.

"I actually feel a lot clearer than I have in months. This place is sacred to me, special in a way I can't put words to, and I wanted you to be a part of it."

She opens her lips a few times but fails to respond.

I grin down at her, holding up our intertwined fingers to my mother's statue. "Mom," I say, my voice raw. "This is Rylee Gray." Rylee's eyes go wide, her smile bright. I continue, "She means a lot to me, and I wanted you to meet her."

Rylee scrambles for a second but quickly bows deep at the waist. "It's wonderful to meet you, Goddess Tareena."

"Please." I urge her to stand up. "Call her Tareena. She wouldn't mind." The few recollections I have of my mother play across my memory—a caring, untamable woman who loved to play games. A fearless woman who taught me about nature and power and how to work with it instead of trying to control it. I remember her being a constant warmth and source of unconditional love before she was ripped from my life.

Rylee shakes her head, leaning into me when I release her hand and wrap an arm around her shoulders instead.

"Can you feel her?" I ask, looking down at Rylee.

She closes her eyes. "Yes."

Anticipation tightens my chest. I've seen my people here before. I've spoken to many on separate occasions, and there are few who can sense the power like I can. I'm not testing Rylee, but I'm not wasting this moment, either. Maybe here, she'll open up to me more.

"Describe it to me," I gently push, my voice softening.

Rylee keeps her eyes closed, her brow furrowed slightly. "She's warm," she says, taking a deep breath before smiling wide. "And…mischievous." Rylee opens her eyes, nudging her body against mine. "She feels like you. All games and constant movement, like the ocean you love so much."

Emotion clogs my throat, my senses soaring with her accurate description. Another piece of the puzzle—Rylee is something different than the norm. What, exactly? I'm not sure, but I'm dying to find out.

"You're fucking amazing, you know that?" I ask.

"You just cursed in front of your mother," she whispers, like Mom can really hear me.

Another sting pricks my chest as I look up at her statue. "I don't think she can hear me."

“Why not?” Rylee asks.

“My father told me she made the choice to go into stasis after the war with the demis and when Erithmore became a greater threat,” I explain, waving my hand to the statue she supposedly created around herself. Rylee tenses beneath my arm, but I give her a comforting touch to assure her that I’m okay to talk about this. “He told me she’d awaken and return to us when she felt the world was at peace.” I swallow around the rock in my throat. “But that can’t be true, can it? Just a bedtime story to appease me when I was young and grieving.” I turn to Rylee like she’ll have all the answers. “If my mother was really sleeping in there, wouldn’t she hear me? Wouldn’t she have felt the peace Lumathyst has held for the last few decades? Wouldn’t she…come back?”

Rylee blinks up at me, sympathy ringing from her features. She splays a hand over the center of my chest before glancing back up at my mother’s statue. “Maybe she isn’t ready yet,” she says softly. “Maybe she’s waiting for her son to be on one of the four thrones before she awakens.”

Hope splinters the tension gripping my heart. “You really believe that?”

“Why not?” she asks. “Anything is possible.”

There is something in her tone with the last statement that makes a whole new wave of doubt crash over me…something that makes her sound more like she’s trying to convince herself than me.

I shift my arm from her shoulders, reaching into my pocket to withdraw a long wooden box made from driftwood before handing it to her.

She cracks it open, smiling as she trails her fingers over the bracelet I placed inside. I hold it up before her. “This band is made of the strongest platinum Lumathyst has to offer,” I say, sliding my finger over the silver waves that comprise the bracelet. “And these sapphires represent not only my city but the ocean that holds my heart.”

Rylee presses her lips together.

“I had this made for you,” I explain. “It won’t break or shatter. I knew from the moment you dove into the ocean with me that you needed something that would withstand your adventurous side, because once you put it on, Rylee, I don’t want you to take it off.”

I eye Kal’s ruby ring on her right hand, pride swelling in my heart that she’s worn his token since the day he gave it to her.

“This means I’m choosing you, kitten,” I say, holding it before her. “It means that no matter what happens…” I take a breath, hesitating. “No matter what secrets come to light, I’m with you.” Her bottom lip trembles slightly, but I press on. “Kal might’ve told you to wear that ring without making anything official, but I’m not him. You put this on, it marks you as *mine*. I don’t take that lightly,

and neither should you." I grimace. "I know I'm a handful. Know I'm a cocky bastard who likes to push the limits, not to mention the weight of obligation that comes with being a Legend. If that's too much, then—"

"It's not," she cuts over me, reaching for the bracelet. "You're not." She slides it onto her right wrist, her eyes shuddering like she's just stepped off the edge of a cliff with no bottom in sight. "I love it," she says, eyeing the bracelet with silver lining her eyes.

The sight of my token secure around her wrist has a low growl rumbling from my chest, instincts roaring at me while she wears my mark.

One second. That's all it takes for me to scoop her up and throw her over my shoulder, hurrying out of the building and down the stairs, her laughter chasing me all the way to the beach.

"What are you doing?" she asks through her laughter, not once trying to fight me as I carry her back to the ship.

"What I want to do to you can't be done in front of my mother," I grumble, hauling us up the stairs of my ship.

I lay her out on the nearest available surface, not wasting one second to descend to the primary room below deck. The small table on the deck, fully open to the elements, will do.

"Axl," she says as I practically rip her pants off and toss them over my shoulder.

Goddess help me, she's not wearing any underwear.

"Look at you," I say, gliding my fingers through her heat. "All pink and glistening for me." I shift to my knees, dragging her ass to the edge of the table before I set my mouth on her. "Mine."

Fuck, she tastes like caramel and salt and everything good in this fucking world. I drag my tongue through her without preamble, relishing the light scrape of her nails on my scalp as she tangles her fingers in my hair.

I look up at her from between her legs, gripping her delicious thighs as I lap and suck and thrust my tongue inside her. "I need you, kitten," I say, my words guttural in a way I almost don't recognize.

Fire courses through my veins, all my instincts narrowing to one base truth—Rylee is *mine*. My mate in every way that matters.

Rylee looks down her body, her eyes glazed with lust and need.

"You understand?" I spear my tongue into her heat. She arches against my mouth, chasing her pleasure without a hint of shame. "You put that on," I say, eyeing the bracelet. "And I need you more than I've ever needed you before. Need you to understand…" I flick my tongue over her swollen flesh, and she moans.

“I understand,” she says, her breaths ragged as she rocks against me. “Axl, I… I…” Her words get lost as I suck her clit into my mouth. “Axl!” Her flavor bursts against my tongue as she comes. I lick her down quickly, rising to my feet and dropping my pants to my ankles.

There’s no time to remove my boots. No time to undress completely. I need her right fucking now.

“I understand,” she says again as I seat myself at her entrance. She reaches up, cupping my cheeks and dragging her lips over mine in the barest of kisses. “Take what you need from me,” she says.

I go still against her.

“I can handle it. I can handle you.”

Her words are my undoing.

I glide into her wetness, sinking to the hilt only to pull out and do it all over again. She locks her ankles behind me, clinging to me as I pound into her hard and fast.

Mine, mine, mine.

My soul shouts the chant as I pump into her, every connection igniting a fire that consumes me. She’s the flame, the conduit to everything I’ve ever wanted. A partner who understands me, a match that challenges me, a true pairing I never thought possible.

I snake my arm underneath her ass, hefting her so I can fuck her at a deeper angle. I want to claim every single piece of her, even those parts she keeps buried and hidden. I want all of her. No matter what. And I try to convey that with our bodies clashing together in the most perfect way.

This time is different than all the others.

This time, she’s admitted she’s mine, and there is no going back.

“Axl,” she groans, her nails digging into the muscles of my back as I drive into her over and over again.

She flutters around me, and I grin down at her. “Already?”

She nods, barely coherent as I continue to hold her ass up, sinking into her until I bottom out, devouring the way her eyes roll back in her head with every stroke.

“Fuck, kitten.” My orgasm is rising to the cusp. “See what you do to me?” I pound into her for emphasis. I groan, trying to hold out as long as I can, but she feels so fucking good, so fucking *mine*. “Come on,” I say, using my free hand to push on one of her knees, shifting the angle enough that I can see where we connect. “You need to drench me. *Now*.”

I roll my hips, ensuring I brush against her sensitive spot just as I bottom out in her again—

“Axl!” She cries my name, her heat clamping down around me, pulsing with her orgasm and drawing mine right along with her. “Axl,” she says over and over again, catching her breath as I slow my thrusts, spilling inside her so deep and hot I know I’ve claimed her forever.

I shift and hold her against me, realizing she’s it for me.

But she still has to choose me…choose us *all* in the end.

Terror streaks through me. She may wear my bracelet, wear my mark, but that doesn’t mean she’ll say yes to us all when it matters most.

And I hate that I won’t know until the end.

28

Rylee

Moonlight sparkles along the ocean as Axl's ship cuts through the waves with ease.

We set sail three hours ago, the ship navigating around the edge of the Sapphire Cove while Pierce, Axl, Kal, Jax, and I ate and mingled with the kings. There are a few servers on board, Mirren included—though she hasn't shown herself much since dinner. A few kings' enforcers and nobility round out the ship's company, as well as the elite enforcers following the kings around like loyal puppies.

Angry loyal puppies.

I've been studying enforcers my entire life, and the elites are definitely a different breed. The four bodyguard assassins move like a unit, almost as tight-knit as the Legends, but with less grace. They're all hard edges, their muscled bodies accented by the elite uniforms they wear—black leathers, gold vests, and diamond-encrusted masks that make seeing their eyes impossible. Every time they're around, I try my best to get a peek beneath the mask, if only to be able to identify them beyond the number emblazoned on the upper right shoulder of their uniforms, but I've never been successful.

Probably a good thing. I'm sure they're all bastards—cold-hearted and entitled and predatory, just like Turner.

Icy fear tumbles in my stomach at the thought of him, and it takes all the willpower I have not to smooth a hand over the now-healed but still skin-deep bruises I have from him. He's been a ghost haunting my thoughts for weeks, drenching me with terror that he'll finally find his way to one of the royal cities and expose who I really am. The only semblance of peace I get from the thoughts is when I assure myself over and over again that there are *thousands* of enforcers employed across the kingdom, and the odds of him being granted an audience with the kings are slim.

I lean against the railing, sipping on sparkling wine and counting the seconds until I can be free of the kings' gazes. Surprisingly, Baydel has kept his distance, and there isn't an execution or test in sight. Maybe he has something else in mind, some grander display to catch me off guard, but he's barely spoken a word to me.

I can’t decide which is worse: him giving me veiled threats about my sister, or him being silent and indifferent.

Sighing, I smooth down the folds of my silk gown. I chose emerald green tonight, much to Pierce’s delight. I’ll be traveling to his city tomorrow, and now that I’ve been doing this whole *potential mate* thing for a couple of months, I’m feeling more confident. I don’t feel the need to ask Kal or Axl to come with me this time.

Sure, I’m nervous about getting to know Pierce on a deeper level, but I’ve spent a good amount of time with him during my stays in the Ruby Aire and the Sapphire Cove. Mostly, I know I’ll miss Axl, just like I’ve missed Kal. Though, luckily, Kal has visited many, *many* times.

Heat flutters beneath my skin at the memories, and I can’t help but long for the days when the Choosing business is done and I can just be with them all at the same time whenever I want…

Wait.

Since when did I start seeing a future with them? A real future with a true partnership between the five of us? I look down at the ruby ring and sapphire bracelet on my right hand, the tokens a searing bond of connection that zaps up the center of me, spinning visions of a happily ever after.

I hold back a laugh.

Happily ever afters aren’t destined for people like me.

Liars.

The thought has me automatically searching the ship for Jax, my heart dipping. Kal and Axl are fond of me for who I am…they just don’t have all the specifics. Maybe they’ll overlook the details I’ve kept from them. Maybe they’ll hate me regardless. Jax is certainly halfway there, though we did have a moment last week on this very ship, which gives me the slimmest glimmer of hope.

“Have I told you how absolutely ravishing you look tonight?” Pierce’s voice is warm and fluid, sending delightful shivers over my skin.

I can’t hide my smile as he settles beside me against the railing, his own emerald suit fitting him like a glove. There isn’t a piece of fabric out of place, not a sharp line hidden. He looks regal, the most princely of the Legends, and has this sophisticated air that naturally radiates from him, likely due to his incredible gifts.

“You have,” I say, turning to face him. “Thank you.”

Pierce leans a little closer, lowering his voice between us. “I’m sure the entire kingdom won’t be able to take their eyes off you, either. Just think of the illustration that will be in the royal post tomorrow.”

My eyes flicker toward the half dozen Occuli across the ship. They stick out

among the nobility mingling and sipping sparkling wine, their unblinking eyes and green flames ensuring they're given a wide berth among the company. Oddly, I've gotten used to their presence. So much so that I'm careful in my words and actions when they're around and relish the times they're not. Luckily, they've never crossed lines and tested me with their magic again like they did in the Ruby Aire. Whatever Kal said to them obviously worked.

"You handle yourself like royalty around them," he continues, nodding toward the Occuli. "It's a massive adjustment, having everything you do in public observed and reported on, but you've adapted so quickly."

I huff a laugh. "I couldn't let a little thing like being stalked deter me from you Legends," I tease.

Half true. I also couldn't let the Occuli or the kings or anything stop me from trying my best to survive and uncover answers about my sister.

Pierce furrows his brow, the sexiest little wrinkle forming there. "Of course not. And you're the first potential to stick around as long as you have," he says, eyeing the tokens from his friends on my right hand and wrist.

I swallow hard, unable to soothe the slight worry prickling in my stomach. He's right, and I can't help but wonder what will await me from here. As no one else has made it this far, there's no history for me to read and know what to expect.

The kings have already tested me twice—first with Baydel's attempt to claim me, then with my reaction to the execution. What will come next? What will they attempt in an effort to see if I'm a worthy mate for their sons? A worthy future queen of Lumathyst?

He keeps his voice low. "Are you wondering why Baydel and the other kings have been so quiet tonight?"

I straighten, apprehension blooming in my chest. "Reading my mind, Pierce?"

He wets his lips. "Only if you ask nicely, darling," he says, his voice liquid and velvety. A promise of what's to come.

I smile up at him. "Truly?" I ask, though we've spoken on it before. "You're not rummaging around through my head?"

He draws closer to me. Goddess, he smells like amber and violets, intoxicating and riveting at the same time. "I told you before," he says, brown eyes scanning my face. "I actively try to stay out of the minds of those closest to me, but from the first moment I met you, you've been an enigma."

I swallow hard.

"You're different," he continues. "And while I'm dying to find out exactly why, I won't force myself where I'm not welcome."

"How very gentlemanly of you," I tease, relief unraveling some of the tension

in my shoulders.

"You didn't answer my question," he says casually.

I sigh, pressing my lips together. "Would you think me a coward if I admitted I'm worried about what the kings will test me with next?"

"Never," he says, shaking his head. "Like I said, you're the first to stay this long, to attempt to know us as well as you have." He glances across the boat, where Axl and Kal are speaking with a handful of nobles, before returning his focus to me. "You're strong," he says. "Courageous and bold. Worrying about the unknown is the most natural thing any of us can do."

I nod, taking comfort in his words. "Do you know what's to come?" I hedge.

He smiles. "I can't see into the future, darling," he answers. "And I'm not privy to the kings' plans, either. We're all in uncharted territory now."

"If you did know," I say, tilting my head, "would you warn me?"

Pierce studies me. "That's a complicated question."

I study him a bit harder. "I believe Kal and Axl would," I say, nodding toward them. "If they overheard their fathers discussing an upcoming test set up for me…I think they'd give me a warning."

Pierce shifts his weight, the motion smooth as he looks down at me. "The purpose of a test is to get a genuine reaction," he explains, ever the Mind with his logical sense. "If we warn you, how are we to know if you'll react from the heart, from your most basic instincts, or if you'll choose to react in a way that would be pleasing to us?"

Sadness stings my chest at his words. "I hate that you have to wonder such things," I admit, sighing. "The Choosing has corrupted the authenticity right out of finding a proper mate for you four," I continue. "First with the promise of an increase in nobility status and wealth, and second with the title of *queen* at the end of it, should they survive. Unfair." I look up at Pierce with what I hope he can tell is sincerity. "But from what you've seen of me, what Kal and Axl have told you…am I the type to perform?"

The question leaves a bitter internal sting as it comes off my tongue. In the beginning, I knew I had a role to play, but even with my life on the line, I haven't been able to control my reactions beyond keeping where I come from and the power I have a secret. Everything else? It's been genuine, whether that helps me or not.

And after accepting Kal and Axl's tokens…

I fear this game is playing me more than I'm playing it.

Pierce's eyes widen. "You are a remarkable creature," he says, gaze falling to my lips for a brief moment. "The things you say…"

I smile. "Jax said my mouth gets me into trouble." My chest tightens at the

memory. At how easy it was between us before he chose me.

“Never change,” he says, drawing me out of my thoughts. “Truth be told, I’m tempted to steal you a night early,” he continues, and I chuckle softly. “Damn the rules. You wearing that dress has become a new weakness I didn’t realize I had.”

“Oh?” I ask, sipping more of my sparkling wine. “What would we do?” I ask. “If you *did* break the rules?”

His eyes darken, a smirk playing across his full lips. He draws closer, pressing his cheek to mine, his lips at the shell of my ear. “I’d take you to my estate, not bothering to show you to your own rooms, and guide you to my bed. There, I’d rid you of the delicious silk covering your body, and then I’d make you come without even touching you just so I could study the curves of your face when pleasure consumes you.”

My breath quickens as I lean back enough to look at him. “You can do that?” I whisper.

“Indeed,” he answers, smoothing a knuckle over my temple, tucking some hair behind my ear. “The possibilities of what I can do to your mind are limitless, darling,” he continues. “It’s the door to all things, you know. Knowledge. Fear. Survival. *Pleasure*.”

Tingles dance down my spine when he says the last word, and I sigh from the sensation. His smile turns mischievous before he leans in close again. “I could make you come right here,” he says, scanning the crowd around us.

I follow his gaze, spotting Kal and Axl chatting not ten feet away with Jullian and Brooks now. Baydel and Lucas are on the other end of the ship, conspiring as their guards—One and Two—hover near them. And Jax. He’s alone, of course, at the bow of the ship. Plus, there are countless servers and nobility, a few extra enforcers, and Mirren wandering about as well.

“I could unravel you in front of all these people,” he continues. “You wouldn’t even realize you’re on the ship anymore.”

A throbbing ache pulses between my thighs, like Pierce’s fingers are lightly brushing over that sensitive bundle of nerves.

“I could take you anywhere in the universe without either of us moving an inch, and there would be nothing you could do to stop me.”

My pulse skitters as what he says plays out in my mind. Would I be able to keep quiet? Would I be able to stay still while he mentally shattered me? Do I want to find out?

From the ache and slickness between my thighs, I most certainly do. And this game is a little too fun to stop now.

“Such a humblebrag,” I say, grinning up at him. “But I *could* stop you.” My breath catches as the need inside me grows.

He arches a dark brow at me. “You think so?”

I nod, discarding my empty glass on a passing tray. I take his tie in both my hands, playing with it as I smile up at him.

“The kings themselves have to work extensively to keep me out of their minds,” he says. “What makes you so confident?”

“You do,” I answer. “All I’d have to do is say *no*,” I continue, “and you’d release me from your hold. You told me so yourself. You’d never force your way in.”

“Perhaps I was lying.” A slow, easy smile. “Haven’t you heard? All the Legends are scoundrels. Your consent and comfort are the least important things to a prince of Lumathyst.”

I laugh then, full and bright enough that Pierce joins in. “You know that isn’t true,” I finally say once I’ve reeled it in. “You and the other Legends are nothing like the rumors report.”

“Ah,” he says. “So *you* think. But we could have you fooled, darling. All in the spirit of the Choosing.”

Cold dread slices through me, but it’s quickly whisked away by one warm look from Kal across the room, followed immediately by a scandalous wink from Axl. I focus back on Pierce and shake my head.

“Liar,” I accuse playfully.

His eyes fall to my lips, something more serious shifting within them. “Aren’t we all?”

The playfulness drains out of me in an instant.

Pierce may be my undoing—not only can he read minds, he can control them. Control the very reality around me if he wishes, and he can use that same power to manipulate things. He could flay me where I stand and make me believe I loved it. Even now, his tease against my skin, the ache I have between my thighs, is just a glimpse of his power.

Once again, the desire to come clean with him…with all of them…fills me so much, I can hardly breathe. They’ve turned out to be nothing like I’d expected. Maybe the fear of retaliation is wrong, too.

“Pierce…” I try to make the words come out.

I’m an Ashlander. I’m a demi.

It would be so easy to free myself of the weights around my ankles threatening to drown me in lies.

“I’m—”

Screams ring out from the shoreline, stopping my confession.

We both rush across the ship to where Axl has climbed up the railing, eyes like a hawk across his Sapphire Sea.

Another scream, and I can pinpoint the spot on the shore.

The fishing village.

People are rushing from the market square, scattering like ants from a freshly turned hill. And behind them, lit by soft glowing torches hanging from posts strategically placed along the public gathering area, are shadows of people in gray that I can barely make out.

“Faders.” Axl spares us a glance before he dives into the water.

“Axl!” I call, glancing over the rail. All I can see is his form beneath the water, spearing toward the shore like a shark locked on prey.

The ship shudders, turning too quickly as it adjusts its course for the shoreline.

“Secure the kings!” Number Three of the elite enforcers shouts, ushering Jullian below deck. One, Two, and Four follow with their respective kings.

I glare at Baydel, who seems unaffected as One pushes him toward the descending stairs. “You could help!” I call out. “You’re more powerful—”

He merely shakes his head, then disappears below deck.

Prick.

“They have to be kept safe,” Kal explains, tension in his tone. “Any physical harm to a king would be a declaration of war.”

“And attacking an innocent fishing village isn’t?” I roll my eyes. “Baydel could stop them, hold all the attackers at bay at once so we can question them, figure out how to come to terms or stop them for good.”

Jax’s laugh borders on chaotic, which makes Kal grimace. “That would entail him caring about anything other than his own safety.” Jax narrows his eyes.

“Stay here,” Kal says. “Go below deck with the kings. You’ll be safe there.”

I grab his arm, digging my nails in to keep him with me. I know he’s indulging me. If he wanted, he could already be in the skies, leaving me behind like a weight that would only slow him down.

“You did *not* just tell me to go below deck with the damned kings,” I snap.

Kal’s blue eyes widen, and this time it’s Pierce’s turn to laugh.

“That was feisty, darling,” Pierce says, hovering above us now, sparkling ribbons of emerald light swirling around his body from the palms of his hands, propelling him into the sky. He dips his head, flashing Kal a *good luck* look, and then disappears as he soars away.

“You’re our mate potential,” Kal says. “You can’t—”

“I can and I will. Don’t leave me behind again, Kal. You promised.”

He sighs. “If you’re harmed…”

“Then I’ll let you take extra special care of me,” I assure him, and he glances up like he’s searching for patience.

The ship is only feet from the dock, but Kal scoops me up and shoots us into

the sky.

“See you in a few,” Kal calls down to Jax, who has climbed to the top rung of the railing on the ship, holding on to a cable to steady himself as the ship docks.

Jax waves us off, a manic sort of smile on his face that displays delight in this danger, in this chaos, and it slashes through my fear, my panic, filling my soul with adrenaline and need and a sense of unity as we all race to protect the innocent.

The wind swirls in my blood, the power flexing like the muscles in my body as Kal lands on the edge of the fishing village.

My heart lurches as he sets me on my feet, everything slowing down around me. There are a dozen Faders scattered about the market square, dressed in all gray, their entire bodies covered in the canvas-like fabric, including their heads. There’s a horizontal slash over their eyes so they can see, and the fabric over the rest of their faces is accentuated with an emblem over their left cheek—a red circle with a dagger speared through it.

Each of them is strapped with weapons—smaller blades and swords. A few of them even have the more expensive weapons of royalty: magical blasters with the power of the sun to sear through flesh.

They’re destroying every market booth they touch, upturning tables, smashing goods, and attacking anyone who gets in their way. There’s no reason to it—they’re not picking up the food or supplies and shoving it into bags to steal. It looks like they’re creating chaos for the sake of chaos.

“Go,” I urge Kal when he lingers at my side, his muscles tense as he looks from me to where Axl is facing down two Faders at once. “I can keep myself safe,” I assure him when he doesn’t move. “Go.”

He hesitates a moment longer, clearly battling his instinct to stay behind with me, but finally relents and is gone in a blink. He races to Axl’s defense, scooping up one of the Faders and flying with them out of sight. Axl draws water from the ocean, bringing it to the market and wielding it in waves to beat the Faders back. But they’re resisting, managing to hold their ground while using those weapons against the Legends.

A Fader blows something at Axl—a fine dust I can just barely make out from where I stand at the edge of the market square. Axl stumbles backward, the water dropping from his control and splashing in puddles at his feet. He falls to one knee, swiping at the substance clinging to his skin. He flexes his hand behind him, brow furrowed in concentration—

“No!” someone shouts right next to me, and my gaze darts toward the panicked sound. “No! Please, that’s all I have!”

A woman stands in front of a crate of fish packed in ice, guarding it like it’s a

lifeline. I recognize the desperation in her voice, the plea written all over her face as her sole source of survival is threatened. Selling that fish probably supports her and a family, if she has one.

I don't think or hesitate before rushing over to her.

The Fader backhands the woman so hard she hits the ground.

"Stop!" I snap as the Fader tosses the woman's crate, the fish spreading all across the cobblestone road. They hover over the woman with a short sword aimed at her throat. "Don't touch her!"

The Fader—I'm not sure if they're a woman or a man; I can't tell because of the full-body uniform—whips their head around.

Instinct has the wind roaring in my blood, but I don't have time to look to see if anyone is watching, so I shove myself between the woman and the Fader, nothing but my body to use as a shield because I don't carry any weapons.

"I said don't touch her," I snarl at the Fader, adrenaline crackling through my veins.

The Fader tilts their head, moving the tip of their sword to aim at me—

A blade hurtles through the air so quickly, I feel the wind from it kiss my cheek before it sinks into the Fader's shoulder. A sharp whimper escapes the Fader, definitely feminine, as she grabs the knife from her shoulder and spikes it into the ground. She faces me for a second, the gray material of her uniform now stained red, before she runs in the opposite direction.

Jax stalks toward me like a predator, more blades glistening in his hands as he continues to hurl them through the air, the tips making their marks farther into the market, where there is more fighting.

I turn around, helping the panicked woman to her feet. "Are you hurt?"

She shakes her head, her eyes devastated at the sight of her market goods destroyed all over the ground. "Thank you," she says. "For protecting me."

I nod to her. "Run," I say, motioning to the one path that isn't blocked by Faders. "Get out of here. I'll make sure you're compensated."

Her eyes are as wide as saucers, surprise and gratitude filling them. "Thank you, your highness," she says, dipping low at the waist.

She takes off before I can tell her I'm not royalty. I watch her flee until she's safely out of sight, then turn around to find the battle still raging on.

Pierce is farther across the market square, wielding those emerald bands of energy against five Faders. Some are getting tangled in his powers, others merely dropping to the ground from it.

Axl is fighting hand to hand now. He glances our way. "They have something," he hollers. "It's nullifying my power!"

The dust I saw. Is that possible?

Ice fills my veins as I look for Kal, but I can't see him. I can only hope he's taken to the skies and isn't allowing any of that dust to touch him.

"Butterfly," Jax says with a sense of urgency that has me standing at attention.

Four Faders stalk toward us, swords ready as they surround us.

Jax shifts me so my back is against his, him facing two of the Faders and me facing the others. He passes me a knife, and I wrap my fingers around the hilt.

"You lose that," he says, voice low and razor-edged, "and we will have a *very* big problem."

"What are you going to do? Fill my pillow with snakes when I sleep in the Obsidian City?" I already fully understand his disdain for me. Does he really have to pour it on?

"Already thinking about my bed?" He blocks an incoming blow from a Fader with his blade, the sword of the Fader clanking before Jax slams a booted foot into the Fader's gut, sending him flying backward.

"I've grown quite fond of Legend beds," I quip back, the breath rushing out of me as I shove against him, knocking us out of the path of a dagger thrown by another Fader. The move pushes us apart, but I don't have time to get back to Jax as the two Faders come at me.

I swipe the borrowed knife at the Fader closest to me, and it cuts through the thick material of their uniform, drawing blood along their chest.

The Fader is twice my size, and a masculine grunt sounds at the small hurt I've caused. He backhands me so fast I don't have time to defend myself. I wince at the sting on my lip, whirling around to block another blow with my arms. A metallic tang coats my mouth, and I curl my tongue along the split in my lip, tasting blood.

He goes for another hit, and I duck, slashing the knife across his shins, but he keeps coming, reaching for me—

Then he's in the air, ribbons of green light lifting his body and sending him sailing in the opposite direction. Pierce is coming toward us, his sleeves rolled to his elbows, his suit jacket discarded who knows where. He looks like he could be ready to prepare dinner, not be in the midst of a battle as he slowly walks through the fray, curling his fingers this way and that, sending any Fader near him running.

A succession of whistles breaks through the noises of the fight, and the Faders immediately stop what they're doing, scattering at the sound.

"Try to get one alive!" Jax calls out to the Legends as he points at the Fader closest to him. They tense up, going rigid right where they stand before unleashing a bloodcurdling scream. They grip their head, shaking it back and forth as if something has slipped beneath the mask and is cutting them up from

the inside out.

Jax takes two steps toward them, but they race in the opposite direction, disappearing into the shadows, their screams muffled before going silent.

“They’re running,” Pierce says as he makes it to my side. “And whatever they’re using is making them oddly resistant to my power.”

Kal soars through the skies, landing softly near us. “I lost two,” he says, shaking his head. “My flight disappeared, and I almost crashed.”

I move instinctively to check on him—

“Don’t leave my side,” Jax commands, gripping my wrist and hauling me back against him as he hurls a blade at the last Fader doing their best to run.

Kal takes after them, his usually untraceable speed flickering in and out. Pierce and Axl follow him.

Jax sheathes his blades, turning to face me. He tips my chin up, those indigo eyes searing as he looks at the split in my lip. He gently examines it, shaking his head. “Still think you want any part of this?” His question is a whisper between us.

I reach up, gripping his wrist, the words on the tip of my tongue.

“They evaded.” Pierce’s voice is breathless for once as he makes his way back to us.

“What?” Jax snaps as he turns toward Pierce.

“They’re taking enhancements,” Pierce says, Axl and Kal coming up behind him. “Or they’re demis. I couldn’t sense either.”

Jax growls.

Confusion spins my mind, but I’m too distracted as I note a cut across Axl’s chest and one along Kal’s right arm. I race toward them, my heart in my throat. “You’re hurt,” I say as I look over their wounds. “What happened?” I ask Axl. “What made your powers weaker?”

Axl gently moves his hand over my cheek as he eyes my split lip. “I’m not sure,” he says. “It’s the same as last time, and it only lasts for small bursts before I get my power back.”

“That’s why they ran?” I ask. “Whoever whistled… It was a signal that they were outmatched?”

“Easily,” Kal says. “But they still got away. They always get away.”

“They’ve proven their intelligence when it comes to evading us,” Pierce says, frustration lining his features. “I do not believe it is skill alone.”

I survey the destruction they caused, a weight sinking in my stomach. “What was the point of this?” I look to Pierce. “This wasn’t a test by the kings, was it?”

“No,” Pierce answers, moving closer to us. “This has been happening since before the Choosing started.”

I tongue the small hurt on my lip, glancing back to Axl. “We have to help make up for the losses, Axl,” I say on a rushed breath. “Some of these wares… they’re people’s livelihoods.”

Axl smiles down at me. “We will,” he says, drawing me in closer. “I promise that those affected will be taken care of.”

I lean into his embrace, relief easing some of the tension in my shoulders.

“We’ll check on the people who fled,” Kal says.

“We’re right behind you,” Axl replies, still holding me close as Kal, Pierce, and Jax head toward where all the villagers escaped.

“You defended them.” Axl pushes me away just enough to look down at me. “You could’ve stayed back,” he says. “You could’ve protected yourself with the kings and elite enforcers, but you chose to defend my people.”

I meet his gaze, and the sincerity in his golden eyes has my heart clenching in my chest. It’s evident that no one other than the Legends has ever supported him in such a way. I can sense how much it means to him, can see it in the gratitude lining his features.

And he’s not wrong. I probably should’ve stayed behind. I’m not sure how much help I truly was, especially without using my power for fear of them discovering what I am. Pierce said it himself a moment ago—he thinks the Faders might be demis because of their ability to evade capture and to stand against them.

But these people were *innocent*.

Axl’s people didn’t deserve any of this, and there’s no denying I would do it again.

For any one of their people.

“I’ll never hide when something I love is in danger,” I finally say, knowing the full truth of that statement.

This is no longer a game.

No longer just about my survival.

I’m willing to put myself in harm’s way for the Legends and their people…

And I worry that instinct will get me killed in the end.

THE EMERALD WOOD

29

Rylee

Although Pierce meets me in the Emerald Wood, it's nothing like when I met with Kal for the first time, or even Axl.

Gone is the banter he delivered at the dinner on Axl's ship, replaced with nothing but exhaustion written on both of our faces thanks to last night's attack.

Even tired Pierce looks incredible, his full lips smiling softly, his fit body still wearing the clothes he wore last night, some of them tattered from the battle. I didn't have time to change, either. Not when we'd spent the entire night ensuring that all of Axl's people affected by the battle were taken care of, and after, we discussed possibilities of the motivations behind the Faders' attacks.

Kal and Axl had both made a point to check in with me before I climbed into the carriage that would take me to the Emerald Wood, asking if I wanted either or both to accompany me.

I thought about it for only a moment before I realized the earlier apprehension about being alone with each Legend following Kal was gone.

Maybe I've spent enough time with Pierce for that old worry to be soothed, or maybe I've settled into my role as chosen a little more than I thought I would. Either way, I have no hesitation being with Pierce alone now. I know I'll see Axl and Kal soon, so missing them won't sting as badly.

Pierce gives Mirren a nod from where she stands behind me, then reaches his hand out to me.

"Come," he says, beckoning me into his estate. I slide my hand into his, sighing at the connection. "I fear this is not the welcome I wanted to give you," he says as he leads me through the front doors of something much quainter than the other two Legends' homes I've seen so far.

It's still magnificent, but it's smaller than the others' mansions. Cozier, almost like a luxury cottage set among lush green trees and grass. It's tucked away, nothing but silence save for the sounds of nature around for miles.

Inside is warm and rich, the home filled with comfy furniture, soft lighting, and all sorts of books and scrolls and parchments and knickknacks in every corner, making the home lived-in and cozy as opposed to crowded and uncomfortable.

"I've drawn you a bath," Pierce continues as he leads me up the stairs and into

what I can only assume is his bedroom. His scent is all over the space.

I only get to glance at it before he walks me into the bathing chamber. The smell of something floral wafts on the steam from the full bath set into the floor, tucked against a pair of grand windows open to the elements and letting in the crisp pine scent from trees. Light dawns from the sun breaking over the sky.

"You did this for me?" I ask, smiling at the tub filled with bubbles, the wax candles burning to give the chamber a soft glow that is beyond relaxing.

"I did," he says, tapping his temple with his free hand. "While we said goodbye to Mirren."

My eyes flare in wonder. The depth of his power never ceases to amaze me. And this is only a portion of what it could be…

He rubs his thumb over the back of my hand where he holds it. "I assumed after last night's events, and the fact that neither of us slept, we'll need to table the little flirtation we had on Axl's ship. Now my most pressing concern is ensuring that you're well kept, well fed, and well rested."

I swallow around the emotion in my throat. Kal and Axl gave such importance to my well-being, too, but I'm still overcome by the gesture each time. Maybe it's because I'm not used to such luxuries or kindness, or maybe it's because my baser instincts are still terrified I'll wake up and this will all be an act. That they're treating me so well for a chance to magnify their power…despite everything in my heart countering those fears.

"I'll come check on you in a little bit," he says, leaning close to plant a soft kiss on my cheek before he heads out of the bathing chamber and closes the door behind him.

I don't waste time, shedding my battle-weary clothes and stepping into the deep tub, sighing as the hot water soothes the exhaustion I can feel in my bones.

I settle back against one of the benches that's built into the tub, stretching out because it's big enough to hold five people, let alone just me.

"Pierce," I call out, somehow knowing I don't need to yell for him to hear me.

"Yes, darling?" he answers from just outside the door.

"Will you come in here?"

Pierce opens the door almost timidly, his eyes finding me in the tub easily, noting the massive array of bubbles covering my body beneath the water.

"This truly is divine," I say, my heart fluttering in my chest. I motion to the water. "I know you must be just as exhausted as I am, even with all the power you have. Why don't you join me?"

He tilts his head just slightly. "Do you *want* me to join you?"

"Yes," I say, meaning it with my whole heart. "I'm not saying I have the energy to properly satisfy you right now," I hurry to admit. "And I don't think

you have that energy, either. I'm completely on board with making sure we're fed and rested before we cross that line, but this bath is certainly big enough for both of us. There's really no point for you to wait when I know you have to be craving the warm water just as much as me."

"When you put it that way," he says, and I nod.

He slowly sheds his dress shirt, his jacket already discarded somewhere I didn't see. And when he goes for his pants, I do the polite thing and turn around. After all, he didn't stay for the show of *me* undressing, and I can't help the butterflies that take flight in my stomach when I hear him breach the water, feel the ripples from his movement brush against my skin.

"You're safe to turn around now," he says, amusement drenching his tone. "Though you would have been welcome to look."

I smile and bite my lip as I turn and reclaim my seat on the bench, finding him on the opposite side.

My heart stutters in my chest. The sight of him leaning against the bath, his arms outstretched, soft glittering bubbles caressing his brown skin, is enough to steal my breath. But it's the weariness in his eyes, the ones usually filled with such intelligence and calculation, that has me frowning.

"I am sorry," I say.

His brow furrows. "Why would you be sorry?"

I blow out a breath, doing my best not to think of every reason I have to be sorry—the things I'm hiding from them, my inability to offer them much help with their obstacles—and focus on what is known.

"These attacks are starting to take their toll on you and the other Legends," I say. "Not to mention your people. I can't imagine what that's like for you, not knowing why they're doing it and not being able to predict when they'll strike again."

"It's quite taxing," he says, his eyes going distant for a moment. "I couldn't break into their minds," he continues. "Whatever substance they're using that nullifies our powers staggered mine in a way that meant I couldn't easily tell their motivations. I've never been up against anything like that, and I'm not exactly sure what we're going to do about it."

A lump forms in my throat as I remember his assumption from last night that some, if not all, of the Faders could be demis. Could be someone like me, hiding their power to avoid ridicule or imprisonment, like so many of the demis who live openly face.

"I'm sure that doesn't happen often," I say.

He smiles at me, just a little. "It doesn't," he says, eyes trailing over my face. "Though I do try not to invade everyone's privacy…" He shifts slightly in the

water. “Sometimes I can’t help but hear what people are thinking, if they’re thinking it loudly enough.”

“That has to be exhausting in itself,” I say.

“It certainly was when I was younger.” He leans a little bit farther back, his head resting on the edge of the bath. “It took me years to learn how to block peoples’ thoughts, but even I’m not a master of it. Jax and I practice with each other, though both of us struggle in regard to feeling everybody else’s emotions for him, and hearing their thoughts for me. It’s gotten easier, but sometimes we simply can’t shut people out.” He raises his hands from the water, indicating the space around him. “Hence why I chose a secluded place for my home. It’s quiet out here, surrounded by woods. Animals aren’t nearly as loud as people.” He chuckles softly.

My heart aches for the pair of them, seeing their power from an entirely new side.

Of course, when the enforcers told us stories of the Legends in the past, I’d always thought that they were entitled, pompous royals blessed with goddess-given powers that they used for their own selfish desires.

Now I know how wrongly those stories paint them.

Their powers are as much of a curse as they are a gift, although it seems like Jax and Pierce got the more complicated ones compared to Axl and Kal.

Even my control over the wind isn’t such a weight to carry, relative to hearing people’s thoughts or feeling their every emotion.

“I promise after we get some sleep, I’ll be a much better host,” Pierce says, smiling sleepily at me across the water.

“I think you’ve already been a wonderful host.” I sink into the tub just a bit more. “This is perfection.”

His grin widens as he looks at me. “I must admit,” he says, wetting his lips, “this bath has never held as much appeal as it does now.”

A flush breaks my skin at the compliment. “And what shall we do after this?”

Pierce sighs, moving through the water to get closer to me. Heat radiates between us, that tension tightening like a pulled string as he pushes some of my damp hair away from my face. “I have every intention of making you a delicious breakfast while you change into some comfortable sleep clothes, and then after we eat, I say a good long nap is in order.” His smile deepens. “How is that for foreplay, my darling?”

A laugh tumbles from my lips, and I lean into the hand lingering at the side of my face. “It’s perfect,” I say, and I truly mean it.

As much as I would love to keep flirting like we did on the ship and explore our connection like I have with all the other Legends, I know we have time. We

have an entire month to be intimate, and after last night's battle, I think what we both need most is to recover.

After another half hour in the bath, we each step out separately, both of us giving each other privacy to dry off before changing into the aforementioned sleep clothes.

Pierce delivers on his delicious breakfast—it's simple but filling—and afterward, we climb into his oversize bed, the two of us sighing at the comfort it offers as we lie down facing each other.

"What's that expression for?" he asks from where his head rests on his pillow and me on mine.

"I'm just grateful for you," I say, unable to keep the vulnerable admission to myself.

I'm full and bathed and relaxed and exhausted, and there's no hiding right now.

"For all of you," I add.

Pierce reaches across the distance between us to take my hand. He holds it, and my eyes become heavy.

"Sleep, my darling," he says. "Tomorrow, I'll show you the Emerald Wood."

My eyes fully shut, as if his soft command broke whatever willpower I had to stay awake. And just as the heavy blanket of sleep is draping over me, I hear Pierce whisper softly, "I'm grateful for you, too, Rylee Gray."

30

Rylee

“You’re cheating,” I say from where I sit across from Pierce at a small table, a game board with elegantly carved pieces between us.

An unfiltered laugh rumbles from Pierce’s chest as he shakes his head and leans back in his chair. “I assure you, I’m not,” he says, eyes on me as he waits for me to make my next move.

It’s hard to concentrate on the elaborate game that’s tested every ounce of my intelligence over the last two weeks since he first taught me. I can barely look at my golden pieces—half of them rest on Pierce’s side, due to his emerald pieces taking possession of them—when he looks so ridiculously handsome in nothing but a simple unbuttoned white shirt and soft black cotton pants, his feet bare. How am I expected to keep track of his strategic moves about the checkered game board when he looks like that?

We’ve barely left his cozy home in the last two weeks and haven’t changed into anything more formal than casual lounging clothes.

It’s exactly what we needed. Nothing but talking and resting and eating, falling into this wonderful, almost domestic habit, and he’s even worked with me on some tricks to use to enforce my mental shields. It’s all about the breath work.

We still haven’t crossed the intimate threshold yet. At first, exhaustion was the reasoning, but now it’s turned into a delicious game of anticipation.

I’ve enjoyed it. It’s given us time to develop an emotional connection that only heightens our already burning physical chemistry. I’ve learned so much about him and his habits, what he does when he’s not forced to be the Mind. Reading or being read to is one of them—something we share.

My favorite spot to read is tucked under one of his arms, both of us enjoying different books while also being physically close. It’s much more fun than losing this game to him over and over again, at least, but my competitive hunger has me trying to best him whenever I get the chance.

“I feel like you’re reading my mind,” I chide him as I look over my pieces and try to plot my next move.

“I’m not,” he says, shaking his head. “I’ve been playing this game since before I could read. My father and I would spend hours, sometimes *days* playing a session. I don’t expect you to beat me after only having played it two weeks.”

“I didn’t realize just *how* competitive I was until I discovered I couldn’t beat you,” I grumble.

“Yet,” Pierce says with emphasis. “You haven’t beat me *yet*, my darling.”

More butterflies take flight in my stomach at the endearing way he phrases that, as if he truly believes we have a future together, enough time for me to grow my gaming skills enough to beat someone dubbed the Mind.

My fingers hover over one of my golden pieces that’s the shape of a horse, and I look to Pierce, then back down to the piece and to him again.

He gives *nothing* away, which is just as frustrating as losing to him has been every day this week.

Finally, I make my decision, confidently picking up the horse and moving it to steal one of his smaller emerald pieces. I grab it, adding it to my pile, which now consists of *three* from his collection.

Pierce studies the board for a moment, those brown eyes calculating before a wide smile spreads across his lips. “That was a brilliant move, darling,” he says before reaching for one of his pieces. “Truly, I mean that.”

“How dare you.” I gape at him as he makes his move, which renders it *impossible* for me to do anything else. “You compliment me while beating me?”

Pierce laughs at my fake pout, and I rise from the table, maneuvering to sit in his lap. “It’s not fair,” I say, my fingers at his temples. “I’ll never be able to beat you. I’ll never be able to match this intellect—”

Pierce snatches one of my hands, planting a soft kiss on my palm, then the inside of my wrist, sending shock waves of heat rippling across my skin. “Don’t you dare say that,” he says in a rare commanding tone. His other arm wraps around my lower back, holding me tighter. “It is your mind, my darling, that intrigues me most. Do not insult it again in my presence.”

Tendrils of warmth tickle my insides, my heart stuttering at the idea of what he’ll do if I break that command. I know exactly what Kal and Axl would do, but I am still uncertain about Pierce.

I stick out my bottom lip, egging on my exaggeration of disappointment at losing yet again, and he flashes me a chiding look.

“Darling.” He says the endearment like a plea. “You know I can’t stand it when you’re upset,” he continues. “Tell me what I can do to make it up to you. Would you like me to let you win next time—”

“Never,” I cut him off. “I will beat you one day, regardless of whether you’re the Mind or not. I just need more time, but I have to admit my brain can’t handle one more second of this game today.”

“Tonight,” Pierce corrects me, motioning to the window across his bedroom.

“Goddess,” I say. “Have we been playing almost all day?”

“Are you growing bored of it?”

“No,” I admit. “I can stay locked in this room with you for the rest of forever and die a happy woman.” The truth of that statement rolls off my lips without even a hitch.

And I soon find myself swimming in guilt instead of the flirtatious energy we possessed moments ago.

I’m not lying.

I can’t deny what my heart is beating every second of every day since Jax chose me.

I’m where I’m supposed to be.

And yet I still haven’t found the courage to tell any of them the truth. It makes me a hypocrite, hoping that they’re being their true selves with me when I’m definitely not.

Pierce leans closer, his lips grazing over mine in the softest of kisses before he pulls back. “Tell me something,” he says. “Something that will make you happy tonight.”

“I am happy,” I say, hoping he believes me, hoping that he isn’t mistaking my own internal guilt for some fault on his part. “I promise,” I continue. “I’m very happy.”

Terrified of these new feelings, absolutely, but I’m happy.

“Still,” he says, smiling up at me. “What would you be doing on a night like this if you weren’t here with me?”

I give that question some thought, my mind immediately conjuring images of Ivy and Layce. Goddess, I miss them.

“That,” he says, motioning to me. “You just had a thought. What is it?”

“Do you honestly not know?” I ask.

“How many times must I tell you?” he replies. “I’m not going where I’m not wanted.”

“You are very much wanted,” I counter, but he gives me a silent look, pressing for answers. I shrug. “If I wasn’t here, I’d most likely be with my friends.” If I had energy after a long workday, that is. “I miss them,” I admit. “Almost as much as I miss my sister.”

Sympathy coats his features, and he rubs his hand up and down my back. “I know,” he says. “Kal and Axl haven’t found anything else in their cities. I’m sorry that I haven’t, either.”

“Don’t be.” I shake my head. “It’s not your responsibility to find her. I appreciate each of you helping look, but I’m starting to think my sister doesn’t want to be found.”

The image of her painting in the Ruby Aire haunts me when my thoughts go

restless at night and sleep evades me. I jump from grief to anxiety to anger all in the span of a few heartbeats.

"It's important to you," he says. "So, it's important to us. I have one more contact I'd like to reach out to." He tilts his head, his eyes lighting up. "Perhaps we could satisfy both needs in one night?"

"I'm listening," I say.

"Why don't you invite your friends over, and I'll go meet with my contact to see if he can find further information on your sister."

My heart jolts with hope. "You would do that for me?"

"We've been doing it for you, darling," he says. "I dare say we're just as frustrated with the lack of information as you are." Pierce leans closer to me, cupping my cheek, his eyes on mine. "She's your sister. That makes her our priority as well. If it's within our power, we're going to find answers for you. I just hope they're the ones you want."

I kiss him. Fiercely, passionately. Pouring all my gratitude into it, clinging to him in a silent way that I hope he can understand is my immense gratefulness.

I draw back, my eyes on his.

"You're welcome," he says softly, and my smile deepens.

"I don't know if my friends will be entirely comfortable in your home," I say. "They aren't exactly used to lounging in royal estates. Not that I am, either. Besides, we haven't gone out since before the Choosing…"

"Ah," Pierce says. He pats my hip, grinning. "I have just the place for you and your friends. I won't be able to join you until after I meet with my contact. Will you be all right on your own?"

Surprise flits through me. "You're going to let me go out with my friends without you?"

"Darling," he chides, his brow furrowed. "You're not some pet we're keeping. If you had asked Kal or Axl, they would've done the same."

Shame threatens to steal my excitement, and my shoulders drop. "I'm sorry. That came out the wrong way."

"Don't apologize," he says. "I just want you to know that we're looking not to *possess* you but to partner with you. If you have a need, speak it, and we'll do our best to make it happen."

I study his eyes, reading him in the only way I can.

I'm an Ashlander.

I'm a demi.

And I'm terrified of what you all will do to me when you find out.

The silent need races through my mind, sending a bolt of guilt straight through the center of me.

“Come,” he says. “I’ll get a message to your friends while you get ready and send a carriage that will take them to a place I know you’re going to love.”

That quickly, the excitement washes away the guilt, and I hop up from Pierce’s lap, hurrying to the wardrobe that I claimed as mine and grabbing an outfit before I step into the bathing chamber.

“I adore you,” I call before closing the door to get changed. “Have I told you that?”

I hear Pierce’s laughter from the other side of the door. “I’ll never hear it enough.”

An hour later, Pierce slows the velomage in front of Ephemeral, one of his favorite teashops in the Emerald Wood.

“Your friends should already be in there,” he says as I climb off the back of the velomage. He nods behind me, toward a guard standing at the entrance. “There’s a private spot you’ll be shown to. I know everyone who works here, so you shouldn’t have any trouble. Order anything you want, and I’ll be back after I meet with my contact.”

My heart expands in my chest. “Thank you for this.”

“Of course, darling,” he says, then glares at something behind me.

I turn, my shoulders dropping when I see the Occuli. There are two of them lingering near the brick building where the establishment’s emblem is painted—a white teacup with the name beneath it.

“They’re allowed inside,” he says, drawing my attention back to him. “But they’re not allowed in the private space. You’ll be okay there.”

I blow out a breath, nodding. “Someday, I’ll be used to them.”

“No, you won’t.” He flashes me an encouraging smile, then motions to the teashop. “I’ll wait until you’re safely inside.”

Goddess, this man.

I kiss him quickly before heading toward the entrance, the guard ushering me inside. I hear Pierce’s velomage take off before light piano music overcomes my senses.

It’s a beautiful, soft melody that perfectly accompanies the space, which is a quaint building with hunter green walls displaying local art with small descriptions and sale prices. I scan the pieces, automatically looking for anything that Erin might’ve done, but find nothing.

There is a variety of round and square tables scattered about the open space, all centered around the stage, where a piano player brushes his fingers across the keys.

The place smells of both wine and freshly brewed tea, and the chatter from the patrons is hushed; perhaps there is some unspoken rule about the teashop being a

calm and relaxed environment. A place where conversations are had among slow sips of your favorite beverage.

I can barely hold back my smile as I completely understand why this is Pierce's favorite place in the city. Not only is it a relaxed area, but it's also quiet in a soft way that likely appeals to his constantly bombarded senses.

"Rylee Gray." A server approaches me, an empty tray tucked under her arm as she looks me over.

"Yes," I answer.

The server spares the Occuli behind me a worried glance but quickly looks back to me. "Right this way."

I ignore the Occuli, even though I can feel them practically breathing down my neck in the form of chills racing over my skin. As long as they don't try to get too close to me again, I'll be fine.

I follow the server through the wide array of tables and around a small corner that leads to a circular, concealed spot half hidden by rich emerald curtains—

"Ohh my goddess!" Ivy's voice overtakes all thought, and soon I'm nearly tackled by her and Layce.

We're a tangle of arms and squeals and tight squeezes, emotion clawing up my throat and threatening to have me crying in relief at the sight of my friends.

Ivy wears a pair of black pencil slacks and a white blouse, Layce a purple tunic with black leggings, both looking as healthy and well as ever.

"I'll just give you ladies a moment," the server calls over our squeals, disappearing to check on other patrons.

"When the carriage came to our places," Layce whispers as we break out of our three-way embrace, "I was terrified. I thought they were going to drag us in for…" Her voice trails off, but I don't need her to finish.

I can imagine where her mind went. She likely thought they were going to be questioned about me and my character by either the Legends or the kings themselves.

"I'm sorry. I know it's a surprise," I say as we fold ourselves into the circular table with cushioned seats, our tones hushed between us. "But when Pierce gave me the opportunity to see you two, I wasn't going to miss it." I glance between Ivy and Layce, relief coursing through my body and unraveling tension I didn't realize I had. "Goddess, I've missed you two."

"Same," Ivy says, looking me over with a concerned stare. "We've been beside ourselves with worry." She glances around as if we may be overheard.

I follow her and Layce's eyes across the establishment, spotting the Occuli, who sit at a table with their backs to the piano player and their gazes on *us*. They're a good distance away, but it's still unnerving, especially as they hold

those green flames aloft without even the slightest tremble in their hands.

“That’s not creepy at all,” Layce says sarcastically.

“Yeah, you don’t get used to it,” I say, shaking my head but returning my focus to them. “Those green flames are how they communicate directly with the kings.”

“Not the Legends?” Ivy asks, tilting her head.

“No,” I say. “The Legends aren’t keen to keep tabs on me as much as the kings are.”

“Ah,” Ivy says. “Because of course the good kings want to ensure that the mate of their sons’ choosing, the future queen of Lumathyst, is a worthy person.”

I don’t miss the snark in her tone, but I nod. “Naturally.”

“Even if,” Layce says. “Isn’t that a bit suffocating?”

“Very,” I say, sighing. The server from earlier returns, and we quickly place food and drink orders before she hurries off.

I reach across the table, taking Ivy’s and Layce’s hands in mine. “Tell me, how have you two been?”

“We’ve been the same,” Ivy says, glancing at Layce, who nods. “Tell us how *you’ve* been?”

“We’ve been so…anxious to hear how it’s all going,” Layce adds. “There’s only so much the royal post reports on, and it’s hard to read between the lines sometimes.”

“I’m okay,” I assure them. “It’s been a whirlwind, for certain. I’ve barely had time to think beyond taking each day as it comes. I know I should have tried to get letters or something to you—”

“We totally understand,” Ivy cuts me off, shaking her head and squeezing my hand. “We never expected you to reach out, not until after winter solstice and the Athanry…”

Her voice trails off, and we all share a serious look. Likely each of us thinking about what Ivy isn’t saying.

If I survive the Athanry.

“I know,” I say, ignoring the sliver of terror in my blood. “I just want you to know I’ve been thinking of you.”

Plus, in the beginning, I’d been so terrified of them being harmed when my secret inevitably came to light that I hadn’t wanted anyone to know they existed. But now…with everything that’s happened between the Legends and myself, I’m less afraid.

Maybe that’s being naive.

Maybe I’m getting too comfortable in this new life.

“We understand,” Layce says. “And we *have* been reading.”

A flush dusts my cheeks. “I must admit I haven’t read any of the posts about me. I’ve been a coward.”

“Well lucky for you, we never miss one,” Ivy says. “The illustrations definitely make you look comfy with red and blue, and I don’t mean your outfit.” She motions to my tight red leggings and long-sleeve blue shirt.

I press my lips together, nodding, unable to deny the thrill of excitement that rushes through me. “Kal and Axl are amazing,” I say with absolute honesty. “The rumors we heard about them…they aren’t true.”

Ivy looks at me skeptically while Layce’s eyes are downright dreamy.

“And you’re sure they’re being genuine?” Ivy whispers, scooting closer, so quiet I can barely hear her question.

I swallow hard, lowering my voice as well, despite Pierce assuring me that I was safe here. “I’ve worried about that since the beginning,” I admit. “Worried they’re playing a part just as much as me in order to come out winners at the end of this…” I sigh. “But I don’t know how to explain it,” I say, returning to my normal vocal level. “The more time I spend with them, the more I feel like they’re being genuine. They aren’t perfect—goddess knows I’ve seen their flaws just as much as they’ve seen mine—but it feels authentic.”

Ivy nods.

“And the Mind?” Layce asks. “Has he been freely reading your thoughts?”

I shake my head. “He respects my privacy.”

Both of them sigh in relief at that, and I finally let go of their hands as we relax into our seats.

“What about the Nightmare?” Layce asks. “How has he been since he chose you? We rarely see you together in the illustrations. Not like with the others.”

“Jax is…complicated. And I won’t visit him for another two weeks.”

I glance between my friends, reading the sense of urgency on their faces and laughing softly. “It’s okay,” I say after the server sets a steaming teapot filled with boiled water on the table along with three fine glass teacups, an assortment of teas to choose from, and a tower of delicate treats to eat. “Ask me anything.”

“Are you really okay?” Layce.

“Have the kings discovered anything yet?” Ivy.

“Is the Player good in bed?” Layce.

“Are you going to say *yes* in the end?” Ivy.

I laugh around the bite of soft buttery bread I’ve just taken. “Yes, no, beyond amazing, and I’m not sure,” I answer in order. I lean closer to Ivy, speaking my return question directly into her ear, terrified to raise my voice even above release of breath. “Did you change my records?”

Ivy shakes her head, the small cake in her fingers completely forgotten as she

stares at me, wide-eyed. “What do you mean?”

“My birthplace,” I say just as quietly.

Ivy gapes at me. “No. Was I supposed to?”

“You really didn’t?” I ask a little louder, glancing between her and Layce.

“Rylee,” Ivy says. “I’ve done nothing but worry since that night. I have connections in the royal records halls, and if I could have changed them, I would have, but I worried they’d already seen them and would get even more suspicious. I don’t know all the rules of this game you’re playing.”

I knew she had connections in the records halls. We’d used those connections before in the very beginning when my sister went missing. Of course we turned up empty-handed, but it’s the reason I thought she was behind my change in birthplace.

My shoulders sink, confusion washing over me in waves. “Someone changed them,” I explain and then quickly fill them in on what’s been happening—the test I underwent the first night from Baydel, the Fader attacks that are no longer seeming so random, Jax’s outspokenness about me being a liar, and everything else in between.

By the time I’m done, we’ve gone through two pots of tea and have already had our snack tower refilled.

“So, Pierce is off meeting with one of his contacts right now in regard to Erin’s whereabouts?” Layce asks after taking another bite of a cookie from the top tier of the tower.

“Yes,” I say. “Once Baydel announced that I did in fact have a sister, I knew there was no point in trying to hide that connection anymore. Not that the Legends ever gave me any reason to worry, but in the beginning, I just didn’t know what to do. And I saw one of her paintings in the Ruby Aire, one that Kal swears was done recently.”

“And you’re certain it was hers?” Layce asks, then immediately flashes me an apologetic look. “I’m sorry. That’s a ridiculous question. I know you know Erin inside and out.”

“It’s not a ridiculous question,” I say. “I *thought* I knew Erin.” My heart sinks to my stomach. “But now I’m not so sure. She’s not on a Never List mission. There’s no record of that anywhere. When I came across that painting of hers, I suddenly found myself questioning *everything*.” I blow out a breath. “When I first got chosen and I thought she’d been put on the Never List, I secretly hoped she’d found someone to run away with and was simply off living a happy life. But when faced with that actual reality? A life where she’s free enough to paint in the Ruby Aire? I can’t help but wonder—why haven’t I heard a word from her? Why hasn’t she at least sent a letter explaining where she went?” I try to

shove down the emotion tangling in my chest. “For a minute, I thought maybe the painting was a warning and her silence was some form of protection. But I’m not sure of anything anymore. Maybe I didn’t really know her at all.”

The reality of those words catches up in my throat, and my voice cracks.

I take a sip of my minty tea, drinking the subtle flavors down in hopes of covering up how devastating that notion is.

Ivy and Layce both look at me with concerned eyes, their features riddled with confusion. They were just as close with Erin, and sometimes I forget that it’s not just *me* who grieves the hole she’s left in our group.

“We all know she likes to go on her little adventures,” Ivy says. “But she’s never done it for this long or without letting any of us know what she was doing. I don’t believe she’d leave you like that.” Ivy shrugs, picking up her teacup and taking a quick sip. “I don’t. She may have met someone at the Choosing, though; we never saw her speaking with anybody that night, but she could have. She went off on her own in the middle of the event. But I don’t see her not telling you if she decided to leave.”

“Is there a chance that she *did* send a letter?” Layce asks, her expression empathetic. “You know how shoddy the post is in…that area,” she says, rolling her eyes at her almost slip. “Maybe she sent one and you didn’t get it.”

I laugh darkly at that, then take another sip of tea. “Could you imagine?” I shake my head. “That all my answers are in some lost letter? That all my attempts at searching for her have been a pathetic attempt from a grieving sister?”

“It’s not pathetic,” Ivy says.

“Maybe the Legends will find something,” Layce says hopefully.

“Maybe,” I say, setting my teacup down. “Of course, I do feel there are quite a few other things I should be worrying about.”

“You don’t say?” Ivy asks sarcastically, and we all laugh, lightening up some of the heaviness.

“Being a mate potential certainly comes with its fair share of responsibilities and worries,” Layce adds. “But your *clothes*,” she says dramatically. “You were born for those.”

We all laugh harder, simultaneously reaching for our teas and taking sips, the levity disappearing just a little as we come back down to reality.

“Are you going to choose them in the end?” Layce asks this time.

My heart immediately says *yes*, a silent, solid decision already tattooed across my soul.

“Whenever I envision the final Choosing ceremony,” I whisper, “I see myself there, and even though I’m terrified of the Athanry, I can’t see myself saying no

to any of them.”

My friends sit up straighter at that declaration, sharing a glance before returning their focus to me.

“Even the Nightmare?” Ivy asks quietly.

My heart flutters in my chest, apprehension tingling across my skin. “Like I said, Jax is complicated. I suppose I’ll learn more in a couple of weeks.”

“And the Athanry?” Ivy shifts closer to me. “Have you learned any more about it?”

“Not as much as I’d like,” I admit. “Every month, we’re forced to have a dinner with the kings, but the topic has never come up. Whenever Baydel is around, his disposition is so prickly toward me that I don’t dare ask anything.”

“And the Legends?”

“They know about as much as we know,” I answer. “After I choose the Legends, I submit myself to the goddesses, and they determine if I’m worthy of being with them for eternity.”

We all fall silent, no doubt washed away by our own imaginings of such an event.

Ivy breaks the silence, looking at me with determination. “You will survive. I’ve told you that since the beginning. You have to.”

“I know,” I say despite fear’s cold chill clinging to my skin.

“And then you’ll be a queen,” Layce says with a bit of reverence. “Have you thought about that at all?”

“I haven’t,” I admit. “I’ve been living each day in fear…” I look at them both, and they nod, understanding without me having to explain the specifics of that fear. “While also in wonder,” I continue. “The idea of being able to spend the rest of my existence with each of them is as incredible as it is terrifying.”

Terrifying because it means I have more people in my life to lose. And after knowing how badly it hurts to lose my family, I can’t imagine losing *more*. Opening my heart to that kind of loss is a scary proposition, but I am powerless against it.

“Tell us something,” Layce says, reaching for another cookie. “Something less heavy, please.”

I smile softly at her. “You would die at the amount of clothes and jewelry and adornments I’ve been given along this journey.”

“Ah.” Layce almost moans with relief. “I am properly jealous, and I’ll be stealing from said stash the moment we’re free to see each other every day again.”

“You know, I feel like if I asked to see you two every day, the Legends would make it so. I could probably ask for you two to be carted around with me like

special pieces of luggage.”

Ivy playfully smacks me. “We are no such things. If anything, we’d be the most epic of entourages.”

We all laugh, and it feels so good to be normal with my friends again.

“But don’t ask for that,” Layce says once we finally reel it in. “There’s no way the two of us are going to distract you while you’re doing your best to get to know the rest of the Legends. The winter solstice isn’t that far away—”

“Six weeks,” I say.

Somehow, we’ve made our way back to the heavy.

“That’s how long I have left.”

“That’s how long you have left until you become the Legends’ mate and the future queen of Lumathyst,” Ivy says, leaving no room for argument as she raises her teacup between us.

Layce mimics her, and finally, I do, too.

“To six weeks, then,” Layce says.

“I love you both,” I say, not only because it’s true but because of the ticking clock I have hanging over my head. I don’t know how many more opportunities I’ll have to say that to them.

“Yes, yes, we love you, too,” Ivy says, eyeing our raised teacups.

I smile at her, clinking my glass against theirs. “To six weeks.”

We sip the rest of our tea and spend the next two hours talking about everything and nothing, and by the time the server alerts us that Pierce’s carriage has arrived to take my friends home, I feel so much more secure in my own skin in the only way a night out with your best friends can do.

I follow them out of the teashop, hugging them both more times than would likely be acceptable in a normal situation.

“See you both soon,” I say as I release them.

Tears fill my eyes, a mixture of happiness and sadness brewing beneath my skin as I watch the carriage until it’s out of sight.

I scan the area for any sign or sound of Pierce’s velomage, but when I see and hear nothing, I turn back to the teashop, prepared to wait until Pierce arrives to take me home.

I head back toward Pierce’s private table, my mind buzzing from all the things my friends and I discussed. I pause two steps away from the table, noting a man sitting in my spot. He looks vaguely familiar—

The breath stalls in my lungs as the man turns around, sliding away from the table to face me.

“Ah, Rylee Gray. There you are,” he says, motioning to the table in a gesture for me to sit down. “I’ve been dying to speak with you.”

Adrenaline races through my veins so fast it hurts, my heart pounding against my chest as I bow, dipping my head.

“Your majesty,” I say before I do as I am told and take my seat across from Pierce’s father.

31

Rylee

Brooks Bertrand looks so much like his son, but in a more casual way, where Pierce is infinitely more refined.

I do my best to quell my rising nerves, my eyes darting around the teashop as if the other kings will arrive at any moment.

“Please,” he says after my previous server has brought over a fresh teapot and cup for him. “Relax.” He eyes the undoubtedly tense set of my shoulders.

“I’m not entirely sure that’s possible, your majesty,” I say, electing to stick with the truth.

Brooks Bertrand chuckles as he pours hot water over a strainer full of tea leaves, lifting the thing in and out of the cup as he looks at me. “I suppose that’s fair. I doubt any of the other kings singled you out when you were in their sons’ cities.”

I shake my head, my mouth suddenly dry, but I can’t bring myself to reach for my abandoned teacup. I’m trembling and hiding my hands beneath the table. Why *is* he singling me out? Why is he here? Where is Pierce?

The thoughts race through my mind in a chaotic way, and I struggle to draw in a full breath. He’s not Baydel; thank goddess for that. He’s never done anything like Baydel did that first night, but being alone with a king… It feels more like a trap than a friendly chat.

“I can assure you, I mean you no harm,” he says as he continues to dip that tea in and out of the water. “And none of the other kings know I’m here.”

That creates more questions than answers and in no way relaxes me.

“Why are you here?” I ask when he doesn’t continue. My eyes dart to where the Occuli still sit and stare in our direction, but there are no green flames in their hands anymore.

Did they alert Brooks Bertrand to my presence here? Did they let him know the minute I was alone?

“I wanted to see how you are enjoying your time with my son,” Brooks explains.

I don’t believe it for a second. Not because I can sense any ill intent from him, like I usually can Baydel, but on the sheer fact that he’s a king of Lumathyst and has way more important things to do.

Still, if this is some form of test, I need to do my best to pass it.

"I'm enjoying my time with Pierce immensely," I answer.

"Even after that horrendous display in the Sapphire Cove?" he asks, keen eyes on me. "You came here the next day."

"Yes," I answer, unsure of what he's looking for from me.

"You didn't go below deck with us and our elite enforcers," he says, and I simply nod. "You chose to go with the Legends. It's plagued my mind ever since. Part of my motivation in coming to find you when my son isn't around."

I shift in my seat, all comfort from spending time with my friends disappearing.

"Why?" he asks a bit forcefully, taking his tea strainer out of the water and discarding it to the side before he takes a sip.

"Why what?" I ask, unable to keep the bite from my tone to match his energy. I chide myself silently, doing my best to remember who sits across from me.

"Why did you *choose* to go with them? I doubt a Cedar and Silk citizen has much battle training."

The hair on the back of my neck stands on end as the reality of that question hits me over the head. Why would any seemingly untrained Cedar and Silk citizen follow the Legends into battle? I did so because my instincts demanded it. Because the thought of them fighting for those innocent people without me was abhorrent, but also because I knew if things got seriously dangerous, I had power of my own to wield. Not to mention that Erin and I had been sparring together since before our parents were taken for a Never List mission. Those skills helped during situations when enforcers abused their power.

"It wasn't really a choice," I say.

Brooks tilts his head, eyes narrowing. "Did they force you to accompany them?" His features are deadly serious, as if there will be repercussions if they did.

"Of course not," I say quickly, my brow furrowed. I force out a laugh. "Kal begged me to stay back on the ship," I admit. "But I couldn't."

"What do you mean, you couldn't?" he asks a little softer this time as he sips his tea.

I take a deep breath and let it out slowly, searching for the right words. "Axl's people, Kal's people, and now Pierce's," I say as I glance around the teashop before returning my focus to him. "After spending as much time with the Legends as I have, growing to know them and love their cities and their people, they feel like *my* people, too. I couldn't let the innocent suffer without doing something, even if that meant only guiding people to safety. The idea of being left behind and not knowing if the Legends were okay or not…" My voice trails

off as the genuine terror takes up residence inside my chest.

I remember that first night in the Ruby Aire, when they'd left me behind and I had no way of knowing if they were all right. I never wanted to feel that way again.

"I'd rather be in danger *with* them than be safe somewhere without them."

Brooks studies me, his eyes older and more calculative than Pierce's.

I've never been more relieved that his power isn't like his son's, because I fear with his age and experience, he'd break through my thoughts immediately and find all the secrets I'm hiding.

Luckily for me, he only has the power to manipulate energy—something he passed on to his son, right alongside his mother's mind-reading abilities and alternate-reality creations.

"Do you say this because you're a mate potential?" he asks with all seriousness. "Do you say it because I'm the king, father of one of your possible mates, and because you think it's what I want to hear?"

I laugh genuinely this time as I shake my head. "I thought you would've noticed by now from my absolute blunders at every dinner that I rarely say what I'm supposed to say."

Brooks chuckles, nodding as he takes another sip of tea. "You certainly don't get along with Baydel," he says, shrugging. "But then again, only a few of us do. Old age affects others differently, and I do say that it's made Baydel more rigid as opposed to wise."

I don't feel like I have the right to comment on that, so I keep my mouth shut.

"I have a question for you, Rylee Gray," he says, setting down his teacup. "And since you are so honest all the time, I'm hoping you'll be honest with me now."

I swallow hard, heart pounding as I wait for him to speak.

"I came here to offer you something," he says. "Something I think you desperately need."

I tilt my head. "What is it that you think I need?"

Brooks leans back against the cushioned seat, eyeing me. "An escape, for one," he says. "And answers about your sister, for two."

I try to school my features, try to keep them calm, but my eyes flare just a bit.

The wise king tracks it.

"I know the Legends have been looking for her," he continues. "I know that she's not on a Never List mission or in Cedar and Silk where she should be."

Ice water fills my veins, but I hold entirely still as if that will make me a smaller target, as if that will make my weaknesses less apparent.

"Breathe," he says. "I do not say this to threaten you. I'm simply stating

facts.”

“I don’t understand what you’re asking me.” My lip threatens to tremble at the adrenaline coursing through my body, at my instincts shouting at me that I’m being threatened, even though nothing about his demeanor says as much. He’s relaxed in his seat, his features calm and interested, even; there’s no hint of the malice or disgust that I see on Baydel so often.

“I’m offering you a chance to escape,” he says plainly. “As you know, I have a wealth of power, not to mention means and status. I know the kings better than anyone else. There are places even Baydel can’t reach. I could make sure you get to that place with enough wealth to start a new life. One that includes your sister.”

My eyes widen. “Are you saying you *have* my sister?” I ask on a loose breath.

Brooks waves me off. “Of course not,” he says. “I’m not a monster. I have no need to track down your relatives and loved ones…unless you brought harm to my son, and then that would be a different story. As it is now, Pierce is absolutely smitten with you. But, if you choose to take my offer, I will find her. If she’s alive to be found. Either way, you could start your new life away from the Legends, away from the kings’ eyes, and put this whole Choosing business behind you.”

The picture he paints is an offer I would have considered three months ago. A fantasy Erin and I used to have ever since our parents were called away on the Never List mission. Us coming into money somehow, coming into wealth to help the Ashlands before escaping somewhere to live peacefully on our own together, no longer threatened by kings’ enforcers.

But now? That fantasy is drenched in a sadness I can’t entirely explain, and when I picture my future, it has the Legends all over it.

“You’d only have to do one thing for me in return,” he says, and that draws my attention back to the present. I keep quiet, not wanting to give anything away. “Reject them,” he says when I’ve remained silent. “Reject them at the Choosing. Don’t go through with the Athanry, and I’ll make sure you’re well taken care of.”

My hackles rise at his condition, not that I was seriously entertaining the offer to begin with. His condition is a direct threat to the Legends, to the men I…

I finally work up the courage to hold my teacup, lifting it with a steady hand as I sip on what is now cold liquid and swallow it down.

Things have changed.

I’ve changed.

And the idea of rejecting the Legends is…

Unfathomable.

There’s no other way to describe it. I used to visualize the ceremony, used to think about the best way to reject them without incurring any of their wrath, but now? I can’t picture me saying anything other than *yes.*

Even to Jax and his obvious distaste for me.

The offer the king presents has made it abundantly clear—there’s no going back for me. I can no longer straddle both sides of the line. I’m either all in with them, or all out.

“Why would you, not only a king of Lumathyst but Pierce’s father, want me to reject them? Isn’t it you and Baydel and the others who are so worried about their draining powers? Powers needed as offerings to keep the goddesses appeased and connected to Lumathyst?”

“Ah, clever. I suspected as much, as you’re capable of holding my son’s interest for longer than a day, but the way your mind works is quite riveting in person. You’re right in that regard,” he admits. “We want our sons’ powers at their full potential, for themselves and for the goddesses’ needs.” He takes another sip of tea before looking at me again. “I mean no disrespect, but your behavior the last two and a half months has been anything but royal decorum. I just don’t see you as our next queen of Lumathyst.”

Shame unfurls inside me, despite his *no disrespect* comment. I may as well be wearing my threadbare Ashlander clothes, as opposed to Axl and Kal’s colors of the finest royal materials.

“Of course, it’s hard to see anyone as a queen when the last ones we had were goddesses,” he continues. “But there’s something about you that is lacking where the others weren’t.” He doesn’t speak the words in a malicious way, more like it’s a simple, logical fact. “Some of the other potentials—the heirs of dukes for certain—had more of that regalness I believe our kingdom needs.”

Acid claws up my throat, but I swallow it down and hold my head up high. “And yet not one of those other potentials made it as far as I have,” I say, my voice only trembling slightly as I shift my right hand on the table. Axl and Kal’s tokens sparkle on my wrist and finger. “Why do you think that is?”

“Why indeed?” he counters. “Regardless of my reasoning, you’ll find no better offer out there. And as you’ve so poignantly brought up, past potentials have left for much less.”

Anger prickles my skin at that admission.

Some of the other potentials were given offers similar to this and left?

They were never genuinely interested in the Legends in the first place, then.

“So,” he says, folding his hands on the table, a move that has me tracking it, suddenly worrying that bolts of energy might spear from those hands and wrap around my neck, disposing of what would be a *shameful* potential. “Will you

take my offer?”

I sip my cold tea once more, mostly to keep my mouth under control and remind myself that I’m talking to an immortal king who could easily take my life right here in this very teashop.

“It’s certainly a generous offer,” I admit, thinking about how much he sweetened it by dangling my sister in front of my face.

I’m sure he has no clue where she is. If he did, he would’ve given me way more details about her to make the offer irresistible.

But it doesn’t matter. Even if he showed me *proof* right now that he had her in his power, it would be hard for me to take the deal.

And that certainty fills me with the courage I need in order to tell the king *no*.

“But I’m going to have to pass,” I finally finish.

Brooks blinks in surprise, barely holding back the shock that ripples over his features before he smooths them out in an indifferent look.

“Interesting,” he says, scooping up his teacup again and holding it close to his lips. “Price is too steep?” he asks.

“The Legends aren’t a price point for me,” I say as clearly as I can. “Never. Not a bargaining chip, either. I’m theirs,” I continue with absolute confidence, despite the fact that I only have two tokens on my right hand and have yet to earn Pierce’s or Jax’s.

“Very interesting,” Brooks says, finishing his tea. “Very, very interesting, Rylee Gray.” He slides away from the table, and I do so as well, bowing as I’m expected to. “Until we meet again,” he says, dipping his head just slightly, the ghost of a smile playing across his lips that I’m sure I’ve mistaken as he turns around and heads out of the teashop.

I slump back into my seat the moment he’s out of sight, doing my best to get a grip on my breath.

“Darling.” Pierce’s voice breaks through my racing thoughts a few moments later, startling me with his sudden appearance at the table. “Are you ready to go home?”

I blink up at him, hurrying out of my seat to wrap my arms around him.

“What is it?” he asks as I cling to him, trembling from the encounter.

I breathe easier as he holds me. “Take me home?” I ask, unable to recount the story for him right this second. I need to think, need to sit with the overwhelming realization that the king so abruptly provided me with tonight.

I *will* choose them.

No matter what is offered.

No matter the risk.

I’m going to choose them.

And it could kill me.

32

Rylee

Pierce guides me out of the teashop, and I hold tight to him as he navigates the velomage back to his estate. By the time we make it into the safety of his bedroom, I feel like I can finally breathe. My heart no longer races, and I feel… relieved and content in my choice.

"Are you ready to talk to me?" Pierce asks as we linger in his bedroom.

"About?" I ask innocently.

Pierce steps closer to me. "About why I saw my father leaving the teashop."

"Ah," I say, nodding. "That."

"Yes, that," he says softly.

I reach for him, stepping close to slide my hands along his muscled arms, anticipation blooming in my chest. "Why don't I just show you?"

Pierce tilts his head. "What do you mean?"

I arch a brow at him. "You know what I mean," I say. "I could easily tell you what your father said to me, but won't showing you satisfy your curiosity so much more?"

Pierce visibly swallows, his warm brown eyes severe. "Are you…quite sure of what you're offering?"

"For you to go inside my mind and replay the conversation?" I nod. "Honestly, I know you trust me," I continue. "But on this…I'd much rather you see it, so you can understand it and every reaction, too."

I take a deep breath, settling in the certainty of my choice. If he bothers to look deep enough, what he finds could change the course of my future.

I'm done waiting, done agonizing. His father's offer of freedom—whether it was genuine or some test set forth by him and the other kings—made everything crystal clear. I'm with the Legends, even if it kills me.

And if they are going to kill me because Pierce uncovers my hidden truths, then so be it.

"You're *willingly* inviting me into your mind," he says.

"You say that like you don't do it all the time."

"I don't," he quickly answers. "You know I don't."

"I know," I say, fiddling with his tie. "But you could if you wanted to. You could enter anyone's mind, and they'd never know."

“Yes,” he admits. “That’s usually why people tend to stay away from me. It’s never bothered me before. I’m an introvert by nature.”

“Well,” I say, sliding the tie from his neck, “you’re free to look into mine on one condition.”

“Anything.” He breathes the word.

“Promise me you’ll let me explain if you find anything you don’t understand.”

“Agreed,” he says. “But of course, you know I won’t go traipsing through your personal thoughts. I’m not an amateur.”

I laugh. “Can there be amateurs if you’re the only one with the gift?”

“Darling, the universe is much too big to believe I’m the only one with these abilities.”

“Good point,” I say, nerves fluttering in my stomach. “So? Do I need to lie down or sit or something?”

Pierce smiles, the look melting me in a way that has me feeling like I’ve made the best decision in the world, regardless of how terrifying it is. He smooths his hands on either side of my face. “Close your eyes,” he whispers. “And let me in.”

I do as I’m told, my pulse skittering. Letting him in means there will truly be no more hiding. And I don’t *want* to hide anymore. I may not have the courage to openly share my secrets, but I don’t have to shut him out entirely, either.

A warm presence glides over my mind, almost like a caress. It has that same signature I felt from before on Axl’s ship—all heat and crackling energy. I breathe deeply, inhaling pure Pierce. He’s everywhere at once, not only standing before me, gently cradling my face, but inside me in a way no one has ever been before.

“I see it,” he says. “The memory.”

And I do, too. The conversation with his father plays out behind my closed lids. I watch the replay from a different angle, like looking at the scene from above, as the speed of the memory increases without my control. I can feel Pierce’s intrigue almost like a citrusy taste on the back of my tongue as the discussion progresses, but then it jerks to a halt and restarts when his father makes the offer and I adamantly decline it.

I feel his quick retreat like a string yanked from the center of my mind. My eyes flutter open, locking with Pierce’s.

“What’s wrong?” I ask, my stomach immediately plummeting at his severe expression.

His eyes are wide and calculating, and his intense power thrashes around the two of us, almost like he’s lost control of it.

“You didn’t leave.” He murmurs the words.

I blink up at him.

"When my father offered you an out…" He wets his lips. "It would've been so easy to *leave*."

I scrunch my brow. "Nothing about leaving any of you would be easy."

He blinks before something clicks in his eyes. Then his mouth is on mine, stealing my breath as he snakes his arms around my hips, bringing our bodies flush.

"You opened your mind to me," he says against my mouth. I fist his shirt, heat from his kiss storming my blood. "I want you to do it again."

I feel his presence there, that warmth with a little more bite, a little more hunger. "Yes," I say, more than ready to let him in.

"If it's too much—"

"It won't be," I cut him off, moaning as he slides his powerful hands over my ass.

"If it is, darling, I need you to say so. I'm not sure I'll be able to stop once we've started."

"I don't want you to stop, Pierce. I've wanted you from the second you opened your mouth at the Choosing. Please," I practically beg.

"Darling." He tilts my head to kiss me at a deeper angle.

Every nerve in my body comes alive with his kiss, some piece of myself unlocked with the taste of him. And then his presence slides into my opened mind, his energy curling around every inch of me, inside and out.

Pleasure floods me in warm waves, and then Pierce breaks our kiss, taking a few steps back. I whimper at the loss of contact, but it turns into a moan as I feel his energy teasing every inch of my skin as if it were his fingers.

Goddess, I can't even move beyond arching into the phantom touch.

I bring my eyes to his, my breaths shaky as he holds me there, suspending and aching with just the power of his mind.

And that's when I realize: Pierce is puppeteering me to his liking.

And goddess save me, I love the way he pulls the strings.

33

Pierce

Sliding into Rylee's mind is as easy as breathing—she's opened that much for me. I don't know if that makes her incredibly brave and trusting or dangerously reckless, but I'm dying to find out.

I'm theirs. The words she so confidently expressed to my father earlier this evening ring out in my own mind. She meant it, too. With every fiber of her being, she meant it. And now, all those luscious fibers are mine to play with.

My eyes skim her body, which looks gorgeous in my fellow Legends' colors of red and blue. I've seen her in emerald, too, and I'm certain there isn't a color she can't pull off. But right now, I want her naked.

Half a thought, and her clothes dissolve from her body, the soft ash caressing her skin on the way down. Her gasp of surprise is delightful.

"Rylee," I say, stunned at the sight of her. She's all luscious skin, long legs, and supple breasts. I want to taste every curve she has, want to unravel every piece of her until she's a limp, sated bundle in my arms.

"You…" I groan at the way she's reacting to my mental touch, to my powers caressing and teasing her body. I can feel her desire flickering against every sensory receptor I possess, like little flames dancing on my skin. She's not afraid—I hold her entire being in my power's grip, and she's not afraid.

"Me, what?" She's breathless, already riding that sweet edge of pleasure with every twist of my power inside her. I seek out the spots that cause her to moan and stroke the sparkling blooms, increasing the mental pressure there.

Her eyes are on me as I slowly approach her. Her sexy black heels are all I've left her wearing, and they dangle just above the floor where I hold her. I unbutton my sleeves, rolling them up to my elbows as I stop in front of her.

"You're flirting with the edge of release," I say, my tone low between us. "I can feel the tension winding up inside you with every subtle flick of my power. Like this…" I roll my energy inside her, and she whimpers, her head leaning back. "Look at me, darling," I say, and her head dips forward. I mentally lift her to my eye level, gently gripping her chin. "You're mine now." She shivers at my words. "Your mind, body, and heart belong to me. So," I say, smiling as I tease her mouth with my tongue, "do what I say and *come*."

Her moan is my new favorite melody as her orgasm floods her body, the taste

of her energy tingling along my tongue like the sweetest sparkling wine. It nearly brings me to my knees, and I haven't even touched her yet, not properly.

All in good time. And we have eons to play.

I've never been more certain in our choice to take things slow these last two weeks, developing what I never knew I needed—an unbreakable bond that I've never experienced before. And after her clear defense of us? Her devotion to us even when my father offered her everything?

She has me…heart and soul and mind.

"Pierce," she says, her breaths ragged. "I want to touch you," she begs. "Please."

She tries to reach for me, but I still have a grip on her senses, her movements. I grin at her, heart pounding, arousal thrumming through me. I haven't wanted to sink inside someone so much in so, so very long. Rylee has been a delicious enigma since the Choosing, and now that I have her all to myself, I'm not sure which fantasy I want to play out first. I've had several in the months she's spent in my fellow Legends' cities.

"Please," she says. "Don't leave my mind. Just let me touch you."

I shudder. The intensity…the sincerity in her words makes me feel as if she's in *my* mind, flaying me open with a power she can't possibly possess.

Her heels gently touch the floor, and every muscle in my body clenches at the way she looks striding toward me—all confidence and desire. She's incredible. And she's mine…at least for now.

Almost timidly, she brushes her mouth over mine. Explorative as she unbuttons my shirt and slides it off my shoulders and down my arms, letting it fall to the floor. She doesn't stop kissing me as her fingers find my pants, and I stroke my tongue into her mouth before she pulls back. She smirks at me and tugs my pants down, gliding to her knees while she does it.

Fuck. Me.

The most adorable look of delighted surprise flutters over her features as she comes face-to-face with the evidence of how much I want her. Nothing about Rylee is for show; not an inch of her is doing this for my power, wealth, or position. Everything in her eyes—flicking up at me as she wraps her hands around my length—speaks of nothing but want and primal need. As if she feels as connected to me as I do to her.

And her mind…fuck, I'm still in there, caressing her mental self, teasing and stroking her most favorite spots, and every piece of her wants me for *me*. I can sense it all around her being—she wants me for my wit, my intelligence. She loves the way I kiss the back of her hand and the way my tongue rolls over the term of endearment I've given her.

After months of being unable to crack through her unknown mental walls, she's let me in willingly, and it's…everything.

"Darling," I say just to feel her shiver in delight.

"Yes?" she asks, stroking my length in too-light touches, teasing me until I jerk my hips forward in her grasp.

I smooth my fingers through her hair, looking down at her. "You don't need to be on your knees for me," I say, urging her up, but she stops me, shaking her head.

"What part of this position do you think is about you?" she asks, grinning deviously.

A jolt of awareness ripples through me, and before I can respond, she wraps her lips around my shaft and sucks me into her mouth. "Fuck," I hiss, head arching back as she takes me deeper. She swirls her tongue, her hand still firmly gripped around my base as she squeezes and works me into fucking oblivion.

She moans, and the vibrations tremble down my shaft. "Rylee," I groan as she takes me deeper, her mind still in my grasp. I lose the damper I constantly keep on my powers, and she shudders at the shift in intensity but doesn't stop. "If it's too much," I say, but she moans over me again, moving faster, as if to show nothing is too much for her.

Her determination and strength are practically screaming at me through my connection to her mind, and she's not boasting—she's the strongest mate potential I've ever felt, quite possibly as strong as the Legends…

And that knowledge creates a thread that weaves further down, deeper inside her, where I find—

Rylee adjusts her angle, and I bottom out in her throat, the sensation jerking me firmly to the present. "Darling," I groan as she ups her speed and tightens her grip. "I'm going to come." Sparks rip their way up my spine as my release builds. I reach out, spreading my powers throughout her essence, teasing every nerve ending, brushing my power against the thousands of receptors aching for pressure until she comes again. Her moans around my length shove me right over the edge.

I try to pull away in time, unsure of what she prefers, what she wants, but she holds me tighter—and that move alone makes me spill into her mouth. She swallows me down, and I swear I'm in fucking *love*.

I ride the high, gently pulling out. I rub my thumb over her swollen lips, then draw her up to my level.

"I've been thinking about how your lips would look wrapped around me since the Choosing," I say, grinning down at her. "But you've exceeded every fantasy I could've possibly had. That deserves a reward."

Her skin is already flushed from her two orgasms, but her eyes brighten at my words. “Oh?”

“Tell me where you want me to take you,” I say, skimming my fingers along the line of her jaw, down her neck, and then over her bare breasts. She arches into the touch, inhaling at the energy I weave around her body. “I can take you anywhere you can imagine.”

“Kal took me up in the sky,” Rylee says, and heat spears through my body as she shows me her memories of the way he claimed her with the stars surrounding them. Fuck, they look amazing together.

“Axl took me on his ship.” Her mind shifts to that memory, fueling the fire licking my skin. “And they took me together,” she continues, then bites her bottom lip.

“Fuck,” I groan as the scene plays out in my mind. Axl and Kal have shared her so many times, so many different ways. And each one looks better than the next. “You appear to enjoy being taken by multiple men, darling,” I say. “Wait until I take you.”

Her eyes flicker down between us to where I’m already growing hard for her again. She knows what she’s doing by drawing up those specific memories, taunting me, teasing me, challenging me to do better. Well, two can play that game.

“Then that’s what I want,” she answers, splaying her palms over my chest and rising on her tiptoes to bring her lips to mine. “You don’t have to take me anywhere. I just want you.”

I swallow around the emotion clogging my throat and crush my lips against hers. “You want me?”

“Yes,” she breathes against my mouth.

“All of me?” I ask, needing her to be absolutely clear.

She draws back just enough to meet my eyes, every ounce of her being radiating the word *yes.*

I smile down at her. “Then that’s exactly what you’ll get.”

34

Rylee

Pierce strokes my tongue with his, stealing my breath again and again. He draws me flush against him, the contact a release in itself. I can feel him everywhere, against my body and in my mind.

Lips press against my back, startling me out of the kiss. I whirl around to find Pierce standing there, even though my back is also pressed against his chest.

“Two of you,” I say, amazed.

“I can create more if you’d like,” he says, every inch of his voice unflinching confidence.

I blink, and more Pierces fill the room, his power growing and expanding, the pressure of it tightly hugging my bones. I know that there aren’t a dozen Pierces standing in this room. I know it’s just a new reality he’s spinning in my mind, but it *feels* real. The power he wields is intense and infinite—because if the mind believes, so does the body—and right now, I have two carbon copies of Pierce *touching* me while others are watching.

“I don’t know if I can handle more than two of you,” I admit, laughing as my head spins with the possibilities.

Emerald ribbons of light shimmer around the other copies before they disappear, leaving just the two touching and teasing me.

“Do you trust me, darling?” he asks, his lips at the shell of my ear while the copy runs his fingers down my sides, gripping my hips and kissing my breasts.

“Yes,” I say, though there is a small piece of me that is trembling with the game we’re playing. He’s in my mind, controlling it, deciding what I see and feel and experience. I’ve never given that kind of control to anyone before. And there are still parts of me that are guarded, buried, things I can feel acting like little roadblocks to the waves of his energy as they skirt around inside me.

“Then close your eyes,” he says.

My eyes flutter shut and my breathing hitches as he gently clutches my shoulders and slowly spins me around a few times. I’m half wondering how ridiculous I look, standing there naked save for my heels and twirling in circles, but he stops me after a few moments.

I open my eyes again, but a flash of green light covers them, the sensation like velvet. A magical blindfold, the trickster.

“We’re going to keep them closed,” he says, and my entire body tingles with anticipation.

One set of hands touches me this time, and I can hear one of the Pierces circling to stand behind me. He brushes my loose hair to the side, gliding his fingers over my skin. I tremble beneath his touch.

Another set of hands teases my breasts, palming them before rolling my nipples, making them taut. It’s overwhelming, feeling him everywhere. It’s different than when Axl and Kal are with me at the same time. They have different signatures, a touch unique to them that allows me to tell who is who. This is one hundred percent Pierce—his energy, his power, his essence.

I gasp as he slides a hand around my hip and dips his fingers between my thighs. A spark zaps down my center as he slides through my heat, slick from everything he did to me without even touching me.

But now that he is?

It’s like an unbreakable connection has sparked to life inside me, and with every surge of need comes an internal stroke of his power, playing with all the senses I possess like a cat toying with its prey.

His muscled chest presses against my back as his fingers stroke my aching core. Then I feel a hot breath over one of my nipples before his lips close around it. He’s kissing my neck, too, playing with that spot just beneath my ear that causes me to arch against him. I moan, my muscles clenching at all the sensations.

“I can feel how much you’re burning for me,” he says, lips at my ear. His hand increases its pace between my thighs while his other self worships my breasts, sucking and flicking until they’re heavy and aching.

“Good,” I say, rocking into his hand as I reach out and grip the Pierce in front of me. “I want you to feel it. I want you to feel me. All of me.”

He shudders behind me, and the Pierce in front of me lightly bites one of my nipples, causing me to rock harder against the hand between my thighs. It’s a maelstrom of pleasure, building and swirling until I’m sure I’ll combust.

“You want me to fuck you, darling,” he says, and I honestly can’t tell which one is speaking at this point. I’m buzzing, soaring, begging to be shoved over the edge to fly. “I can feel how badly you need it.”

“Yes,” I groan as he withdraws his fingers, settling on teasing me with too-light brushes. The one in front of me joins the fun, following the fingers with his tongue—all too light, all too slow.

“Please,” I beg, sighing at each new tease. The darkness really adds an entirely new element to this, layered on top of feeling him in so many different places at once. “Pierce, *please*.”

“I’ll give it to you,” he says, removing his hand from between my thighs to grip my hips. He presses his hard length against my ass, and I shiver. “But you have to tell me which one of us is *real*.”

“What?” I gasp.

He rocks behind me, bending at the knees to slide his shaft between my thighs, rubbing along my entrance once before pulling it away. The Pierce in front of me does the same; they both feel hard, thick, and hot against my aching flesh.

“Oh, *goddess*,” I moan, rocking my hips in an attempt to get either one of them inside me. Hot, searing tension builds in my core as they stay just out of my reach.

“Am I the real one?” he asks from the front, flicking his tongue over my nipple again.

“Or is it me?” the exact same voice asks from behind me, planting kisses down my neck.

Pierce’s power is rampant inside me, like he’s taken off all his shields. His energy consumes me as it pulses, spinning this fantasy.

“If I answer wrong?” I ask, barely able to form a full sentence.

“You’ll only get my mouth,” the two Pierces answer together.

Damn him. I’d hoped that only one would answer.

“That doesn’t sound too bad,” I say, but my voice is tense. I reach out with my senses, focusing on each gentle touch, each lick, each sigh I hear from them both.

An impossible test, but a test all the same.

Everything since the Choosing has been a test, but this one feels deeper, more personal. This is Pierce’s own way of deciding if I’m worth his token, his support, his choice, just like Kal’s with the way I treated his people or Axl’s with the trapped creature in the sea.

Those tests were easier than this. Pierce is a master at manipulating minds, and I’m the fool who let him all the way in.

“Clock is ticking, darling,” he says, dragging his teeth along the seam of my neck.

I glide my hands over the Pierce in front of me, touching his shoulders, down his arms, and back up again. He feels so damn real. It *could* be him, but there is a slight warmth beneath my fingers, almost like a candle, that feels…other.

And I can’t explain it, but there is something inside me, something deep and aching, that keeps following a connection behind me, like a band of that emerald energy of his, begging me to turn around.

Is that Pierce’s power playing a trick on me? Trying to trip me up? Or is it the connection we’ve shared since the night of the Choosing?

I reach behind me, timidly trailing my fingers over his face, skimming the line of his jaw, his neck, and back up to his cheeks. This touch feels more powerful, more real. And that could very well be because Pierce wants it to feel that way, but I can't shake my instincts, so I follow them and turn.

I still can't see anything, thanks to the magical blindfold, so I cup his face in my hands, using touch to navigate my way to his lips. Sparks burst beneath my skin as I kiss him, and I know this has to be real.

"You," I say against his mouth. "You're the real Pierce."

"Are you certain?" the Pierce behind me asks, and I nod against the one I'm kissing.

"Absolutely," I say, my heart racing.

The touch behind me disappears, and Pierce lifts the blindfold from my eyes. I blink a few times, my heart in my throat.

Pierce is looking down at me like he's seeing me clearly for the first time.

"Rylee." My name rasps from his lips.

I spare a glance behind me, noting that nothing is there, and then grin up at him. "Have I earned this?" I ask, reaching between us to grip his length.

He thrusts into my hand once before pulling my palm back up to the center of his chest. "You've earned this," he says, planting his hand over mine and pressing it harder against his heart.

I swallow around the lump of emotion in my throat.

"And that is much more valuable," he says, studying me with a curiosity that makes me feel priceless and treasured.

"True." I bite down on my smile, eyes flicking from his to his lips and back again. "But," I say, a playfulness in my voice, "can I still have it?"

His grin is delicious—and then we're on his bed and I'm splayed out on my back. I don't even have time to ask him how he did it because he spreads my thighs and settles between them, thoroughly distracting me.

He holds my gaze as he glides into me, sinking in to the hilt so fast I whimper. For a few seconds, he lets me adjust to his size, but he's already given me multiple orgasms, so I don't need much. I roll my hips, and he shudders above me. Emerald ribbons of his energy curl out from behind him, almost as if he can't contain them while he's lost in me.

The idea makes me *liquid*.

He pulls all the way out only to slam home again. I arch against him, my back bowing off the bed as he sinks into me over and over. I grip the sheets, my pleasure building like a cresting wave. Pierce is inside me in so many ways—between my thighs, beneath my skin, stroking me into an oblivion I'm certain I never want to end.

“Fuck,” he groans, upping his pace. “Where did you come from?”

My eyes fly open, momentarily shocking me right out of my orbital bliss. His eyes are locked on me as he pumps into me, the motion a dominant claim.

“Surely, the stars,” he says, leaning down to brush a hot kiss over my lips. “Because you were made for me.” He rocks against my center while bottoming out inside me, his energy beneath my skin flaring and flickering like flame. “For *us*.”

My orgasm rips through me, shaking my entire body as he continues to draw it out, coax it right into another one by thrusting again and again. Emerald ribbons slide between us, teasing my nipples even as he holds me tight, pumping into me with abandon.

“Pierce,” I groan. “I can’t…”

“You can,” he says. “And you will.”

Shivers dance over my skin, his bands of energy sliding between my thighs, circling my swollen, oversensitive flesh while he unleashes himself on me.

Goddess, maybe I was *made* for him, made for each of them, because I’m quite certain I could stay here forever and never get enough.

“Now,” he demands, and his energy crackles against my flesh, sending bursts of euphoria along my skin, my muscles, every pleasurable spot I have.

I grip his back, holding on as I convulse again. This orgasm is better than the last because he spills inside me at the same time. We’re in sync, our minds connected by his powers. My body his to command. He could tell me to fly right now, and I would.

Pierce smooths my wild hair away from my face, looking down at me with an expression I’m pretty sure I understand but won’t dare say out loud. A soft heat sweeps over my left index finger, and he draws it up so I can see it.

A ring is nestled there. It’s gold and in the shape of a spider—his mother’s insignia. Inside the spider’s abdomen is a large, glimmering emerald.

His token.

“But,” I say, eyes welling. “It hasn’t been a full month—”

“I don’t need a month,” he says, then presses his lips to mine. “I choose you.” Something shifts over his features—a seriousness I can’t quite place. He kisses me again, and my heart responds, racing and expanding. He draws back just enough to look at me. “And don’t worry, darling,” he says. “I’ll keep your secret until you’re ready to share it with all of us.”

35

Rylee

I'm a coward.

I didn't say a fucking word when Pierce said he'd keep my secret—and that was nearly two weeks ago. I just stared at him for a few heartbeats and then attacked him with kisses and worshipped his body until he fell asleep.

It wasn't my most brave and heroic move, but it's all I had.

Sure, I can say I'm confident in my role here all I want, but when it came down to it? When he confronted me with the truth?

I froze.

And I *hate* that I don't even know which secret he uncovered while I submitted my mind to him. Is it that I'm an Ashlander? Or that I'm a demi? Or both?

He's never once mentioned it in our time together since he brought it up.

And I still don't have the courage to ask.

Not even as the clock runs out on my time in the Emerald Wood, with only two days left to spend with Pierce.

Pierce, who has been wonderful and accommodating, who has challenged me intellectually and emotionally and connected with me on levels I couldn't even imagine. Pierce, who knows one of my secrets and hasn't judged me, yelled at me, or tried to harm me.

Pierce, who is leading me through one of his favorite nightclubs in the Emerald Wood, this one with boisterous live music consisting of strings and piano and brass instruments that fill the space with a melodic rhythm that has people dancing and swaying on the dance floor in practiced moves they somehow all seem to know.

It's a wonderful distraction, especially as Axl and Kal join us at Pierce's table. The absence of Jax is so evident it almost hurts. But I ignore the space where he should be sitting and hug Axl and Kal, grateful for this time together.

It isn't long before Pierce beckons me onto the dance floor.

"I don't know any of these steps," I admit when I reach him.

"Just follow my lead, darling," Pierce says, clearly noting my panic as we step onto the floor among all the dancers simultaneously moving in a rehearsed way.

"Do you trust me?" he asks when I haven't relaxed as we move, afraid I might

make some misstep and be outed for the Ashlander I am.

I meet his gaze and nod. “I trust you.”

How could I not after everything?

Pierce smiles deeply, one hand in mine and the other on my hip as he spins me around the dance floor. The more I relax, the easier the moves become, and then we’re folding right into the crowd of his people, laughing and smiling as we bounce and dip and spin.

Mid-song, Axl sweeps in, scooping me up and inserting himself into the dance, making me laugh harder as we keep up to the beat of the music.

And then it’s Kal leading me, the shift between partners smooth and graceful as they pass me around in a world of music and melody and movement that has my head spinning and my heart racing in the best of ways.

We laugh and dance until I’m no longer thinking about anything outside of the pure joy it is to be with the three of them.

We dance until my feet hurt in my heeled shoes and sweat dots my brow.

We dance as if we have all the time in the world, as if the approaching dawn doesn’t signify my last day in the Emerald Wood.

We dance as if we aren’t going to be expected at a kings’ dinner tomorrow and I won’t be venturing into Jax’s city the day after.

We dance as if none of these problems exist and no obstacles line our paths until this present becomes our future reality.

But eventually the music stops and I have to say goodbye to Kal and Axl one more time.

And even as I tumble into bed with Pierce, exhausted from a brilliant night of fun, I can’t help but cling to this moment, wanting it to last a little longer.

Because I’m terrified that when I go to Jax, he’ll be the one who ends up rejecting me after all, bringing this little fantasy I’ve been living to a crashing, burning end.

• • •

I fiddle with the spider ring Pierce gifted me, the emerald flickering beneath the lights in the entryway of his home.

“Are you sure I must go now?” I ask, having returned from a thankfully uneventful kings’ dinner. Pierce’s father had been kind to me, even spoken softly when he inquired about my favorite parts of the Emerald Wood, almost as if he regretted our conversation a couple of weeks ago.

And as much as I wanted that dinner to end, it’s hard to say goodbye to Pierce

now.

Mirren has already packed my things, and Pierce helped her load them into the carriage.

He smooths his hands down my arms, drawing me close. “I would keep you forever if I could, darling,” he says. “But I must share you.”

“I’m nervous,” I admit. “Jax… He hasn’t…” I can barely find the right words.

Pierce intertwines our fingers. “I will admit, I wasn’t sure about Jax’s choice that first evening or even weeks after.” He flashes me an apologetic smile. “You were different than any before, and while I knew that might be the best change of pace, I was afraid.” He sighs. “I’m afraid every Choosing.” He squeezes my hands tighter. “The pressure of finding the perfect mate is a daunting problem that I’ve had no control over. Even when I made my selection, it was wrong.” Something calculating flickers behind his eyes. “And now I believe it’s because *we* were the ones choosing.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I don’t think Jax chose you like we’ve done in the past,” he explains. “I think he *had* to choose you. I think he felt the connection we’ve all felt and couldn’t deny it, almost as if you walked into the party and chose us instead.”

My heart expands a little at his declaration, but my spirit instantly falls.

That’s not even close to the reason I was there.

The image of my sister flutters across my mind, followed by the deep ache in my chest with the uncertainty of her whereabouts. None of Pierce’s connections, or Axl’s or Kal’s, have been able to locate her, which has sat heavily on my chest for weeks now.

It doesn’t matter that I’ve convinced myself her *forget me* painting in the Ruby Aire was an outward declaration of her not wanting to be found…it still hurts.

Pierce flinches as if he can feel the pain radiating from me, and it’s only then that I sense the soft warmth of his presence in my mind.

Fear and panic streak through my veins, but he simply skirts a hand along my cheek, pressing his forehead to mine.

“I promise,” he whispers. “I’m doing everything in my power to find her.”

The sincerity in his words brings tears to my eyes, but I quickly suck in a breath, not wanting our last private moments to be spent crying.

“You should stop spending your resources on it.” I hate to admit that out loud, but it’s the truth. “We have to focus on the quickly approaching winter solstice and the Athanry,” I hurry to say. “Perhaps my sister simply doesn’t want to be found.” My heart clenches in my chest. “I’m starting to believe that if she wanted to be, she would be.”

“I admire your courage in accepting that possibility,” he says, and the depth of

that understanding radiates in his eyes. “But I won’t stop searching. None of us will. You deserve closure and peace about her well-being, regardless of the motivation behind it in the first place.”

I sigh, nodding. I’m so grateful for him…for all of them, I don’t even know where to begin in the way of thanking them.

“You’re sure about this?” I ask after a few moments, because I really need the assurance right now.

“Rylee, darling,” he says, bringing our bodies flush as he tips my head back with the hand on my cheek. “I don’t want you to go, but you must. It’s Jax’s turn. The sooner you two sort out your differences, the sooner we can all start the final bonding process.”

“Differences,” I say, shaking my head in his palm. I focus on that problem instead of the giant one at hand.

How am I to accept the bonds with these Legends officially and undergo the Athanry when they don’t know my secrets?

“That’s an understatement,” I continue. “Jax has been indifferent toward me since the night of the Choosing. I *know* he regrets his choice.”

“Can you read minds now, darling?” Pierce asks, teasing his lips over mine and making me shiver.

“No, but Jax isn’t that hard to read.”

“He’s the hardest to read, even for me.” He leans down, kissing me again, longer this time, enough to soothe the aching tension in my chest, enough to make me forget that I’m about to leave.

“You know that it doesn’t matter if you, Axl, and Kal have given me your tokens, your choice…if Jax doesn’t, if he finds me lacking…”

Then we’re all screwed.

And he’s the one I’ve worried about most. Not only because I was so instantly drawn to him that night, but because he’s the one whose approval I’ve sought most this entire time and I’ve *never* gotten it. He hates liars, and he knows I’m lying to them every single day. How can I be expected to fix that tangled mess?

“No one is perfect, Rylee,” he says, and I scan his face for deception. Because he can’t be fully telling the truth. Not if he knows where I come from. Not if he knows I’m a forbidden anomaly living in a world designed to hate me. “We all have flaws. You’ve seen enough of ours to understandably send you running, but you haven’t.” He sighs. “Jax is complicated. Try to put yourself in his position. His father is a liar by nature, someone who constantly tests and punishes him for simply being what he is. Since birth, Jax has been bombarded with other peoples’ emotions. Yes, he can control them, but the constant state of feeling what others do, of knowing how they feel about him…”

The sentence hangs there as Pierce's features shift. He and Jax are the closest out of the four, and there's genuine concern in his eyes.

"He's rarely met a person who isn't terrified of him," he explains. "With who his father is and how he behaves, it's not hard for people to make the stretch that he's the same cold, heartless fool Baydel is. The Nightmare," he says, shaking his head. "A Legend who delights in manipulating emotions simply because he can. He could make you feel nothing but desire for him without so much as touching you, or he could make you tremble with fear or turn you against him with the iciest hate in existence."

When he says it like that, explaining it in that way… Goddess, no wonder Jax is so closed off to everyone around him. I doubt anyone outside his fellow Legends has seen him for who he really is, accepted it, and loved him because of it.

My heart sinks to my stomach. Falling for Kal was as easy as breathing, and I think I loved Axl the moment he playfully called me *kitten*. But Pierce and Jax are different. Pierce tested me, made me earn his trust, his attention, but now? Now there is nothing left between us except this connection I can't deny.

And Jax?

I swallow around the emotion clogging my throat.

"Jax treats me like the biggest mistake of his life," I admit on a whisper. "What are we going to do if he truly does hate me and rejects me?"

He could do it, too. He has the ability to shut this all down. Sure, I'll have more power at the official Choosing ceremony where I choose them as my lifelong mates, accepting them for who they are down to their cores…but if he wants, he could reject me before all this is done.

Pierce dips down, kissing me again before pulling back. "If that happens," he says, though he sounds doubtful, "we'll deal with it then."

"Right. We have more important things to focus on." The upcoming Athanry, if we make it that far, and the Faders who have gone quiet in a way that puts us all on edge.

Pierce draws my hand up, planting a kiss over the ring he gave me. "I don't give this out lightly, darling. *You* are the most important thing to me now," he says. "My mate—if not official, then in my heart."

My lungs tighten at his words.

I've never been loved like this before, from all three of them, and it's overwhelming to say the least. I'm accustomed to being used and discarded like yesterday's trash. This… How is it harder to swallow?

There is still a very big part of me that believes they will all laugh in my face at the final Choosing, when I choose them and unlock their powers by

undergoing the Athanry, and if I survive, they'll kick me out of their lives at the very public event, then incarcerate me for being what I am for good measure.

Why is that more believable than the compassion they've already shown me these last few months? And will there ever be a time when I stop doubting and start accepting? When I believe I'm a fraction good enough for them?

"Darling," Pierce chides. "I'm doing my best to stay out of your mind and give you privacy, but I can't help hearing what you're basically shouting at me." He shifts us, maneuvering me to the nearest wall, pinning me against it with his body. "What will it take for you to believe me when I tell you I want every piece of you? Even the ones you've kept hidden from us?"

I shiver against him, my heart racing in my chest.

Maybe it isn't about me needing him to convince me.

Maybe I need to convince myself.

He must read that, either in my eyes or my mind, because he simply sighs and claims my mouth in a breath-stealing kiss that has my toes curling in my shoes.

"I want to stay." I sigh between his lips as he hooks my leg around his hip and pushes against me.

"I want you to stay, too," he says, drawing back just enough to look at me with fire in his eyes. "But…" He clears his throat, stepping back just enough for us to both breathe. "I can't be selfish with you right now. You know that myself or Axl or Kal would accompany you, should you ask, but…" He takes my hand in his again, rubbing his thumb over the back. "I know my friend," he says, eyes on my hand, as if looking at me will trigger another wave of need too powerful for either of us to deny. "He won't open up to you if we're there to act as buffers. And whatever is ailing him…you're the only one who can help him."

"I think you're seriously off base on this one."

He finally looks at me, a little smirk on his lips at me openly challenging his assumptions. I doubt that happens to the Mind often, and the fact that I'm one of the few gives me a little flutter of power.

"You trust me, don't you?" he asks.

How could I not trust him? I opened my mind to him in every way possible, and yet, here I stand, cared for, practically adored. Not in a prison, not gearing up for an execution.

Pierce may have doubted me in the beginning, but now? Now I can feel his intentions through that connection we share, and the fear and panic in my heart have quieted. If he's planning to betray me in the end, then he's a master manipulator and the best actor I've ever met.

"Yes," I finally say, opening my mind another fraction, allowing that warmth of his to slide right in. The sensation has me arching against him, my blood

thrumming with need. It's a primal thing, an instinctual thing, and I'd rather submit myself to the throes of it than step one foot outside this house and face the one Legend who may end it all for me.

"Good," he says. "Then please, do me a favor and help him. He will never ask for it, never admit it, but he needs you. Probably more than all of us combined."

I swallow hard, nodding. "I'll do my best."

"Then I have no doubts everything will work out," he says, brushing another kiss along my mouth. He kisses his way across my jawline and up to the shell of my ear. "And just think how all four of us will ravage you once we're given the chance."

Streaks of lava spear through my veins, the heat settling between my thighs at the image he's painted. The same image I fantasized about when Ivy forged the invitation to the Choosing for me. Goddess, that feels like years ago, not mere months.

I'd laughed at the idea then, secretly envisioning what it would be like to have four powerful men like them consume me entirely.

And now?

It could be my reality. My soul soars at just the thought.

But just as quickly, my hopes are dashed. Because Kal, Axl, and Pierce might've taken to me, but Jax is the Nightmare.

And Nightmares don't fall in love and live happily ever after.

THE OBSIDIAN CITY

36

Rylee

“I’ve never seen Pierce so happy,” Mirren says as our carriage rumbles into the Obsidian City, the horses’ hooves clip-clopping along the cobblestone road.

I fiddle with Pierce’s ring, switching between his, Kal’s, and Axl’s bracelet hugging my wrist. The tokens give me hope, but it’s hard to keep the doubts at bay.

“Really?” I ask, unable to stop the onslaught of thoughts as we drive toward Jax’s home.

Pierce knows my secret—one of them, at least—and he hasn’t used it to his advantage, hasn’t held it over my head in a power play.

My skin crawls as I remember every single time Turner caught me past curfew or outside my boundaries and used that crime to his advantage.

Hands too rough on my skin. His tongue forcing its way into my mouth. A single, traitorous tear sliding down my cheek as I take it, knowing it’s this or the dungeons.

“Yes,” Mirren says as we turn down another road, jarring me from the memories. Those are real nightmares, not whatever Jax thinks he is.

That thought steels my nerves. I’ll just have to prove that to him.

“I’ve known the princes since birth,” she reminds me. “I know their moods as easily as my own. They’re a handful, to say the least, but they’re…special.” She eyes me from where she sits on the cushioned bench across from me. “I didn’t think you could handle it when I first met you.”

“That makes two of us.” I laugh.

“But you’ve proven me wrong, Rylee,” she says, and I swear the sharp, rigid woman sounds somewhat soft.

“Wait,” I say, grinning ridiculously as I span the distance between us, scooching close to her. “Are you saying you *like* me?”

“No.” She swats at my hand on her shoulder. “No embracing.”

I laugh, falling back into my seat across the carriage. But I can see it there—the slightest hint of approval. Well, if I can earn that from the hardest woman I know, then maybe, just maybe, I can get the Nightmare to dream with me.

Our carriage pulls into a gated estate, the brick walls surrounding the property high and ominous. The house itself is made from obsidian, naturally, and looks

like something out of a dark fairy tale I read ages ago. It's all slick black rock with carvings of wild beasts laid into the stone, with wrought iron bars over the windows and spindly pieces jutting along the roof.

"Cozy," I say as Mirren and I head inside with our bags.

I scan the space, inhaling deeply and shivering at the smell of Jax *everywhere*. Smoke and leather have my senses tingling with anticipation, and I reassure myself of what I decided earlier—I will prove to Jax that I'm not afraid of him. That I'm not like the others who've come before me. I'll prove to him that whatever nightmares he can dish out, I can take without a flinch. Because that's what he needs, and honestly, it's who I *am*. I've suffered enough living nightmares to hold my own.

If I can do that…if I can get him to love me despite being a liar, maybe we'll be able to move forward and create the kinds of changes Lumathyst needs.

Mirren guides me down a set of black walnut stairs that seem to go on forever before we reach a lush basement as big as the main floor. The charcoal carpets are soft beneath our shoes, and the walls are black brick, with shelves packed with books stacked haphazardly throughout. A stone fireplace crackles across the room, leather couches centered around it and perched atop a thick, fluffy silver rug, and a glass bar cart filled with crystal decanters rests to the side.

She leads me through this main room and down a joining hallway, turning into the first door on the left.

"This is your room," she says, and I feel as if we've done this a hundred times now. It's a luxurious space but moody in a way that's comforting. Mirren points across the hall at another closed door. "That's Jax's room," she says, and my eyebrows perk up. "He's not here." She looks at me with what I'm sure is pity, but that can't be right because Mirren never shows pity.

My heart instantly drops to my stomach, but I try to not show the sting. "Why?" It's the only word I can choke out.

Mirren takes to unpacking my things, her brow furrowed.

Anger slices through my veins, and I fold my arms over my chest, my mind wandering back to the way Kal and Axl and even Pierce greeted me when I came to their territories.

"I mean," I say, shaking my head, "I don't need the royal treatment, but a 'hello, glad you're here' would've been nice." I grab some of my clothes, helping Mirren store them away in the wardrobe in the corner.

"Jax isn't like the others," she says. "You can't compare them."

"I'm not comparing them," I whine. Not out loud, anyway. "I know they're all different," I continue, my muscles clenching from the adrenaline racing through my veins. Why is it that whenever Jax is involved, my fight-or-flight instincts

are at an all-time high? “But this is a clear indicator he doesn’t want me here. Why should I even bother?”

Mirren tips her chin at me, holding some of my pants against her chest. “Really,” she says, for once in total agreement. “Why should you?”

I narrow my eyes. She *never* agrees with me.

Pierce’s words about the Nightmare come back to me, along with a flutter of memories from the night of the Choosing. I may have been equally dreading and longing for this moment since that night. But he clearly doesn’t care, or he wants me to *think* he doesn’t care. Maybe this is a test, to see if I’m brave enough to seek him out…to see if I think he’s worth seeking out.

My heart breaks a little at that thought, and it feels like the closest to the truth.

Well, fuck that. I’m not scared of the bastard; I’m *angry* with him.

“Do you know where he is?”

Mirren smiles, just a little. “He’s at his favorite club, Lust.”

A thrill shoots through me. This will go either very well or very badly, but I’m not about to sit here and pout while waiting for him to give me some goddess-damn attention. He chose me, and it’s about time he dealt with his decision.

“Will you help me get ready?” I ask, glancing down at the silk gown I wore from the Emerald Wood.

Mirren visibly brightens before she starts digging through my clothes. “Don’t I always?” she asks and then gets to work.

Thirty minutes later, I look like I’m ready for battle—well, maybe a sex battle, because *damn.* Black strings of fabric crisscross around my legs, the material looking like the nets Axl’s fisherman use. My feet are tucked into a pair of black boots that are standard for riding the Legends’ magical velomages. Almost-too-tiny black leather shorts hug my ass, and a long-sleeve black lace shirt covers my top half, the hint of my silver bra teasing just beneath.

Mirren has kept my hair down and slightly messy, smearing my lips in a bloodred shade while painting my eyes with a dark, smoky shadow that matches the rest of my outfit.

Goddess, *I* want to fight me or fuck me, and maybe that’s all Jax needs for me to prove that I’m not afraid of him. To show him I’m not going anywhere, no matter how many times he calls me a liar, no matter how much he pretends to hate me. I know he doesn’t. He may not like me very much, but he can’t hate me. He proved that when he had my back during the Fader attack in the Sapphire Cove. He needs to see that I’m not going to reject him.

Reject any of them.

“You know this one will be the hardest,” Mirren says. “Are you sure you want to even try?”

There's the protective instinct I've noticed comes out whenever I'm about to formally attach myself to one of the Legends. Mirren isn't any of their mothers, but she definitely adopted that role when the goddesses went to sleep.

"You still aren't being totally honest with them," she says, shocking the goddesses out of me. She waves off my panicked look. "No need to make up some horseshit, girl. I've been with you since the beginning. You think I'm so unobservant? Why do you think I'm always so insistent that I'm the only one who does your hair?"

I open and close my mouth a few times.

She knows. She fucking knows.

So, why hasn't she turned me in?

Why hasn't she gone straight to Baydel? She could be rewarded for this kind of information.

Before I can come up with a reason, she steps toward me, eyes scanning my face. "This is it. Time is almost up. And I've watched you with Kal and Axl and Pierce. I've watched your attitude change. I've watched you fall. But if this is all an act because of what you're clearly hiding, if you reject them after *all* of this… I will *end* you."

I purse my lips, respecting her bluntness. Her threat isn't like those from Baydel, who delights in making my life a living nightmare and gets off on scaring me into submission. No, she's just stating facts. She'll kill me if I hurt them after accepting their tokens and wearing them proudly, because she loves them. Loves them like her own.

"I…" I blow out a breath, trying to find the right words. I feel like a piece of shit for not coming clean right here, but my entire life has been built around not speaking the words aloud. "I never wanted to be a mate," I admit, and she arches an eyebrow at me. "I didn't go to the Choosing with the hopes and dreams of the other women in attendance. I didn't want this. I never wanted to be queen or whatever I'll be at the end of all this. But none of that matters now."

"Why?"

"Because there is only one thing I know now with absolute certainty."

"And that is?"

"I can't leave them."

"Not even Jax?" she challenges.

I think back to the night of the Choosing, to the way my heart skipped when I first heard his laugh, the way I felt when he caught me in the library, the way he held me while we danced. Wherever that Jax went, I'm determined to find him again.

Even if I have to swim through nightmares to find him.

“Especially Jax,” I admit with brutal honesty.

Mirren smiles at me, her approval giving me more confidence than I’ll ever admit to her. She’d likely smack me if I did.

“Then what are you waiting for?”

It only takes us twenty minutes to make it to Lust, and I’ve used that time to royally amp myself up. By the time my boots hit the pavement outside the club, I’m raring for a fight because I *know* that’s what it’ll take to get Jax to open up to me, to get him to believe that sometimes people lie to protect the ones they love.

I’ll have to come at him head-on in order to get him to crack.

Mirren leaves me outside the front of the club, muttering a *good luck* under her breath before she takes off. She must have some confidence in me, because she doesn’t say she’ll be back at any certain time to pick me up. And the Occuli only observe me going inside the club rather than following me in, which makes me think Jax has some rules about them in his establishments.

Which makes perfect sense the minute I’m waved in by the guards at the doors and fully step into Lust.

The place is massive, with thrumming music playing so loud, it’s a marvel anyone can hear in here. The lighting is dark and moody, with bursts of flashing lights in different areas of the trilevel space. The club is clearly drenched in magic.

The main level consists of a giant dance floor and bar, where people are drinking and grinding against one another like there’s no one watching. Goddesses above, there are people who are practically naked as they rock against each other.

My entire body goes hot and taut all at once at the scene, and I quickly tear my eyes off them. I grab a drink at the bar, throwing back a shot of whiskey to help calm my nerves. Jax will be able to tell in a split second how I’m feeling, and the only thing I want him to sense is confidence—and maybe a heaping dose of desire, because let’s be real, I’ve wanted him since the night he chose me.

After a quick scan of the main floor, I wander up to the second level, keeping to the railing of the balcony that overlooks the dance floor below. This level is teeming with gambling—everything from cards to dice to other games I’ve never seen before but I’m mildly interested to try. I’ve never gambled with anything but my life, and to do it for money sounds like an interesting pastime.

There are three bars on this level, smaller than the one beneath it, and there are rooms with floor-to-ceiling glass windows that overlook the games and the level below, complete with lush couches and…

Goddess help me, there are mini stages in the semi-private rooms, and more than a few are occupied by women holding on to a pole and dancing around it.

They’re all gorgeous, of course, and they all know what they’re doing. These smaller stages are popular, each space filled with three or more people, eyes wide and awestruck by the beauties swaying against the poles. The women hold their audience’s attention, garnering a power I can’t even begin to imagine. Their admirers litter the stage with gold coins and even some jewels.

One of the women turns to face me, catching me watching. She curls her fingers, beckoning me to come closer, but I shoot her a wink and shake my head before I continue my hunt for Jax. For some reason, the encounter makes me think of Erin. Makes me think of how good she’d be at the job, with dancing being one of her sultry skills.

I weave through the throngs of people crowding around the gambling tables, shouting out numbers or squeals of excitement, until I come upon another glass room—

And all my warm feelings for the dancers go right out the fucking window.

Because there’s Jax—*my* Jax—arms stretched out along the backside of a plush leather couch, his shirt half unbuttoned, and his legs spread wide as he stares up at a woman who’s bending herself around the pole like it’s her goddess-given power.

37

Rylee

Wind roars around me, so intense my hair flutters across my face. A few of the gamblers groan about the sudden gust of air, but I tame my hair before anyone can notice.

Jax would rather be here, watching this woman shake her ass, than welcome me into his city for his designated month? Would rather be here than trying to get to know who he *chose*, the one person who might be able to solidify his power and his spot on the throne?

Regret and shame and doubt flood my senses, killing any rage and power desperate to break out of me.

I slip behind a pillar, taking a few moments to collect myself before I continue to watch. Call me a glutton for punishment, I guess, because *goddess damn*, it hurts. But, after a few minutes and some serious deep breaths, I watch as he moves to write something on a piece of parchment as he looks at her in a cold, assessing way.

He's *working.*

Another pit opens up in my stomach. I'm not sure if this is any better than when I thought he was here paying for entertainment from a woman who isn't me.

Either way, he's not *with* me.

It's his month, and he'd rather work than see me.

Is that how this entire month is going to play out? Him ignoring me? Does he think that will inspire me to want to risk my life for him by completing the Athanry? Because from where I'm standing, he's not giving me much to go on in the way of faith.

I take another deep breath.

I came here for a reason, and I'm not going to let this uncertainty stop me.

Steeling my nerves, I dig deep to find that confident woman I was when I first walked into Lust. I straighten and resolve myself on the fact that if I want Jax to be mine—really, *truly* mine—then I certainly can't cower behind a pillar and hide all night. He's the Nightmare, for goddesses' sake. I need to match that energy, and more than that, I want to.

I channel all the confidence I can before I press my hand against the glass door

and push it open. Sultry music floods my senses right along with Jax's leather-and-smoke smell. Goddess, his indigo eyes dart to mine with the barest hint of shock before he slams a wall over his reactions.

That makes two of us, because I'm focusing on feeling confident and sexy as fuck, ensuring I bury any insecure emotions so he can't sense them.

The woman arches a brow at me. "Did you want to see me with another woman?" she asks Jax, calm and professional.

His thighs flex as he shifts in his seat, eyes darting between the woman on the mini platform in the center of the room and me. There is a hint of excitement in his gaze that makes butterflies take flight in my stomach.

"No." He shakes his head before motioning to me. "I'm sure my potential mate here just needs a word with me."

The woman gasps, immediately hopping off the platform and bowing to me. I feel awkward in my own skin but try to nod politely at her.

Jax's sardonic laugh fills the room, and the woman visibly blanches at the sound. I take in her genuine terror at the laugh that makes me slick between my thighs. Curious. Maybe I'm as broken as he is, but I don't fucking care. I'm done fighting it.

"I've seen enough," he continues, the tone of his voice drenched in annoyance, as if my showing up has thoroughly ruined his plans for the evening.

The thought makes a lump form in my throat.

Maybe this was a stupid idea.

The woman bends even lower at the waist toward him before hurrying out of the room.

The music is still playing, but it's not as loud as it was on the main level. This room isn't only for dancing and drinking but watching, talking, bonding.

Jax hasn't moved an inch, still sitting in that confident pose, the parchment forgotten as his arms stretch along the back of the cushioned seat, his thighs spread wide. Every instinct in my body is begging me to step between his legs and drop to my knees before him. I'm at his mercy, and he isn't giving me an inch.

"Are you here for a job, little liar?" he asks, his tone low and raw. Goddess, his voice crackles over my skin like lightning, jerking my entire body awake.

"If that's what it takes to get your attention," I say, cocking an eyebrow at him before I spin around and hop onto the stage in a fluid movement that makes me want to celebrate. Or, rather, thank my sister for helping me with core balance and strength training in our spare time. She always said those were the keys to her being able to get in and out of a room unnoticed, but right now, I *want* him to watch me.

I only allow myself a second of self-doubt as I wrap my fingers around the pole and start to move. I watched the other women enough to get the gist of it, but outside of dancing with Ivy and Layce on the rare occasions we snuck into a club, I have zero experience in this department.

"You know, I get how much you hate liars," I say while I move, forcing myself to maintain the courage I'm clinging to. "But have you ever stopped to think there might be a good reason behind it?"

Jax grunts by way of response.

"Of course not," I say, swaying my hips. "Easier to just believe the worst about people, right?"

Indigo eyes zero in on me, and the music magically filtering into the room switches to a new song. Nothing is ever easy with him, and I suppose if I'm being honest, I wouldn't want him any other way. I rock to the pulsing beat, losing myself to the sensations of the melody rippling over my skin while I use the pole to leverage my body, grinding against it the same way I would his body if he let me in.

It helps that Jax doesn't take his eyes off me, not for one second. I feel them on my skin like a caress, and before long, the music doesn't really matter; I'm dancing and gliding my hands over my body in teasing touches that I desperately wish were his.

Soon, I'm so wound tight from him watching me that I feel like I might burst if he doesn't say something. I can see desire churning in those dark eyes, but he barely gives anything else away, sitting there in the power spot like he is.

Well, fuck that.

I hop down, dancing my way over to him, but I don't dare touch him. I'm not one of the Legend groupies desperate for attention and a great story. I'm his mate potential, and I mean *his*, since he's the one who started this whole beautiful mess in the first place.

His eyes slide over my body with each roll of my hips, each arch of my back or trail of my fingers over my breasts. The tension tightens between us so much I ache.

"What do you think?" I finally ask when the song ends and another one doesn't immediately replace it. Instead, we're plunged in a thick, weighted silence beyond that of my rushed breaths. "Do I get the job?"

Jax wets his lips, flicking a finger toward me. "What is it you think you're doing here?"

Taken aback, I blink at him a few times. "It's your turn," I say, my confidence slipping a rung on the ladder inside me. "You weren't home. Figured I'd come to you."

“Home,” he repeats, dragging out the word. “Do you already consider my space yours?”

“I…”

Mortification steals my words, my soul threatening to crumple in on itself.

Jax’s smile is sharp, and I can’t lie. It *stings*. I’ve seen him give out a dozen or more of these smiles to anyone and everyone. It’s the one that’s meant to scare people away, keep them guessing, keep them running.

My heart thumps rapidly against my chest, adrenaline coursing through my veins as he holds me in a staring competition that has every single one of my muscles clenching. Anger blazes over my embarrassment. Goddess damn him, he’s a stubborn prick.

“Ohh,” he groans, shaking his hands. “What a nice bite of anger, butterfly.” He draws in a sharp breath like he’s taking a hit off the emotions storming me. “Delicious,” he says, and I fucking tremble at the way he says the word.

He’s toying with me, testing me, or trying to shove me away. I’m not sure, and I don’t care. I can play this game all night. Crossing lines is what he wants? Then here the fuck we go.

I lean down, gliding my hands up his thighs and bringing our faces within inches of each other. The only emotion he shows is the slight bob of his throat while I’m sure he can feel every single one of mine—my skittering pulse at the power of his muscles beneath my hands, the intake of my breath as his scent storms my senses, the way that connection between us straightens up and aches from being this close to him.

“If you want me to leave, Jax,” I whisper, my mouth a breath away from his, “just give the order.”

His lips draw back, almost like he’s baring his teeth at me, at my nearness. Like some predator that’s met his match, and he’s scrambling to try and figure out how to fight me off.

But he doesn’t.

He doesn’t flinch at my touch, doesn’t push me away, and I feel like I’m teetering on the edge of one of his blades. One wrong move and I’m done.

“Rylee,” he whispers, nothing but cold, hard warning in his eyes. “I’m not like my friends,” he says. “You should run while you still can.”

I do the exact opposite, throwing one leg on either side of his hips, splaying my hands over his chest. “I’m not running.”

He groans, his hands flexing on my waist. I can’t tell if he’s holding me there or preparing to throw me off, and the rush of the unknown spikes in my blood. His eyes flare a little as he registers the thrill in me.

“I’m *not* running,” I say with more determination this time, remembering

Pierce's words about Jax's fears, about why he is the way he is. He needs to know I'm here no matter what. "You chose me, Jax," I say, some of the pain coming through in my words. "You can say you hate me all you want, but I don't buy it. Stop trying to push me away. Unless you really regret your decision… then I'll walk out that door right now."

A muscle in his jaw ticks. I can see it there—the truth written all over his features for once. He *wants* to tell me to go. He wants to tell me I'm the worst mistake of his life. I know this right down to my bones, but he doesn't say it. Instead, that battle plays out in his eyes as his fingers bite into my hips.

"Jax, please," I say, shuddering atop him. "I'm done fighting this. Don't push me away."

A low growl rumbles his chest as I rock against him, a pure searing heat spearing through me at what I feel beneath me. Goddess, he's hard as fucking granite pressed against me. He wants me, too.

That feels like a win in itself.

"I'm not like my friends," he says again through clenched teeth, gripping my hips and jerking me forward again, scraping my heat right over his hard length. "I'm not trying to win your heart." He growls the words.

My head spins with the sensations, the leather shorts shifting enough that only the thin netting and his slacks separate us.

"I want to ruin it," he continues, eyes burning. "I want to ruin *you*."

I wrap my fingers behind his neck, a stuttered sigh rasping out of me as he moves me over him. I can't form words, can't think outside of this long-awaited contact.

"I want to punish you for lying. I want to cut the truth out of you. I want to fuck you so hard and so long, you won't be able to *think* about anyone outside the Legends," he says. "I want to take turns with them, lighting you up in ways you've never even dared to imagine."

His words send bolts of pleasure down my body, but then his hands lock up, stopping me from moving against him again.

"Don't you get it?" he asks, a desperate edge to his tone. "Don't you see why I can't give in to you?"

"Because I'm a liar?" I shake my head because *no*, I really don't fucking get it. Not when his words contradict everything he's shown up until now.

He reaches up with one hand, tangling it in my long hair and arching my head back so sharply it almost stings. "You think I chose you because I wanted to?" He shakes his head, that laugh sliding like warm whiskey over my bare skin. "I *had* to choose you. I *needed* to choose you. There was no stopping it. And the second the words came out of my mouth, I knew I'd damned us."

I whimper slightly, unable to lock down the hurt that causes.

His grip tightens in my hair. “Not because of what you’re hiding from me, butterfly,” he chides, and my eyes flare. “But because what I’ll *do* for you if you’re really mine.”

I blink back the emotions storming me so fast and so intensely, I can hardly breathe around them.

“I’m the Nightmare, Rylee,” he says. “The son of the vilest bastard who’s ever lived. I’m not good like the other Legends.”

“I don’t believe that,” I argue.

Jax groans, shaking his head. “You’re not afraid,” he says, almost like a warning.

I draw as close to him as I can in his grasp. “*Never,*” I say.

His eyes are searing as they meet mine. “You should be.”

“I’m not.”

He studies me, his eyes going cold. “Then you’re foolish,” he snaps, jerking his head toward the door. “Get out.”

“What?” The question is a surprised whisper.

He stands up, plopping me on my feet and putting two strides’ worth of distance between us. “You heard me,” he says. “Fly away, butterfly.”

“You’re not serious,” I say, my heart racing. I felt it… I’d been so close… He’d been so close—

“Don’t make me ask again.”

I gape at the iciness to his words, but I quickly shut my mouth as I glare at him. “How ironic,” I say, shaking my head. “That the Nightmare turns out to be a fucking coward.”

I spin around, tears welling in my eyes as I hurry out of the room.

Away from him.

Away from his inability to see what’s right in front of him.

Away from any hope of ever getting him to believe me.

38

Rylee

Tears flow freely down my cheeks, my ability to hold them back crumbling every time I hear Jax's voice inside my head demanding I *get out*.

Get away from him.

My heart begs me to go back, to fight for him, but I don't want him to see me cry.

I'm not giving up, but I can only be told I'm not wanted so many times before I start to believe it.

I bump into a few people on my way across the gambling floor, swiping at the traitorous tears on my cheeks as I head toward the stairs.

The overwhelming sense of failure threatens to swallow me whole, the oily sensation slicking beneath my skin in a suffocating way. If I can't solidify some connection with Jax, I'm going to lose them all. In the beginning, I didn't think that would be as devastating as it is to me, but it *is*.

I reach the stairs, prepared to run all the way down and out the door, then allow myself to break down in the carriage Mirren no doubt will have waiting for me. If I can just make it—

A hand on my arm jerks me off the first step, dragging me back and shoving me against a wall.

"Well, if it isn't Rylee fucking Gray," Turner says as he glowers at me from where he holds me against the black brick.

Icy terror spears through my veins, stalling my breath.

Turner grabs my other arm, clenching so hard I yelp. "Where the fuck have you been?" His eyes rake over me, taking in my outfit, and his lip curls in a sneer. "Have you been working here the entire time?"

Clearly, he doesn't read the royal post. That answers that question.

"Let me go," I say, finally finding my voice. I push against him, trying to break his hold.

His grip intensifies, and he pushes me back against the wall again. "You have some nerve, blowing me off that night," he says. "Haven't you learned your lesson by now? Don't you know what I'll do to you for disobeying me?"

Turner releases one arm, dragging his finger down my cheek, his eyes falling to my mouth.

I struggle again, hating that I can't break his grasp—not without using my power.

If he holds me here much longer, I absolutely will.

He no longer has the same control over me, but he still knows one of my secrets. That alone makes me hesitate. My mind shifts from panic to strategy and back to panic again in the span of a blink.

His finger trails toward my mouth, and I cringe, turning my head. He grips my chin so hard it stings, forcing my face back to look at him. "You really are asking for it—"

"Get your hands off my mate."

Jax's voice is absolutely lethal as he grabs Turner and tosses him across the room like he's nothing more than a piece of furniture standing in his way.

Turner lands atop one of the gambling tables and sends it crashing to the floor. All the patrons who'd been playing there scatter back, eyes wide on the scene.

Adrenaline makes my body shake, makes it tremble.

Jax steps in front of me, sliding his hands into his pockets like he's prepared to talk civilly with Turner, who is scrambling to his feet. The second he notices who's standing in front of him, he bows deeply before standing up straight again.

"Apologies, your highness," Turner says, glancing from Jax to me and back again. "Did I hear you correctly?"

Jax tilts his head in his predatory way, sauntering up to him.

The crowd of gamblers has now formed a tight-knit audience around the scene, and I can't help but be grateful that the Occuli aren't here to witness this.

"What makes you think you're allowed to touch what's mine?" Jax asks, his tone low and icy.

Turner is shaking now, sweat popping from his brow. "How is she… I didn't know—"

His words abruptly halt.

His body jerks against some invisible force that I can't see. Eyes wide with terror, Turner blanches, and a low, wounded cry rips out of him.

I've never seen someone look so scared before.

And then the front of his pants grows darker. He's *pissing* himself.

The onlookers gasp, and I, too, cover my mouth with my hand to stifle my shock.

Jax.

He's doing this to him.

Jax takes a step back, shaking his head and tsking Turner, who stands there in a puddle of his own filth. "You should know better than to touch anyone in the way you were," Jax says. "Especially what's *mine*." Jax glances over his

shoulder at me, those indigo eyes hard as gemstones as he looks me over, seeing something on my face that makes him flinch. “Shall I kill him?” he asks me like he’s inquiring what I want to drink.

I hesitate, shocked by the blunt question, especially in front of so many people.

So many of *his* people.

I have no mercy in my heart for Turner—not after the way he’s threatened me, forced himself on me, and tortured me emotionally.

But Jax?

I have *all* sorts of feelings for Jax. The last thing I want is blood on his hands because of me.

I shake my head, and Jax turns back around to face Turner. “You should be on your knees thanking her,” he says. “She’s the only reason your heart is allowed to keep beating tonight. But just so you remember your place…” Jax tilts his head again.

Turner whimpers, another terror-laced cry escaping his lips, and the sound of his bowels releasing follows seconds after.

And then Jax is laughing. That cold, sardonic laugh that sends shivers along my skin. That quickly, Turner starts to laugh, too, like he can’t help himself.

Jax snaps his fingers, and Turner’s laughs die, the fear leaking out of his eyes and shifting to utter mortification.

The rest of the crowd follows the lead of their prince and laughs at the soiled, blubbering mess that is Turner.

His head jerks around, glaring at all the laughing onlookers before looking murderously at Jax for all of two seconds before he bows again. “Thank you, your highness,” he says through chattering teeth.

“Run,” Jax commands.

Turner races down the stairs like a wounded animal.

If he wasn’t such an evil piece of shit, I might have found it in my heart to feel pity for him. Sadistic asshole that he is, I feel nothing.

Nothing but confusion at Jax’s territorial display.

He stands with his back to me, his hands still in his pockets. Every instinct begs me to reach out for him, but the way he told me to *get out* keeps me frozen in place. Even as some people who work at Lust arrive to clean up the mess, the rest of the crowd’s laughter dying off as they get back to their gambling, I still don’t move.

Not until Jax turns around, still smiling coldly. His eyes snag on my cheeks, no doubt riddled with smeared makeup and the evidence of my tears.

“Jax—”

He spans the distance between us, interlacing our fingers and tugging me in the opposite direction, my heart in my throat as the Nightmare leads me away from the crowd.

39

Jax

I keep firm hold of Rylee's hand as I tug her outside the room and up the set of stairs to the third level.

My level.

No one is allowed up here, and right now, we need to be where no one can see us.

I'm not sure which I want to do more, scare her or fuck some sense into her. And I'm still undecided when I lead her into my private chambers, depositing her near my desk as I pace the area.

I'm shaking, my power rising like a tidal wave.

That piece of shit touched what's *mine*.

He touched her.

Mine.

I groan, rolling my neck in an attempt to quell my power begging me to track him down and rip out his heart.

"Jax." Rylee says my name so damn softly, not an inch of fear lacing her tone.

How? How can she speak to me in such a way after everything she just saw me do?

I release a harsh breath, grappling with the battle I've had since the night of the Choosing. Wanting the little liar and wanting to protect her from me just as much.

But when I saw that man holding her against the wall…

When I saw him touch her…

The battle ceased to exist. I knew it in every inch of my soul…she's my mate.

"Jax," she says again, and I snap my eyes to hers.

She doesn't so much as tremble as I stalk toward her. Her emotions have always been harder to grasp—but her lies have been the least of my concerns. I could've easily scared her into telling me the truth, but I want her to tell me on her own terms.

She should be shivering with fear now that I have her alone, but goddess damn her, she's only ramping up in her desire.

How can that be possible? After all she knows about me? After seeing me just now…how easily I turned that enforcer into a whimpering mess.

“Who was that fool?” I bite out the question, returning to my pacing.

She hesitates, and a heavy dose of shame punches me in the chest.

“Who was he?” I practically growl the question.

“He…” She parts her lips, and I feel her intention to lie buzz against my skin.

“Don’t,” I snap. “Don’t you dare fucking lie to me.”

She flinches, turning her back on me as she leans against my desk. I hate myself for the way my tone is coated in rage, but I can *feel* her. My mate… The terror, the shame. It’s all for whoever the fuck that just was, not for me.

I want to kill him for it.

For whatever he’s done to her.

I’m losing my grip, losing my control. Everything inside me, every protection I’ve tried to implement against her is shattering.

I cross the distance between us, wrapping my arms around her from behind, tucking my chin over her shoulder as I lean my cheek against hers.

“Please,” I beg, my mind whirling from her chaotic emotions. She’s all over the place, and I know if I focus now, I can coax her into a calm state where she’ll keep *nothing* from me, but I’m not about to betray her trust like that. Instead, I wait her out, the raggedness of our breaths matching as I hold her.

“Please,” I say again, and she goes still in my arms. I don’t know if I’ve ever said that word before, and here I’ve said it *twice*. “Don’t lie to me this time.”

She blows out a deep breath.

“An enforcer,” she says, her voice cracking over the admission.

“Who was he to you?” I ask as calmly as I possibly can.

“A year ago, I thought he liked me. I thought he was a good person. And then…everything changed. I couldn’t stop it—”

“You’re the strongest woman I’ve ever met, and my mother is a fucking goddess,” I cut her off. “What do you mean you couldn’t stop it?” My butterfly has claws; I saw as much during the Fader attack. There’s no way she couldn’t lay that enforcer out on his ass if she wanted to.

“He threatened me,” she says.

“With what?”

“To put me in the dungeons. Whenever I stepped out of line, whenever he caught me in a city I wasn’t allowed to be in—” Her words stop short.

Reality crashes inside my mind as the buzzing from her lies dissolves.

She’s shaking in my arms now, and I gently spin her around to face me. “Little liar,” I whisper, cupping her cheeks. “Why didn’t you tell me? Tell any one of us?”

Tears fill her eyes, spilling down those black tracks already made on her cheeks. “I was afraid,” she admits on a released breath.

I swipe her tears away with my thumbs, unable to hold back a laugh.

"*That's* what you're afraid of?" I ask through my laughter. "Where you come from? I don't give a shit where you were born," I say. "None of us would. What I care about is your lack of self-preservation when it comes to *me*." I shake my head. "Honestly, Rylee, you were afraid of being outed as an Ashlander, but not the actual *Nightmare* who holds you right now?"

She shakes her head. "You're not…angry with me? You're not going to imprison me?"

"No." I hold her a little more tightly. "I'm not my father. I don't care about noble titles. You're already suffering enough by me choosing you."

Fuck, what she must have been fearing this entire time—

"I'm not afraid of *you*, Jax," she says, hands sliding over my arms where I hold her, the touch so gentle, so accepting, so…loving.

My instincts flare again, the ones begging me to push her away, to protect her from me.

I release her, taking a step back. Putting a good two feet of distance between us.

"If you're not afraid of me, you don't understand me." I finally force out the words, my hands immediately going to my blades. Not in any threat to her, but to protect her from *me*. If my hands are empty for much longer, I'll fill them with that perfect ass of hers, bend her over my desk and fuck her until I'm branded on her skin for life. Until there's no separating us ever again.

Rylee tilts her head for a moment, shock pulsing from her at the turn in conversation before she folds her arms over her chest, defiant. The little pose pushes up her gorgeous breasts, and the lace top she wears practically begs for me to slice it away.

"Oh, I think I do understand you, Jax," she says. "You're the one who is scared."

My eyes flare, and I flip the blades in my hands. "Me? Afraid of you?"

"Yes!" She motions to the chamber around her. "You dragged me up here after an intense territorial display. You called me your *mate*, Jax. But just now, you put a mountain of space between us because you know what will happen if you keep touching me."

"Is that right?" I fire back, sounding like a petulant child. "And what is that?"

"You'll break," she says without a shred of doubt. Goddess, she's the sexiest, smartest, most powerfully infuriating woman I've ever met.

I laugh, full and raw and terrifying. The same laugh that usually has grown men pissing their pants like that fucking enforcer did moments ago.

But not Rylee.

She shivers as if I've just blown in her ear.

Goddess fucking damn it.

"You know who my father is," I say, doing my best to pull any card I can to get her to realize the huge mistake she's about to make. "You know what I'll become if I have any more power." The truth of my deepest fear laces my voice, but I push on, spinning the blades in my hands to keep me grounded. "I'll use you up. Break you down until you're a shell of the woman before me. Just like he did to my mother." I shake my head. "Or I'll do worse. If you're mine and something happens to you, someone threatens you…" I drop my head. Can't believe I'm admitting this to her as I meet her gaze again. "I'll burn the whole fucking world down and laugh the ash out of my lungs."

I don't relish killing, not like everyone says I do. Just because I'm good at something doesn't mean I love it, but that? That's inevitable. What I'm capable of turning into when it comes to her. That much was proven moments ago with the fucking enforcer. Even now, knowing what I know…I want to hurt him. I want to make it last. Want to pay back every harm he's done to her tenfold.

And that scares the living shit out of me—the little scrap of control I have will vanish if I give in to her.

Rylee's frustration slides off her face, her emotions slipping to empathy in a heartbeat. "You are nothing like Baydel," she says through her teeth. "You're nothing like the Nightmare you pretend to be."

"You don't know that—"

"I *know* evil men, Jax," she cuts me off, the truth in her words only adding to my need to cut into the enforcer. "You are not one of them."

"I am. I could be—"

"Then why did you choose me, Jax?" she snaps, her energy swirling around the room with an intensity I swear I can feel against my skin. "Huh? If you were so determined to push me away, to keep me shut out like everyone else, then why—"

"I told you why. I *had* to." It's not a lie. That night… It's as if she compelled me, some ancient magic that forced me to do its bidding.

"*Bullshit,*" she says, and I cock a brow at her tone. "You gave me a bullshit answer and you know it. Tell me the truth. You chose me for a reason, and now you're punishing me for it. Why? Tell me why—"

"Because!" I throw my blades in the opposite direction until they snick perfectly into the walls. I stalk up to her, closing the distance between us again, not lowering my voice an inch. "The minute I heard your voice, the minute I sensed your emotions, you felt like *mine.*"

The second the truth leaves my lips, something breaks open inside me, and

I’m no longer pulling myself away from her; I’m jerking her to me in a painful kiss that sears my soul.

Fuck, she tastes like cherries and whiskey as I sweep my tongue into her mouth possessively. She whimpers at the intensity, her body melting into mine as I haul her against me. Lightning streaks through my veins as I lift her off her feet without breaking our kiss, walking her back toward my desk.

She’s desperately clawing at the buttons on my shirt, so I lean back, peeling it off one arm at a time. Her eyes scan the tattoos inked over my skin, and I hiss as she traces the lines with her fingers. She’s close, so much closer than I’ve ever let anyone be before.

I pull another blade from a harness on my thigh and grip the lace of her top. “Hold still,” I demand, and she goes absolutely immobile. That shoots need straight through me, her obedience like a catalyst for the mounting desire thrumming through me.

I drag my blade expertly through the lace, not daring to touch an inch of her skin. The fabric flutters to the floor, leaving her in just a silver bra, her breasts spilling over the cups. I cut that off next, leaving her upper half bare.

I groan at the sight of her, slamming the blade into the desk behind her. A wild burst of desire floods her emotions as I do, and I almost fucking drop to my knees from the power of it.

Fates above, this woman was truly made for me.

I hesitate, taking my time to drink her in, studying which place I want to tease. She reaches for me, impatient, gripping the back of my neck and looking up at me with defiant, playful eyes.

“Please, Jax,” she sighs, then smiles in that slightly mad way that makes me a complete and utter *fool* for her.

I twist my fingers in her hair, tipping her head back so I can claim her mouth at a deeper angle. My other hand travels over her supple breasts, pinching her nipples until they’re rosy and peaked for me. She arches against me, moaning at the sting, before I drag my hand lower between her thighs.

“You want me to ruin you, butterfly?” I drag my lips from hers, cupping her heat over her shorts.

“Yes,” she begs, and goddess damn me, I want to slam into her so badly. But this has been months coming, and I’m not about to rush.

I tease my mouth over hers, just barely a brush of my lips, before I dip down and haul her over my shoulder. I smack her ass as I walk through a hidden door in the corner of my office.

“Where are you taking me?” she asks with excitement.

I grin as I step into the room, shutting the door behind us. “Haven’t you ever

heard of the Nightmare’s playroom?”

40

Rylee

Jax sets me on my feet and steps back, allowing me to survey the room.

The walls are cushioned and black, and the only light comes from a chandelier hanging in the center of the ceiling. There's an armless chair in the corner, a bench right next to it, and tables lining the walls with all manner of whips and blades and other items I can't make out. There's a massive bed tucked against the farthest wall, and in the opposite corner hangs a pair of chains with cuffs on the end.

Anticipation flutters beneath my skin. So, this is where the Nightmare plays.

I turn back around to face him, feeling the tension roll off him in waves. Relief is an intoxicating thing; my mind is whirling from the truth I laid bare and his acceptance of it. But the fact that I chose him? That's something he's struggling with.

Even now, I can see the conflict in his eyes, can practically feel him thinking about pushing me away again. I hate that he thinks so little of himself, that his father has made him believe such lies about himself. But I'm prepared to fight for him as long and as hard as it takes.

"You're alone with the Nightmare," he says, stepping into my space again. He inhales deeply, almost like he's smelling me, but I know he's not. He's drinking in my emotions. His eyes darken. "You should fly away, butterfly."

"Only if you promise to chase me," I tease.

"Rylee," he chides, folding his hands behind his back like he's trying to keep from touching me. The tension in this dance he's swept us into is tightening with every breath—and deep down, I think he loves it. "You have no idea what you're getting yourself into."

"Neither do you," I say. I have one last secret, one that could damn me in the end. Sure, he may be fine with me being an Ashlander, but a demi? I highly doubt it. Especially when they suspect the Faders might be comprised of people like me. They might think I'm one of them, sent here to ensnare them all.

He sucks his teeth, reaching out to gently grip my throat, tilting my head back to make me look at him. "Last chance," he offers.

"I'm here, Jax. Still here. After all your attempts to push me away. I'm. Still. *Here*." I glance behind him, silently indicating the utter scene he'd caused with

Turner. I know that was merely a taste of what he's capable of.

"I could make you leave," he counters.

"Try me," I fire back.

His grip increases, and then terror slides over my skin like an inky blanket.

It's not *of* him but *from* him.

The prick is raising the stakes, showing me exactly what he can do. I fight against it with every ounce of strength I have, wrapping my mental self with shields upon shields, using every tool Pierce taught me as I assure myself I'm not terrified. It's only his power playing with my emotions. And once I have a semblance of control, once I can look at him without wanting to scream like death himself is holding my neck, I *grin* at him.

"You can do better than that, Nightmare," I say.

The terror instantly leaks from my veins, and the release is like a head rush.

"Fuck, Rylee," he groans. Nothing but pure respect and desire churns in his indigo eyes as he dips his head down and crushes his mouth against mine.

I can't resist his kiss, drinking it in like a much-needed breath. He sighs between my lips, sliding his tongue alongside mine, the edges of my teeth, claiming every inch of me until I'm *burning* for him.

"Goddess, Jax," I sigh between kisses. "Please. I need you."

"I know you do." He grips my wrist and leads me across the room to where the chains hang from a solid wooden beam near the ceiling. The cuffs dangling there are lined in leather. "You'll have to trust me," he says as he guides my wrists into the cuffs and hauls my arms above my head. "Can you do that?"

I nod, breathless, as he unsheathes a blade from his side, eyes scanning my body like he doesn't know where to touch first. No more masks, no more walls, no more anger to keep him at bay. This is Jax, fully exposed and raw as he lets go of every ounce of control he has.

And I fucking love it.

Slowly, carefully, he glides the knife down my exposed skin until he reaches my tiny leather shorts. With an expert flick, they fall to the floor in pieces. I whimper, my entire body hot and tight at the same time as I hang there, completely at his mercy.

"You'll want to hold very, *very* still for me, butterfly," he says, and I barely breathe as he drops to his knees before me. He drags his blade down the netting covering my legs, and the little strings give way, the sensation like being completely controlled and wild at the same damn time. It makes me lightheaded, makes me want to shift my thighs together to find some relief, but I don't dare.

"Good," he says, sheathing the blade again so he can remove the last remains of fabric until I'm totally bare before him. He's still on his knees, and his eyes

flick up to me before he dips his mouth between my thighs.

I tremble as he drags his tongue through the center of me in one sharp lick that makes me want to buckle right then and there. Jax moans against me, parting my thighs with his powerful hands, sliding another inch under me as he devours me from beneath. I rock against him with what little leverage I have, my wrists aching from tugging on the cuffs so hard. I want to drag my fingers through his hair, want to dig my nails into his back—

He sucks hard, emptying my head of all thought. I'm nothing but sensation as he licks and teases me until I can scarcely breathe. I'm right there, my pleasure built to a tipping point. I rock against him, seeking out that pressure that will send me flying—

Jax pulls away, grinning up at me with that devious smile of his as he kisses his way back up my body. He takes his time on my thighs, then my hips, then my stomach, all the way up to my breasts. Every kiss, every graze of his teeth over my skin is like trying to strike a match—I'm right there, ready to ignite, but he's keeping me on the edge until I can barely see straight.

He palms one of my breasts, rolling my nipple until it's peaked and rosy for him. He swoops down and sucks it into his mouth, doing the same to the other in a torturous dance that leaves me breathless.

"Jax," I groan when he works his way up my neck and over the line of my jaw, stopping just an inch away from my lips. "Goddess, please."

"Please, what?" He grins again as he glides his hand over my breast and down, dipping between my thighs, stroking me with a too-light touch.

"Let me come," I beg him, so far beyond caring how much I'm revealing to him. I need him like I've never needed anything else in my life.

Jax steps away to slide off his pants and underwear, agonizingly slowly. My mouth goes dry at the sight of him. He's so close but so far away, and I swear I'll die if he doesn't put me out of my misery soon.

He comes back to me, dragging his length through my wetness, and I whimper. Goddess damn me, I rock against him, trying to get him inside me, but he draws away again, piercing me with those eyes of his.

"I've never had anyone tie me up like you, Rylee," he says, trailing his fingers over my peaked nipples.

"I'm the one in chains," I reply on a released breath. My muscles are clenched tight, my entire being a white-hot knot of tangled need.

"Loving you is dangerous," he says, thrusting his hips so he glides through my wetness again. "So fucking dangerous, you know that?" His fingers bite into my hips, the sting a delicious tremor that makes me see stars.

"Yes," I say, neck slightly arched as he continues to slowly tease me. "We've

been on a crash course since you found me in the library. I loved you then. I didn't know it, but I do now."

He goes still, poised at my entrance. I can feel him throb against me in time to my own heartbeat. "Say it again," he demands.

"I love you." I breathe the words, tugging against my chains. I need to claw at him, need to touch him, need to crash against him so hard I'm left with delicious bruises.

Jax's pupils blow out, and he rocks against me again. "I'll ruin you," he says.

I capture his lips, biting down on his bottom lip hard enough that he growls.

"Then ruin me," I say against his mouth.

He slams into me, and I can't contain the cry of pleasure that rips through me. I'm slick for him, but he's so big and thrusts into me so hard, a line of pain slices right along the pleasure. He feels so damn good, all hard and full and gliding in and out in confident thrusts that make me keen.

"You want to come, butterfly?" he asks as he drags his length all the way out of me, hovering at my entrance again.

"Goddess, please," I beg him.

He captures my mouth and pumps into me again, hard and relentless as he claims my body and soul. He holds nothing back, increasing his pace and shifting my body like it belongs to him, like he owns me and my pleasure. He finds a rhythm, sinking deep inside me and hitting my oversensitive core with every thrust until I'm a breathless, wild thing in his grasp. And when he kisses down my jaw, biting my neck with enough force to sting—

I come so hard my entire body shakes.

My muscles clench, my core fluttering around him as he pumps me through the throes of it, claiming and giving and taking until both our bodies are slick with sweat. I'm barely at the tails of the first orgasm when he wrenches another from me, this one sharp and brilliant in the best way, turning my body to jelly as he spills himself inside me.

And then I go limp against him, totally sated and spent.

He draws his head back, eyes searing as he grins at me—this one is just for me, a rare smile that's pure bliss. *Mine*. He's mine.

And there's no going back.

41

Rylee

Two nights spent in the Nightmare's playroom, and I can *feel* Jax with every step I take toward one of his private tables in Lust on the ground level of the club.

I have a delicious soreness between my thighs, with red marks from his lips and teeth hidden beneath the emerald green shirt and black leggings I wear. I feel complete in a way I never thought possible, especially as I make it to the private area and find Kal, Axl, and Pierce sitting next to Jax.

Their eyes all shift the moment I get within sight, as if our connection is now strong enough for them to sense when I'm near. It's overwhelming, but in an exciting way that has me envisioning a real future with each of them…

A pang of guilt spears through me.

I have one last secret to tell.

And despite the love in my heart I have for each of the Legends, I'm terrified they won't believe me when I say I'm a demi but I have nothing to do with the Faders. Even I can't deny how damn convenient it is that an Ashlander who also happens to be a demi snuck into the Choosing event right when a new rebel group starts attacking that couldn't possibly be anything else *but* demis.

I swallow the guilt, trying not to cringe at how awful it looks when I think of it like that.

But I love these men.

And I know they love me, too.

I can feel it, even if they haven't said it yet. They've shown me enough with their tokens… Well, three of them, at least.

"Darling," Pierce says, sliding away from the table and wrapping me in a warm embrace. His lips linger at the shell of my ear. "Well done," he whispers before he pulls away, subtly casting a look at Jax.

He remains seated in a chair he's pulled up next to the cushioned seats connected to the table, his body relaxed as he leans back, his thighs spread wide, not a care in the world etched in the harsh features of his devastatingly beautiful face.

Butterflies go wild in my stomach when his indigo eyes meet mine, nothing but dominance and need churning in them.

Two massive arms wrap around me from behind, and Axl scoops me up,

whirling me around in one of his signature hugs. His mouth is on mine moments later, a quick, powerful kiss I feel in every inch of my body.

He sets me on my feet, his smile infectious as he sits back down, and I slide in on the outer edge of the table, tucking under Kal's outstretched arm.

"Missed you," he says, planting a kiss on my forehead.

"Me too," I say, my entire body and soul relaxing at the five of us together. "So…" I continue after I've taken a sip from the drink already waiting for me.

Music from the main portion of Lust vibrates through the walls of this semi-private room. The wall to my left is made of one-way glass, allowing us to see the dancing and enjoyment going on out there while having privacy in here. The space near the wall is only sectioned off by a thick velvet rope, offering patrons a sneak peek, but everyone who comes to Lust knows this is the Nightmare's private spot, and no one would be silly enough to try to cross it.

"What is on the Legend business agenda tonight?"

Axl laughs, pushing some of his hair off his shoulders as he leans farther back into the seat across from me.

Pierce has settled on Axl's left, Kal on Pierce's left, and me on the edge. Jax is just off to the side in his own chair. We certainly make an interesting little group, but there's nowhere I'd rather be.

Well, almost.

If I knew where Erin was—somewhere I could speak to her, if only for a moment, to get the closure on why she left and how she's been living since…I *would* want to be in that place. But even in that wild fantasy, the Legends are no less than a step behind me.

"Is it always going to be business with you?" Axl teases.

"I think each and every one of you has learned by now that that isn't the case," I fire back.

Jax shifts in his chair, taking a sip from his short crystal glass, the ice tinkling in the amber liquid.

"Oddly enough," Pierce says, fiddling with his glass without taking a drink, "there hasn't been even a whisper of the Faders." He shakes his head. "And my contacts have gleaned nothing about the whereabouts of your sister, unfortunately," he adds with an apologetic look.

I swallow hard, doing my best to keep the sadness from becoming overwhelming. The last thing I want is Jax or Pierce's powers sweeping them up into my own personal trauma.

"Like I told you," I say, happy when my voice doesn't so much as tremble, "all of you have bigger things to worry about. As much as I miss her, and as much as I think there won't be a day that I *don't* miss her and wish we could find

her, I know Erin. She'll be found when she wants to be. I don't want you guys to keep wasting your resources on it. Not when we have the Athanry and the Faders to worry about."

"Darling," Pierce sighs, but I shake my head.

"I mean it," I say. "I think it's time for me to let go. We have so many more things to worry about. We make it through this next month and the Athanry, and then we'll re-strategize regarding my sister's whereabouts."

The Legends share a look, a silent form of communication I can interpret as saying they aren't going to let it drop, but they do for now. And that's all I can ask.

"If we don't have any Fader business to discuss," I continue, "and no leads on them, is there any other Legend issue?"

Kal tucks me closer against him, chuckling softly. "Are you so eager to earn our crest and don a mask?" he teases.

I don't laugh, looking at each one of them seriously. "What do I have to do to earn it?" I ask genuinely. They all stare at me with shock.

"Oh, come on," I say. "You can't honestly be that surprised. I know the odds are against me surviving the Athanry—"

"Don't talk like that," Kal cuts me off, his eyes severe.

I give him an apologetic shrug. "I can't help but state the facts. But if I do survive the Athanry, did you honestly think that I would just… What? Wait for one of you all to come home every night? Switch estates every two months? Sit idly by while you risk your lives?"

"To be fair, darling," Pierce says, "when you *do* survive, we'll be infinitely more powerful. The odds of us getting hurt go down. Whereas you…" Pierce's voice trails off, and his eyes meet mine.

I can't decipher the silent look.

The power in my veins rumbles just a little, and I wonder if that's what his silence is about. If this is the secret he's been referring to and now is my opportunity to tell the truth.

Adrenaline crackles in my veins, and I shift to sit up straighter in my seat, parting my lips—

"Yeah, kitten," Axl picks up where Pierce left off. "You can't blame us for wanting to protect you when we have the power to do it."

But I have power, too.

Say it.

Just *say* it.

Each one of them now knows I'm an Ashlander and couldn't care less.

I have power, too…

“Come on,” Jax says, suddenly rising from his chair. He looks down at me, a hand outstretched. “Let’s dance.” The sudden shift in conversation makes me eye him curiously.

I take his hand and stand up, scanning the features on his face. Can he sense my emotional struggle? Can he sense my intention to lie or tell the truth, and that’s why he’s offering me this out?

My heart warms at the idea of this form of protection. Both he and Pierce are giving me space and time to come to them when I’m ready, even though there’s no way that Jax knows my final secret. He must only sense my struggle.

Jax grins down at me—the smile that’s just for me and isn’t laced with threats and promises of nightmares. He slides some hair away from my face, dipping down to kiss me, his lips moving to the line of my jaw—

The subtle movement gives me a view behind him, and everything around me slows down at the sight of Turner aiming one of those powerful magical blasters right at the back of Jax’s head.

The other Legends can’t see him from this angle. Just me.

Every instinct flares to life, adrenaline rushing through me so sharp it hurts.

The crack of the magic snaps through the air, loud enough to be heard over the music pulsing not far away.

Red streaks of fire spear for the back of Jax’s head, and my power snaps through me in one great burst, wind gusting around us, moving us out of the way so quickly, Jax doesn’t even register it.

“What the fuck?” Axl shouts.

The Legends scramble away from the table, but they aren’t faster than me.

I put myself in front of Jax, using my wind to rip the blaster out of Turner’s trembling fingers.

A wave of my hand, and I steal all the air from his lungs. Another flick of my wrist, and the wind propels him up in the air, hanging him upside down as rage makes my entire body shake.

“You will die for that!” I yell, tears gathering in my eyes at how close he came to hurting Jax.

“Rylee.” My name is a plea from Kal’s lips, and I spare a glance at him behind me before I hear the sounds of more enforcers heading our way.

I release my power. Turner smacks against the ground in an unceremonious heap, gulping down the air I’ve returned to him. Enforcers spill into Jax’s private space, weapons drawn.

“We heard the shot, your highnesses,” one of them says. “Is everyone all right?”

Jax is at my side in an instant, positioning me behind him protectively, raking

his fingers through his hair as he glares down at Turner.

"We're fine," he says, nodding to Turner. "This one is angry that I humiliated him a couple of nights ago. Put him in the dungeons where he belongs."

"Right away, your highness," the enforcer says, all four of them working to scoop Turner off the floor and take him out of sight.

And then Jax's eyes are on me.

And Axl's and Kal's and Pierce's.

I feel like I might buckle under the weight of all four of their stares, but I hold my head high, swallowing the fear and panic climbing up my throat.

"You're a demi," Kal whispers.

I do nothing to deny it.

"I'm an Ashlander." I lift my hands, palms up, sending a soft gust of wind just powerful enough to ruffle each of their hair. "And a demi," I say, revealing the last secret I have, hoping to all the goddesses above that they won't damn me for it.

42

Rylee

“Come with me,” Jax demands, his voice low and cold.

A pit opens up in my stomach as he silently guides me out of Lust and to his velomage, urging me to climb on after him. I wrap my arms around his middle, taking comfort in the fact that at least he and Pierce know the truth and haven’t fed me to the wolves. Yet.

Axl and Kal haven’t said a word to me since I showed them my power.

And as Jax drives us toward his estate, Axl, Kal, and Pierce following behind us on their own velomages, my worst fears play out in my mind.

What if this really is all part of the Choosing game?

Has my love for these Legends made me so biased that I can’t see the truth? Are they simply giving me whatever I want, treating me this well, so I’ll choose them in the end and they’ll get the power boost they’ve always craved? One that will make them ascend as the rightful kings of Lumathyst?

Maybe that truly is the only reason all of them have been so damn good to me. Even after learning my secret of being an Ashlander and now…

Now they know everything.

And not one of them is saying a fucking word to me.

Maybe they’re afraid that if they react, if they show their disappointment, it will ruin their shot at real power in the end of all this. That all their hard work and time invested into me will be a massive waste.

The doubt tastes like ash in my mouth and weighs heavy on my heart.

By the time Jax pulls into his estate, the rest of the Legends following in behind us, I’m certain I’ll puke any second. Shame threatens to overwhelm me, but I bat the bitch down. I’ve had enough hiding, enough secrets to last me a lifetime, and to be honest, the instant my power left my hands to protect someone I loved, I decided then and there to never let anyone shame me again.

Tough self-talk for someone who doesn’t open her mouth as she follows the Legends of Chaos into the Nightmare’s house. I keep my lips sealed as my pulse skyrockets while Jax leads us down to his basement. Suddenly, the dark living room I found so comforting before has lost all its effect.

Kal and Axl sink onto a black leather couch near the fireplace, and Jax and Pierce take the one across from it. There’s nothing between them but the plush

silver rug lining the floor at their feet. I could take the coward's way out and stomp to my room and lock the door, but I'm just so fucking exhausted. If they're about to send me packing—or worse—I at least want to get it over with quickly.

I walk confidently between them, standing with my arms folded over my chest, the silver rug beneath my boots. "I can't help what I am," I finally say when they all seem content to stare at me. "Any more than you can."

Kal tilts his head, confusion in his expression.

"Of course not, darling," Pierce says.

Jax's eyes are on me, not in a surveying way, but in a hungry way that makes me feel unsteady on my feet. "I silenced you before because it wasn't safe to discuss, butterfly," he says, motioning to the room around us. "This is a safe space. No one is listening."

I close my eyes, thinking back to the Occuli that were no doubt lingering just outside of Lust and the enforcers who were scrambling as they took Turner into their custody. I give myself a second to hope that none of them saw my wind power, then dismiss it. I can't do anything about that now.

A warm hand reaches for mine—Kal's; I can tell from the feel—and I open my eyes.

"Why didn't you tell me?" Kal's words are soft and kind and full of understanding that I don't deserve.

"What did you think, kitten?" Axl asks when I can't answer. "That we'd reject you? Imprison you? Don't you know us better than that?"

My bottom lip trembles, because I can see the hurt on each of their faces, even Jax, who rarely ever shows an ounce of weakness.

Did I think that of them? Honestly? Did I think they'd hurt me, cage me, get rid of me? Has that been keeping me from baring my truths to them even as they bared themselves to me?

I swallow hard, ripping from Kal's grasp to bury my face in my hands. "I'm an Ashlander," I blurt through my palms. "I'm a demi. And I can't change that. Can't change where or how I was born. In the beginning, I was certain you'd all flay me alive for the truth or at the very least imprison me. So many of my kind have walked that path before." I suck in a sharp breath. "I will not be imprisoned for being born with power I didn't ask for. And when Jax chose me, I decided I needed you all to fall for me simply to stay alive long enough to not choose you at the ceremony. And now…" I'm unable to hold back my tears.

Powerful hands pry my fingers from my face, and then indigo eyes meet mine. He's the Nightmare, the stuff of legend, and yet he drops to his knees, sinking us both to the plush rug as he holds me. "And now?" he asks, voice softer than

smoke.

I glance from him, to Kal, to Axl, to Pierce, and finally, back to Jax. “Now I’m the one who can’t survive without you. I need each of you like I need air to breathe, and that scares the shit out of me. I was never meant to be a queen or a mate. And then, when the Faders came and I learned you all suspected demis were behind the rebel group… Goddess, don’t you see how terrible it looks? You’ve chosen a demi and are fighting a group of them at the same time. I never wanted you to think I had any part of it. Because I don’t. I would never support such irrational violence…but it doesn’t change what I am…an Ashlander, the lowest of the classes in Lumathyst, *and* a demi.”

A swirl of power fills the room, an angry sort of sharpness. If I concentrate hard enough, I can pick out whose power is whose.

Kal’s is like the sun, endless and warm.

Pierce’s is like the strands of a spiderweb, infinite and ever-changing.

Axl’s is like the ripping tides with a depth that rivals the deepest ocean.

And Jax’s…his is raw, intense, and multifaceted like the stars in the sky.

“It doesn’t matter that you’re an Ashlander or a demi,” Kal says, shifting to the edge of the couch so he’s eye level with me on my knees. He takes my hand from Jax’s, running his thumb over the ruby ring I wear. “I gave this to you because of your heart. Because of the way you were with my people and your hopes for the future of Lumathyst. I gave this to you because you made me laugh while challenging everything I’ve ever believed and made me desperate for you even while I’m right beside you. That’s love. It has nothing to do with where you’re from or what power runs through your veins.”

Axl grunts his agreement from where he takes up half the couch next to Kal, his powerful thighs spread and one arm strung along the back of it. His hair is a mess of black waves from the earlier chaos at Lust, resting over his shoulders in this seriously sexy way. “I told you that first day, kitten,” he says. “You’re mine. No matter what.”

I shiver at their words, and then Pierce is there, hand gliding over my chin to make me turn to look up at him. “I felt your incredible power the second I stepped into your mind. You know how I feel.”

I swallow hard, nodding, then drag my eyes to Jax, who still sits knee-to-knee with me.

He doesn’t say a word. Instead, he starts unbuttoning his shirt, discarding it behind him, baring his strong chest decorated with endless ink. “I don’t have a token, butterfly,” he says. “Not one you can wear like jewelry.” He slides two fingers across a design right over his heart—the black swirls of ink outline the mark of his mother: a full moon and five stars surrounding it. “You accept *my*

token, and it's inked onto your skin for life."

A stuttered breath leaves my lips as I feel each of their powers rippling against my own, coaxing it to rise and play and merge. Fuck, it's overwhelming, the sheer amount of power filling the room. With all of them here, their sole focus on me, I can feel it like a building storm in the skies. The atmosphere feels electrified, upping my heart rate and awakening every inch of my soul.

I'm theirs. They're mine. And it feels right in a way that shouldn't be possible.

"I'll accept yours," I say, my tone confident and smooth. I take my hands from them, reaching behind me to lift my hair above my neck and turn so they can all see what I've been hiding. "If you'll accept mine," I finish, certain I can feel their gazes like a hot brand as they take in the cloud-like mark on my skin. The one I've had since I turned ten.

Warm fingers trail over the mark, and I close my eyes, focusing as I realize who it is. It's Jax, and his fingers trail down my back and circle around my hip. Another set of hands is on me then—Kal's—all warmth and strength as he moves off the couch and kneels beside Jax and me. Axl's lips are next as he comes around to face me, claiming my mouth while the other two plant kisses along my shoulder and back.

Then Pierce joins us, using his power to lift my shirt over my head. I shiver at the sensation of all their hands on me at once, losing myself in the tangle of touches and tongues as they take turns kissing me.

In a matter of breaths, clothes are shed, leaving me encased in a cocoon of powerful muscles and intoxicating scents that make every nerve ending in my body stand at attention.

Kal leans back, eyes glittering with mischief and love as he scoots back to the couch, deliciously naked and confident as he settles in for the show. "You know I love to watch," he says when I whimper at his lack of contact. "Show me how good you can fuck my friends."

Warm shivers make my muscles tremble, but I can't hold Kal's gaze for long because Pierce is there, jerking my mouth to his as Jax palms my breasts from behind, my back against his chest, his hard length grinding against my ass. Pierce slips into my mind, not speaking but *feeling* as he lets me know just how badly he wants me. I moan into his mouth at the sensation, at being wanted that much.

"Do that again," Axl demands, his hand dipping beneath the band of my pants. His fingers find my heat, and he groans as he feels the wetness there. "Whatever you did, she fucking loved it."

Pierce unleashes another wave of desire inside me, and I rock against Axl's hand, kissing Pierce back with every ounce of need I possess. Then Jax grazes

his teeth along my shoulder blade, and fire sparks beneath my skin.

It's all so much—Kal's eyes on me, the others' hands and tongues and bodies on me—and their *power*. Goddess damn, their power. It will consume me if I let it. It will send me into absolute madness if I allow it, but wouldn't it be such a sweet way to go?

"Axl," Kal says from the couch. "Make her come on your fingers."

Pierce grins as he releases my mouth, moving to work at my breasts, ensuring he doesn't get in the way of Axl.

Axl, who slips a finger inside me, then two, cupping me with his large hand.

"Goddess," I moan, my head spinning as he fucks me with his fingers while Jax and Pierce are doing their best to worship every other spot on my body.

"Eyes on me, love," Kal demands, and I obey. My body melts another degree at the way he watches me, watches his friends wind me up. He grins at me, his lips full and totally kissable if I could only reach him. "I want to watch while he unravels you."

His words have me tightening around Axl's fingers, and he immediately groans at the reaction. "Fuck, Kal," he says, biting his lower lip as he rocks his fingers into me. "You should feel her right now. So slick and pulsing."

Kal shifts on the couch, fisting his hard length in a display of confidence that has me shaking. "Stop toying with her," he says. "She has a long night ahead of her."

The promise in those words steals my breath, but before I can respond, Axl smirks and there's a burst of cool water against my hot, sensitive flesh. He pumps his fingers in and out of me while his power spirals a constant stream of water over that sensitive bundle of nerves, making it shiver and ache all at the same time.

I lean back, my head braced against Jax's chest as he nips at my neck. Pierce pinches my peaked nipples, rolling the buds between his fingers before setting his mouth on them. Each sensation pushes me toward the edge of pleasure, a steady build that increases with each new touch—

"Fuck!" I cry out as my orgasm rips through me, my eyes flaring wide, locked with Kal's, who delights at the sight of me coming.

Axl's water disappears, his power allowing him to withdraw it so he doesn't soak the rug beneath us, and he gently slides his fingers from me, instantly bringing them to his lips and sucking on my flavor. He moans at the taste of me, and my core trembles.

Pierce draws back, flicking his wrist until ribbons of emerald green swirl around my hips, hoisting me off the ground effortlessly.

Jax doesn't hesitate, using the opportunity to peel my pants down my legs,

shucking them to wherever all the other clothes have gone.

Pierce guides me back down, the softness of the rug tickling my bare skin.

And then I'm kneeling there, naked and breathless with all their eyes on me. We've all had sex, so it's not like this is totally new, but having them all at once? Being together like this with no secrets or games between us? It's intense to say the least.

But I love every second of it. Every graze of power against mine, every time my own power rises to help tame theirs so they don't consume me, every time they get territorial over my mouth…*goddess*, do I fucking love it.

Jax's hands grip my shoulders, turning me to face him. My breasts brush over his strong chest, sending jolts of pleasure along my bones. His indigo eyes are severe as he glances behind me, no doubt eyeing the others. "You've each had her for longer," he says, no hint of debate in his voice. "I get her needy little pussy first."

Pierce smacks my ass from behind, and I squeal a little. "Then I get her remarkable ass," he says, and I tremble at the way they're claiming pieces of me.

Axl laughs but mumbles an agreement, moving to sit on the couch opposite Kal. "We can wait, can't we, Kal?" he asks.

"Absolutely," Kal answers, sucking in a deep breath. "I want to watch these two ruin her before you and I put her back together."

I whimper at his words, the absolute truth of his statement rattling through me like a lick of flame. He couldn't be more accurate. Pierce and Jax are a deadly duo who will fuck me within an inch of madness. And Axl and Kal are the warmth that will coax me back to reality.

A perfect match, each of them and me.

I bite back a smile at the thought, and Jax captures my lower lip between his teeth. "What's that smile for?" he asks, leaning back and guiding me with him. "Eager to ride my cock, butterfly?" His hands fly to my hips, situating me over him with ease. I'm slick from Axl's fingers, so I glide against him in a teasing rock that makes him groan.

"That," I say, grinning still. Pierce comes up behind me, his bare chest smooth against my back as he teases my ass. I reach behind me with one hand, wrapping it around his neck as he nibbles at my ear. "And the fact that it's no wonder no one else could handle the lot of you." I laugh, making sure I meet each of their eyes before I speak again.

"Night isn't over, kitten," Axl says from the chair.

I wink at him, then focus on Jax, using my free hand to guide him right up to my entrance. I squeeze him tight, relishing the flare of need in his eyes. "You'll all be lucky to survive *me*," I say, then sink onto him.

Jax hisses, his lips falling apart as I lift up and do it again and again, rolling my hips as he fills me only to pull out and do it all over again. His fingers grip my hips as he lets me take the reins, but I feel his power slipping, merging our emotions until I can't tell where his need starts and mine ends.

Pierce stops kissing my neck, instead trailing his finger down the line of my spine and lower until he just grazes my ass, teasing the tight hole until I whimper. "Axl." He uses his free hand to wrap around the back of my neck. "A little assistance, please."

I glance over my shoulder to see what he means, gasping as Axl flicks his fingers and a warm, slick liquid slides over where Pierce teases me.

Jax reaches up, forcing me to look down at him while he thrusts his hips upward, connecting with me as I sink atop him. Pleasure bursts beneath my skin at the dominant move, and then Pierce is using his hand on my neck to push me down until my breasts are against Jax's chest, our bodies flush as I rock against him, my ass totally, wholly exposed.

And then Pierce is gliding into my ass inch by inch until he bottoms out.

Jax holds us steady, pausing our movements as he gauges my response. My eyes flutter, little shocks of need cascading along my skin and making my core pulse.

Jax groans, a delicious smile on his face. "She's more than ready, Pierce," he says. "Fuck her hard enough for me to feel you."

"You're doing so well, darling," Pierce praises me as he pulls out and plunges in again. The motion rocks me against Jax, the two of them seated so perfectly inside me.

The fact that they're talking about how to use my body is another hit of pleasure, my heart soaring as Pierce fucks me from behind and Jax does from below. I may have thought I was in control, but there is no use now. I'm nothing but their plaything, a body they're using for their pleasure, and I *love* it. There is a freedom in the way they claim me, both of them knowing each and every spot to tease and touch and taste until I'm whimpering, *keening* for them both.

"Goddess," I moan as they fall into a rhythm that only a true intimacy can allow. I can feel them both, their lengths hard and filling as they drag in and out of me, winding me up into tight knots of need that I'm sure will break me soon. They're edging me, the pricks.

Pierce laughs. "Language, darling." He dips down to kiss my back, his hands on my hips as he moves us. Jax's are on my breasts, plucking my nipples like an instrument he's mastered, and I rock against him on instinct. "If you're going to call us pricks for just this, then we'll be total bastards to you by morning."

I shiver at the promise, unable to keep the smile from my face as I surrender to

their torturous demands of my body. They want me panting, gasping, begging for release, and goddess damn them, they have it.

"Please," I beg after Pierce reaches around my hips and teases me with his fingers at the same time Jax thrusts up from underneath me. "I can't take anymore." I breathe the words, my body coiled tight with need.

"Fuck, you look so good taking them," Kal groans from the couch. I whimper, almost daring to reach back in a plea for release. Kal would *never* leave me hanging this long; neither would Axl.

But these two? The Mind and the Nightmare? They hold me in the palms of their hands and keep me dancing on that knife's edge of pleasure until I'm not even sure of my own name anymore.

"You can take more," Pierce says, pumping into me harder, keeping the pressure against my sensitive flesh way too light.

"And you will," Jax says, pinching my nipples. "Do you think once we're done with you, *they* will be?" He jerks his head toward Kal and Axl, and I moan, rocking harder against him and pushing back against Pierce until he groans.

I can feel the rising need in both of them. They're as close as I am—they're just way better at hiding it. I push back harder, taking the reins as I move with Jax inside me, Pierce sinking in over and over again. They both groan, their grips on me tightening as I up our pace, chasing my pleasure right up to the cusp.

They harden another degree inside me, tearing a moan from my lips as Pierce presses down on that bundle of nerves, giving me the pressure I need as I take them both in hard, intense strokes—

I sigh as my orgasm crashes over me in a wave, the building pressure a burst of relief as my entire body trembles, my muscles convulsing as they empty themselves inside me. My breath is hard to catch, my nails digging into Jax's inked chest as I come down—

I'm barely through the throes of it when Pierce gently slides out of me and I'm lifted off of Jax in one fluid motion. Axl has me in his arms and hauls me back to the chair, my spine against his chest as his hard length slides right into my oversensitive heat, the sensation like a crack of lightning down my center.

Goddess, I'm slick with Jax's come, and Axl doesn't bat an eye while he lifts me until I'm bobbing up and down on his cock, his powerful arms encasing me so thoroughly, I don't even have to move. I just have to let go. His lips are at the shell of my ear, teasing as he whispers, "Too much?"

He's genuinely asking, and he slows his pace, even as he throbs inside me. If I want, I can end this now. Take the proper time to rest and try again another day.

But my body is tingling with need, with the power flying around the room, with the way Pierce and Jax are breathless and spent on the opposite couch,

peaceful, hungry smiles on their faces as they watch me.

I feel like a *queen*.

They make me believe I'm something worthy of worship, of love, of respect, of passion intense enough to overtake everything else.

I grip Axl's muscled forearm with one hand, urging him to continue as I curl my other fingers toward Kal in a come-hither motion. And the powerful, nearly indestructible god of a man stalks over to me at my beckoning, his shaft hard and glistening with a bit of precome as he stands before me.

He cups my cheek as I grin up at him, and then I flick my eyes at his length and pop open my lips. Kal shudders at the move but doesn't hesitate at the invitation, and I moan around him as he fills my mouth.

Axl groans at the sight, moving me harder against him as I dip forward enough to take control of Kal in my mouth. I slick his thick length with my tongue, relishing the hot, salty taste of him before taking him deeper. My eyes water from the sheer size of him, but I relax, breathing through my nose as best I can as I reach for his hip, urging him forward.

"Fuck," Kal hisses as I force him to thrust into my mouth. His hand flexes around my face, sliding to tangle in my hair. "You want me to fuck your mouth, my little demi?"

I moan my consent, my request, the tremors of my voice vibrating against his dick. He groans, then pumps into my mouth, falling into pace with the same intensity that Axl is fucking me. The sensation is unlike the one before but just as powerful, the pleasure building and ramping up in waves. Axl kisses my neck as he pumps into me, and Kal may be fucking my mouth, but his hand is tender in my hair.

"I love you," Axl whispers into my ear. "Fucking love the way you can take us. All of us."

"You were made for us." Kal voices his agreement, and I suck a little harder, showing them both exactly how much I agree. No one else could be here and survive; no one else could look each of them in the eye and demand they give all they possess and live to tell the tale. Their power is endless, and they're downright terrifying with how consuming they can be, but I eat it up like a starved woman.

"You're mine," I say, pulling away enough to speak. "You're all mine." I suck Kal back into my mouth before he can respond, the others silent in either awe or shock or pleasure-induced exhaustion. Axl ups his pace, as does Kal, both of them working me right up to the edge and then immediately shoving me over it.

I moan around Kal, my orgasm exploding as Axl rubs his hand against my heat, sending sparks of pleasure to each of my nerve endings as I clench tight

around him.

Goddess, I'm lightheaded with the intensity of it, and I can feel the warm slickness gliding over my thighs as Axl takes his pleasure, coming inside me with hot throbs. Kal quickly follows, a groan tearing through him as he spills into my mouth. I swallow him down, and he gently pulls out of me, rubbing his thumbs over my cheeks to swipe away the tears.

Catching my breath seems an impossible task, as does moving in any sort of way, but I don't have to do either, because Axl is moving me with an ease and gentleness that makes my heart swell, and before I know it, I'm in Jax's massive tub, which is big enough for all five of us.

They take turns cleaning me up, massaging my tired, overworked muscles, and showering me with kisses. By the time I'm dried off and wrapped in a black silk robe that feels like heaven against my skin, I can barely hold my eyes open.

It's Jax who scoops me into his arms, cradling me against his chest while he navigates down the hallway to his bedroom. There are a few mumbles I can barely make out because sleep is calling me down its endless tunnel, but I'm pretty sure he's telling the others where they can sleep. No one argues, and I swear I fall in love with each of them a little more at the confirmation that there's no jealousy among the four of them.

I'm theirs, and they know it.

Each owns my soul in his own unique way, and as Jax tucks me into his bed, sliding in behind me with a protectiveness that makes me want to cry, I can't help but wonder how everything can be so right in a world that I've never, not *once*, fit into.

43

Rylee

Jax's staff prepares an incredible breakfast the next morning, and we fall into this new chapter of life where there are no more secrets between us and we're all in this together.

I spend the better part of breakfast explaining my reasons for sneaking into the Choosing event and plans to look for Erin once I was there, even though I've come to terms with the fact that she doesn't want to be found. I'm just grateful all four of the Legends looked for her and couldn't find her, which means she's not on a Never List mission but likely out on one of her adventures under an alias.

Jax nods in understanding as everything clicks about why he'd found me in the library. We're still completely unsure who changed my records to say I'm from Cedar and Silk, and having the loose end is driving me mad.

"What if it's Baydel?" I finally ask after I've cleared my plate of eggs and toast and fruit.

Axl sits on my left, Kal on my right, helping themselves to thirds from the pile of dishes laying atop Jax's onyx dining table.

Mirren ate with us at the start, no shock on her face as I spilled buckets of truths. Naturally, she's one of the few the Legends trust to help protect my secret from the rest of the world, but she excused herself after an hour, hurrying to work on the upcoming events.

"What if he changed my records so he can hold them over my head later?" I ask again after they all share silent, contemplative looks. "His disdain for me is evident, and even Brooks mentioned that he doesn't see me as queen."

Jax drags his finger over his chin, sitting at the head of the table and looking all kinds of delicious this morning. I've never seen him so…disarmed before. His shirt is wrinkled from sleeping with me last night, and his blue-black hair is a mess atop his head.

"I could try to sift through his mind to find out," Pierce offers from where he sits directly across from me.

"You know how hard it is to get past his mental shields." Jax's indigo eyes are distant, as if he's sorting through a hundred different scenarios. "I don't see my father changing your records," he says, finally looking back at me. "If he found

out you were an Ashlander, he would've exposed you immediately. And if he uncovered that you're a demi…" His features harden, and I feel Jax's power streak over the table, little bursts of terror popping against my skin. I take a deep breath, using my own power to soothe his, stroking it with reassuring air. "We can't let him find out." He settles back in his chair.

"He's been against me since day one, when I stopped him from conducting his little test." I tremble at the memory. "Then with the veiled threats toward Erin." My chest tightens. "If he doesn't know already, then he senses something off about me. He clearly doesn't want me to finish this."

"What about the other kings?" Axl asks, finally pushing his plate away.

"Lucas hasn't paid me much attention," I admit, treading carefully. These are still their fathers I'm talking about. "But he's never come to my aid with Baydel, either. Not like Brooks and Jullian have, though like I said, Brooks blatantly admitted he doesn't view me as queen material."

Anger ticks a muscle in Axl's jaw.

"My father has always been a calculative player." Pierce raises his mug, taking a sip of his tea. "He may not see you as the next queen, but I saw it in the memory you shared with me…you intrigue him. He was testing you with his offer as much as he was trying to understand you."

"And mine always follows the power," Axl admits, shaking his head.

I glance at Kal, who seems the most distant during this discussion. "Jullian outwardly has stood up to Baydel and spoken on my behalf."

That brightens the depths of Kal's blue eyes, and he nods. "I trust him," he says.

"Do you trust him enough to tell him the truth about our Rylee?" Jax asks, and warm tendrils of need spiral inside me at the verbal claiming.

Kal hesitates as he stares at his coffee. "I wouldn't risk it, no." He looks at me, sliding his free hand along my thigh under the table. "I'd never do anything to risk you."

That quickly, I want him.

I want them all.

Memories of last night flutter through my mind, raising my pulse and igniting my blood. Each of them is sitting here, mapping out the best possible future for me, and without a hint of judgment. I have no idea how I managed to get so lucky, but I'm suddenly terrified it will all come crashing down around me if I revel in it too long. Chalk it up to losing my parents, then Erin, but happiness is usually a fleeting thing in my life, coming and going like the rising tides.

There's a sense of urgency here, begging me to soak up as much time as I can with them before it all inevitably blows up in my face.

“We can keep her away from Baydel easily enough these last couple of weeks,” Axl says, refilling his coffee and taking a massive swig. “We’ve given her our tokens, and she’s accepted them. Well, almost everyone’s,” he says, flashing a look to Jax. “Once her time is up with you alone, Jax, we’re free to be together in whichever city we choose. And then…”

“And then I undergo the Athanry,” I finish for him.

Jax slams a fist on the table, and I jolt in my seat.

“No,” he says adamantly. “You won’t.”

44

Rylee

“Jax?” I say his name almost timidly, that fear of everything crashing down around me rising to the surface again at his firm declaration. “What do you mean?”

“I agree,” Kal says, and I gape at him.

Axl and Pierce are nodding, too.

“You don’t…” I swallow hard. “You don’t think I’ll survive.” My shoulders drop. They don’t think I’m strong enough.

“I don’t want to take the risk.” Jax reaches over the table, taking my hand in his.

“None of us do,” Kal says.

“From what I’ve gleaned from my father’s memories…” Pierce leans forward, his forearm on the table as he looks to me. “The ones I could access…” He visibly swallows. “When my mother made him immortal, it almost killed him.” His brow pinches. “It’s unnatural and painful, unlike anything you can imagine. He barely survived it.”

Jax’s hold tightens on my hand.

“But when the goddesses set forth the rules of the Choosing, they changed the Athanry. They aren’t going to flood me with powers. They want me to act as your tether to Lumathyst after your full wealth of powers is unlocked,” I say, glancing at each of them. “The process makes me immortal, but I won’t have your powers. I won’t gain my own like the kings did. They said themselves that that’s the mistake they were correcting for. That the kings were too consumed with the access to all the power through their connections to the four goddesses. So…there’s a chance I survive. There’s a chance it’s not like it was with the kings.” The hope in my voice can’t be mistaken, and even I’m a little shocked by it. I’ve been scared of the Athanry since Jax chose me, but now that they’re saying I can’t go through with it, I’m desperate for it.

“You’re correct.” Pierce dips his head toward me. “But there is no certainty in this. No one has ever gone through this before. Not in the way our mothers laid out when they created the Choosing.”

“We don’t need to take the risk,” Axl says, folding his arms over his chest.

“But…your powers. If I don’t go through the Athanry after choosing you,

you'll never have a chance at unlocking the full potential—"

"Fuck our full potential," Jax cuts me off, leaning farther over the table. "I can't lose you."

A lump forms in my throat at the desperation in his voice.

"None of us would survive it," Kal adds.

I wet my lips, holding back tears. "The kings wouldn't allow it," I say. "I'd have to reject you to get out of the Athanry, and that's not happening."

"I could speak to my father." Kal glances at the others. "He'd understand. He'd help convince the other kings to forgo this part."

"If we could convince them," Axl says, "she wouldn't be at risk."

The four of them continue to volley ideas back and forth, falling into a frantic conversation about me, despite me not adding to it.

And I love each of them all the more for it. For their determination to not risk me, not take the chance. It only further solidifies in my heart that I'm exactly where I'm supposed to be.

Part of me thinks harder on that, realizing that if Erin had never disappeared, I never would've gone to the Choosing event, and I never would've met them. Never felt this kind of love. And as much as I miss her, as much as I'm hurt over her leaving, I silently thank her.

"It could work—"

"No," I cut off Pierce's new idea, the table falling silent as they return their focus to me. "No," I say again, squeezing Jax's hand that is still in mine. "I love you. Each of you. I know in my heart this is where I'm supposed to be. As terrifying as the Athanry is…all the unknown surrounding it…your mothers put it into place as a test for your *true* mate. I will survive it because that's who I am."

"Rylee," Kal says, shaking his head. "We can't—"

"It's not your decision to make," I say, leaving no room for argument on my face. "It's mine." I take a deep breath. "It's always been mine."

That's the entire point of the Choosing: for me to put my life on the line in a clear choice for them, for their powers, for their immortality and mine.

"Butterfly…" Jax's voice is soft.

"I will survive." I make sure every inch of determination is clear in my tone.

Am I still scared? Is there still a sliver of doubt threatening to steal all my confidence? Absolutely.

But it's them…my Legends.

My mates.

And I'll do anything to keep them.

"Now that that's settled," I continue when each of them looks keen to argue

with me but keeps their mouths shut, “shouldn’t we talk about the Faders?” It feels good to shift the focus onto something *other* than what’s going to happen next—the final Choosing ceremony, the Athanry, all of it. “I believe we need to up our efforts to capture one and interrogate them.”

Axl grins at me, sliding a hand along my back. “Spoken like a true Legend,” he says, excitement coloring his tone. He waggles his eyebrows at me. “I think it’s time to make you an official member.”

My heart leaps into my throat. “Really?”

“You have my vote,” Pierce says.

“And mine,” Kal adds.

“You know I already claim you as mine,” Axl continues. “Might as well claim you in every way possible. But being a Legend isn’t all power games and intimidation.”

“You have to be prepared to get your hands dirty,” Jax finishes.

“Haven’t I already proved what I’ll do to anyone who threatens any of you?” I ask, thinking about how quickly I’d unleashed my powers on Turner when he tried to hurt Jax.

“Get her a Legend mask,” Jax says to Axl, who claps his hands. “If she’s going to go through the Athanry without fear, she’s stronger than any one of us.”

Pride flutters in my chest.

“Besides that,” Jax continues, “she’d be an asset to our team.”

“The only problem is that we haven’t heard a whisper from the Faders since the attack on the fishing village in the Sapphire Cove.” Pierce’s brow furrows, his mind calculating scenarios and odds about the reasoning behind their absence.

“Even if they don’t show their faces again,” Jax says, jaw flexing, “which I doubt, there are always other Legend dealings to conduct.” He eyes me. “Let’s see if becoming a Legend is truly what you think it’ll be.”

“There’s only one way to find out,” I say, anticipation bursting through me. We’re in this together, no matter what.

They smile at me, and we all push away from the table.

“Let’s get started,” Jax says, and a thrill rushes through me at his words.

• • •

Weeks pass by in a new sense of normal that I can only call surreal. We fall into a rhythm, working the streets of each city in Lumathyst—me donning my official Legend mask and crest-branded jacket as we hunt for information on the

Faders. Even Ivy and Layce have helped on side missions, slowly integrating into my new life.

I keep off the kings' radar, thanks to my Legends and the lengths they go to to keep my secrets. We're no closer to finding a Fader or any information about them, constantly chasing shadows and leads that result in dead ends, but even that can't sour my mood.

There haven't been any more attacks, and the time we aren't being Legends, we're behaving like *mates*. My body heats at the mere idea of how easily we all live together—choosing to stay at Jax's estate, since that's where we decided to be all in with one another.

Kal, Axl, and Pierce return to their cities frequently to ensure things are running smoothly and their people aren't in need, but they always come back as if I'm the magnet that draws them all together.

It's an intoxicating feeling, even if the closer we get to the winter solstice, the more worried I get. There is already a chill in the air, the crisp cold biting the night in Jax's city. I usually love this time of year, but since it means the Athanry is only a couple of days away, I feel like it's an ominous sign that my little blissful time with the Legends is almost up.

I try to force it out of my mind, focusing instead on just how damn lucky I am. They never try to coddle me; rather, they recognize my strength and utilize me as an asset to their Legend team as we try to hunt down our enemies. There have been smaller problems we've settled together—like an influx of new enhancement drugs causing disturbances in the Ruby Aire—and it seems there isn't anything we can't accomplish together.

Except get our hands on a flesh-and-blood Fader.

I blow out an exaggerated breath as I sit alone, a book open and unread in my lap as I lounge in one of Jax's large, overstuffed armchairs. A fire crackles in the hearth next to me, the flames casting the room in a warm glow that eases my muscles.

Axl, Kal, and Pierce all returned to their cities this morning, and Jax left to handle some matters earlier, leaving me to do nothing but await his return. Even Mirren departed after my moodiness became too much for her, but can she really blame me? The second I stop moving, the second I stop focusing on the Legends or the Faders, my true terrors come to the surface of my mind to torment me.

The Athanry being the main source of worry—a battle splitting me right down the middle over it. One side of me knows I'm here for a reason, knows I'm meant for them and them for me, so surviving has to be inevitable. And the other side of me knows we're dealing with magic and power beyond any of our imaginations, so can anything *truly* be certain?

The kings are my second point of concern.

Baydel has been quiet these past weeks, surely in part due to the Legends' efforts to keep him away from me, but I can't help how much his quietness unnerves me.

Maybe I'm overthinking things.

Maybe he's just a prick who will whine and complain the entire way until I finally choose the Legends and solidify our bonds through love. Maybe he'll leave me alone after I've proven my worth—

"Butterfly." Jax's voice cuts through all my worries, shredding them in an instant as he stalks down the stairs, eyes on me when he enters the living room. "I felt your anxiety the second I walked through the door," he says, stopping to crouch before me. "What is it?"

He slides his hands up my thighs, and I sigh at the contact. Lately, whenever I'm away from any of them too long, I get an irrational sensation in my chest… like a part of me is missing and I'll turn into a feral animal if I don't get it back. It scares me, but I have no doubt it's part of this entire process. I'm truly bonding with these Legends, these princes of Lumathyst, and I have to draw confidence from that, have to hope it helps me survive what's coming.

I close the book and set it on a table next to the chair. "You know how detrimental idle time is to my mind."

He nods, shifting on his knees and parting my thighs so he can lean between them, bringing us eye to eye. "Tell me what you need," he says, leaning down to brush a kiss over my lips.

My entire body relaxes with the contact, that connection inside me that links me to Jax practically purring.

"Is it bad that I wish the Athanry was already over with, but at the same time I don't want it to be?" I ask, and Jax's indigo eyes meet mine.

"No," he says. "It's a natural reaction to a shitty situation."

I run my fingers over his shoulders, pulling him closer. Even though it's been weeks, I still relish this closeness with Jax. We had so much distance between us before, it seems more precious to me than the others. Not that I love them less—I love them all equally—but they never made me fear I'd never get their affection like Jax did.

"You still have time to change your mind."

"Jax," I chide him. "We've been through this. I'm doing it. There's no talking me out of it."

"We don't deserve you," he says, gliding his fingers along the collar of my shirt, pulling it down just enough to see the tattoo inked beneath my right collarbone. His mark—an identical rendering of his goddess-given mark and the

tattoo outlining it.

He did the tattoo himself, carefully inking my skin and branding me as his at the same time. After, he'd made love to me, fully sealing our bond. Fuck the ceremony, that was more instrumental in defining our status than anything else.

"I want you, Rylee," he says, dipping down to kiss the tattoo. "I want you alive and happy and *with* me. I don't need more power. I need you."

I drag my fingers through his hair, tilting his head to meet my eyes. The Nightmare never admits to needing anything, but here, with me, with his mate, he's vulnerable in a way those outside of us will never see.

"You have me," I say, my pulse skittering beneath my skin. "Any way you want me."

His eyes darken, and that mischievous smile stretches his lips. "*Any* way I want you?"

I tremble at the look in his eyes. I *know* that look. I *crave* that look.

"Always," I say as he hooks his hands behind my knees and drags me to the edge of the chair.

"You're a brave little butterfly," he says, his expression carnal as he drags my leggings down, tossing them over his shoulder. His eyes flare when he sees that I'm not wearing anything underneath, and he sucks in a breath. "A tease, too," he observes, his fingers light as he skims them over my thighs. He dips his head between them and inhales deeply, planting a kiss on my now-throbbing core. "You've been walking around like this all day?" he asks, flicking his tongue against me.

I arch into his face. His fingers dig into my thighs, settling me back down. "Yes," I answer, heart racing.

"You were just waiting for me to come home and fuck you, weren't you? I bet you quiver every time you even *think* about me, my devious little butterfly." He smirks up at me, settling an arm over my hips to hold me in place so he can dip his head again, dragging his tongue up my center in a long, languid stroke.

"*Yes,*" I say, breathless. I love the way he calls me his butterfly. The endearment makes me feel like a queen. They all make me feel that way, but right now it's just Jax and me and—

"*Jax,*" I groan as he licks me lightly. I tangle my fingers in his hair as he keeps me pinned to the chair, teasing me with too-light flicks of his tongue. I want to arch up, want to get more pressure, but he's too strong.

He hums against my sensitive flesh, the vibrations sending little shocks of pleasure up my body until I shiver. "I could eat you for hours," he says, teasing my swollen flesh with the tip of his tongue.

I whimper because I know him and know he can; he *will*. The prick loves to

edge me, and while it sends me into the most intense orgasms of my life, I'm an impatient, greedy mate when it comes to him.

My thighs clench around his head, my breath coming in tight waves as he winds me up. I shift one leg over his shoulder, using my bare foot to pull him against me, and he laughs that slow, languid laugh that sends tendrils of heat curling under my skin.

"Needy little butterfly," he says, backing up enough to look at me.

The sight of him on his knees is enough to make me wild with desire. I'm a lit match, an aching pulse in my core.

He wets his lips, inhaling deeply again, as if he can drink in my scent, drench himself in my flavor. I tremble at the sight. "You want me to let you go?" he asks, danger flashing in his eyes as he flexes that muscled arm over my hip.

I hesitate, contemplating my Nightmare. He could let me go but then tie me up somewhere else and edge me some more. My toes curl at the thought, and I realize that there is no losing answer here, not with him.

Smiling, I bite my bottom lip and nod.

Fire flashes in his eyes as he releases me, scooting away from me to lie back on the floor. He crooks two fingers at me in a come-hither motion, pure confidence. He *knows* I'll obey.

I hurry off the chair, pulling my tunic over my head as I do, then settle over his hips—

"Ah ah," he says, tsking me as he points at his face. "Sit."

I go liquid at his command, but I hesitate. Before I can try to convince him otherwise, he palms my ass and hauls me up to his face, situating me right over his mouth and flicking out his tongue. My mind whirls at the position as I timidly hover over his mouth. The last thing I want to do is suffocate him—

"I said *sit*," he commands and tightens his grip on my ass to draw me down, dragging my slickness right over his mouth so his tongue slips inside.

"Jax!" I cry. Any concern I have about smothering him flies right out of my mind, my instincts shifting to an unshakable need that only Jax can satiate. I settle against him, rocking over his face in every way that feels amazing.

"That's it," he says, and I feel the vibrations of his voice against me. "Take what you need."

I arch my neck, rolling my hips and dragging my hands up and over my breasts, touching them because it just feels too fucking good not to. Jax nods his head in time to my movements, dragging his tongue through my heat in sure strokes that make me pant. My thighs quiver on either side of his head as I up my pace.

"Yes," Jax groans. "Such a good, obedient butterfly." He squeezes my ass as I

ride him, and liquid fire ripples beneath my skin at his praise.

"Jax." I say his name on a stuttered breath, my pleasure building and spiraling inside me as I rock against him until—

I explode, my entire body shaking from the throes of my orgasm tearing through me. Jax continues to lick me, shoving me toward the point of glittering, delicious pain as I come hard and long until I feel like I can't hold myself up for a second more.

Jax shifts me upward, not wasting a second to switch our positions. He cradles the back of my head with his hand as he lays me out on the floor, dragging his hands down my body before he reaches for two pillows from the couch next to us. He slides them beneath me so I'm up and on display, just for him.

He parts my thighs with his powerful hands, shifting on his knees between my legs. He sinks into me without preamble, and I groan as he drags his hard length out of me before slamming home again.

Goddess, it's so deep when he bottoms out; the angle he has me at allows him to hit that spot inside me and make my eyes roll back in my head. I force myself to focus because he's just too fucking perfect to not watch. He's pure confidence and danger as he towers over me, his indigo eyes unflinching as he fucks me. The fire glows behind him, making the tattoos covering his chest look fluid. A Nightmare incarnate, terrifying and all-encompassing and hauntingly beautiful.

"Harder, Jax," I demand, knowing he's holding himself back. "Take what you need." I echo his earlier sentiment.

That grin of his turns lethal.

"Goddess," I moan as he grips the backs of my knees and fucks me harder, pumping into me with fierce strokes that fill me so completely I can hardly breathe. "Yes, just like that." I reach above my head to grip the silver rug because I have no other leverage, no other choice but to hold on as he utterly ruins me.

The sounds of our sex fill the room, and Jax's smile deepens. "Listen to that," he says, his words tense as he emphasizes each one with a hard thrust. "Listen to how much your body wants mine," he groans, his grip on my legs tightening. The little bite of pain makes me moan, breathless and needy as he tips my pleasure toward the edge—

He slows down, dragging out of me in long, lengthy strokes that make me *shake*. Every graze of his length inside me is like a demon vying for my soul, and goddess save me, he's got it. Whatever he wants, he can have it—my soul, my heart, my mind—as long as he keeps doing *that*.

"Tell me you're mine," he demands.

"I'm yours," I immediately answer as he drags out of me once again,

controlling my release on the end of a string.

He grins, his lips curling around his white teeth in a predatory way. “Tell me you’re mine forever.”

“Forever,” I promise. “Jax, always.” I can barely form the words around the keening in my mind.

His emotions spear into mine, waves of need and assurance and love that are so brutal it makes me want to roar. And when he shifts against me, leaning farther over my body and pushing my knee back with one hand, bottoming out as he rocks himself against my center—I fucking do.

I cry out his name like it’s the last word I’ll ever say, the last thought I’ll ever have in this world. My pleasure crystalizes and shatters in a crescendo that I swear makes me black out for a few seconds. I can barely catch my breath even when my vision clears, with Jax still moving inside me, still stroking me from one dazzling orgasm right into another.

I dig my nails into his back now that I can reach him, rocking in time with his thrusts as I chase another high, and he growls when I clench around him. His release sends me into another one, and I feel entirely limp as we come down.

Our breaths are synced as Jax shifts, gently pulling the pillows out from under me and rolling us until I’m sprawled against his chest. One arm wraps around me while the other one is splayed at his side, and then I’m laughing, my head and spirit thoroughly blissed out and downright giddy.

Jax grins down at me, laughing, too, and it’s all we can do before his mouth is on mine and I’m rolling atop him, never, ever getting enough.

THE ATHANRY

45

Rylee

Mirren's jaw is set in a taut line as she does my makeup, the brushstrokes harder against my face than usual.

"I couldn't sleep," I say as she drags the soft bristles beneath my eyes, doing her best to cover the harsh purple beneath them. "None of us could."

She does nothing but purse her lips at me like she's just bitten into a lemon. I've always loved her for her sassy attitude, but this is a level we've never reached before.

"I'm sorry for the extra work," I say, and she freezes with the brush against my skin.

She huffs out an abrupt laugh, then shakes her head as she finishes with my eyes and sets down the brush. "I don't care that you look like yesterday's garbage." Her tone is laced with a combination of anger and worry.

"Wow," I say, looking up at her from where I sit in Jax's room.

It's been four months since Mirren first helped me get ready at the palace, and yet it feels like no time has passed at all.

"Thanks for not sugar coating that one, Mir. Charming, as always."

She rolls her eyes, then twirls her fingers in a demand that I turn around. I do as I'm told, my heart in my throat. Not at her comment—I know I look like shit—but at the memories of what kept me up all night in the first place.

Long, deep kisses none of us admitted had a sense of urgency behind them… as if they might be the last ones we'll ever have.

Sweet, soft touches that filled me with confidence and longing at the same time.

Whispered stories to distract us from the night passing and a dawn breaking on the day that will change our lives one way or another.

My Legends of Chaos.

The princes of Lumathyst.

In the beginning, I'd hated the mere idea of them, but I hadn't *known* them.

The majority of Lumathyst doesn't understand their princes, and it's a real fucking shame. A shame they don't know how much they care, how much they're trying to help make Lumathyst a better place. But they can't know. No one can. If the kings knew how against tradition the princes are, how badly they

want to reshape our country…

I can't even think of what the kings would do to them.

Maybe not all of them, but certainly Baydel and Lucas. They've shown exactly how content they are with the way things are in Lumathyst.

The Legends can't show their true intentions for this kingdom until they're matched in power.

I swallow around the lump in my throat, resisting the urge to chew on my bottom lip. Mirren is already in a pissy mood. If I mess up her hard work? She might just kill me before the Athanry has its chance.

"Ow," I hiss as she yanks the brush through my hair. "If you're intent on torturing me, I'll do my hair myself."

She makes no move to leave. The stubborn woman just continues yanking and pulling my hair into curls and braids inlaid with ruby, sapphire, obsidian, and emerald pins.

"Why are you so angry with me today?" I finally ask when she tosses me a dress made of silver and lace. "Did you not sleep well, either?" I slide into the dress, adjusting the thin straps over my shoulders and smoothing my hands across the middle, arching an eyebrow at her when the hemline stops just below my ass. It's certainly not the formal gown I expected for the Athanry ceremony. It's more like a dress I'd wear to a club like Lust.

Mirren simply gives me an approving nod.

"You're not going to answer me?" I ask when she remains silent.

Debate churns in her eyes, but she finally lets me have it. "I am angry with you," she says, and I flinch as if she's hit me.

My eyes widen. "What did *I* do?"

"You've put yourself in the absolute worst position," Mirren says, drawing me back to the present. "Honestly, Rylee, I'm disappointed in you."

I almost curl in on myself as her words hit their target. Goddess, I feel like I've just been scolded by my mother.

"What are you talking about?"

"Do you think the Athanry ceremony is just another party? Another event for you to smile and wave at? Another breakfast or art gallery donation for the wealthy of Lumathyst to awe over? You can't *fake* your way through this one, Rylee. It messes with power the likes of which regular citizens never experience. It's designed to kill you more than enhance you, and you're going to walk in there with no sleep. I could throttle those boys for keeping you up all night and didn't even think about suggesting you nap today. It's almost sunset, and you look as if you've not slept in days." Tears line her eyes, her raw emotions catching up with her, and I don't think, I just move, wrapping her in my arms.

She’s shaking, but her arms come around me in return.

“I’m going to be all right,” I say, the anger leaking right out of me and leading straight into fear. I have no idea if I’m lying or not. I could die, and the thought of never having another day with my mates…

“I’m not going to die,” I say like that will force the outcome. I move, gently clutching her shoulders as we lock eyes. “I didn’t mean to not sleep, but we didn’t want to miss a second of being together.” We’d spent the day talking, eating, and doing routine life tasks in an effort to pretend like tonight wasn’t happening.

Mirren nods in understanding.

“I don’t like being attached to you,” she admits, shaking me off. “I’ve always been so careful to never get attached, but you… Goddess, you’re impossible.”

I laugh weakly. “You sound like my mates.”

“Your mates,” she repeats, pride shining through her features.

“They’re mine,” I say, and at least I know that is a certainty. After everything we’ve been through, the passion and love that’s grown between us, I can’t deny it. I’ll never deny it again. “I will survive for them.”

Goddesses, please let that be true.

Suddenly, I wish so badly for Erin to be here. To be supporting me in this decision. I hate that I can’t completely shut out my hope to reconnect with her one day, even when I know I should. She left me, not the other way around.

But…she’s my sister.

No matter what she did, she’ll always be my sister.

And as I’m quite possibly about to head to my demise, I wish she was here.

“It’s time,” Mirren says, and I force the thoughts away.

Survive, Rylee. Figure out your sister trauma after.

I chant this over and over again as Mirren walks me out of Jax’s estate, leading me to where all four of them wait for me outside of an oversize carriage. All look grim but gorgeous in suits of their home colors.

“I can’t go with you,” Mirren says. “I wish I could, but I’m not allowed. I’ll be praying to the goddesses for you, though.”

“Thank you,” I say, then lower my voice to a whisper. “I love you. If something happens, please take care of them.” Just in case. I don’t want them to grieve alone.

She gives me a curt nod, and Pierce takes my hand, helping me into the carriage before they all follow me inside.

We’re quiet the entire ride to the Temple of Evaluna, having said everything we could last night. Hence our exhaustion. There’s nothing more to say, to worry about, to try to plan when we have no possible way of knowing what’s to come.

Instead, we sit in a somber yet comfortable silence until the carriage stops.

"It's not too late," Jax says, reaching for my hand. "We could put an end to this right now."

I swallow the emotion clogging my throat as I look at him, then the rest of them. They all look at me with such sincerity, such support.

They'd do it.

They really would deny the Athanry and have their powers remain locked up for the rest of forever to spare me.

"I can do this," I say, knowing they deserve to be at full strength.

The door to the carriage opens—

And Baydel is standing there, one hand on the door, a smug smile stretched over his lips. The other kings are behind him, waiting patiently, and behind them rests the grand Temple of Evaluna.

"Well, there you are," Baydel says, reaching for me with his free hand. "I have the honor of escorting you up the temple steps," he continues. "Seeing as how it's my son's choice and my mate's temple at which we're conducting this Athanry."

I spare a glance at the Legends, silently telling Jax to relax. He looks as if he might slice Baydel's hand clean off, and that would certainly delay things.

I take Baydel's hand, my already shot nerves tangling up even more as he leads me away from the Legends and toward the bottom of the temple steps.

There are hundreds of them we have to climb, the sparkling obsidian temple massive enough to hold the resting statue of the goddess Evaluna.

Baydel falls silent as we ascend the stairs, and it takes all of my willpower to not look behind me to ensure my Legends aren't far behind.

My skin tightens, every single instinct in my body roaring that something is terribly, terribly wrong, to the point I can't take another second of silence, of the unknown.

"No wise counsel for me today?" I ask, doing my best to keep the fear out of my voice. I'm stripped thin—not sleeping combined with all the fear—it's left me feeling raw and exposed and so fucking *tired*.

Baydel's smile is eerie in a way that makes my stomach turn. He knows something, but fuck if I'll be the one to figure out what it is or give him any information of my own.

"Whatever do you mean?" he asks, all charm and elegance.

I want to puke on his shiny gold shoes. We're now ten steps away from my fate, whether that be survival or death, and I'm so *done*.

"Every time we've met, you've given me barely veiled threats or openly voiced your dislike of me. And now, the last time we may ever meet, you're

silent?”

A giddy little giggle escapes him, a sound that doesn’t match the evil in his eyes. “I have no need for threats now, little bug,” he says, dismissing me as we reach the last stair at the temple’s entrance.

Cold dread sinks in my gut.

“All is already determined.” He takes a step forward into the temple, his body blocking my view as he gives me a final look over his shoulder.

The breath catches in my throat, and anger slices through my veins.

He thinks I’m going to die.

No…he’s acting like he *knows* I will.

I shiver, unable to stop the fear streaking through my body as he enters the temple, leaving me standing there, unable to even appreciate the intricate design—the way the moon hangs high in the sky, the stars bathing the massive obsidian statue of Evaluna in silver. She’s at least one hundred stories tall, her face severe. A balcony wraps around her near her chest, offering worshippers a closer view.

There’s a small fountain of sparkling black near her feet, and the rest of the temple is open space filled with the same crowd as the Choosing event, only this time, their eyes are *on* me instead of me trying to blend into the shadows.

Goddess, that feels like a lifetime ago.

I sense Jax beside me before he slips his hand in mine, the kiss of his power rippling against my skin. Then Axl’s and Kal’s and Pierce’s as they join me at the entrance of the temple.

Fear melts into courage as I look at them. There’s nothing I wouldn’t do for these men.

They look as magnificent and godlike as ever as we head farther into the temple. The kings move ahead of us, climbing more stairs that lead up to the balcony near Evaluna’s chest. The rest of the people remain on the ground level to watch, drinking champagne and eating delicacies as if this was any other party hosted by the royals.

But it isn’t.

It’s an event that hasn’t happened in hundreds of years—not since the kings themselves were blessed and turned immortal by their beloved goddesses.

We reach the balcony, and I look at my mates again. Their eyes are on me, each of them the picture of confidence, support, and love. There’s no way I’ll ever be able to run from that.

I smile at them, not showing an ounce of the fear I feel drenching my insides.

There are a half dozen Occuli on the balcony with us, no doubt capturing every detail of my face so that all of Lumathyst can analyze and judge me later when they report on it.

I still as we draw near the statue of Evaluna, her face so close, so large, so overpowering. But it's not her that slows my pace. It's the vertical rectangle of what seems to be liquid starlight free-flowing at the edge of the balcony. The substance looks thick, as if the kings melted a few stars and are using magic to create what looks like an ever-churning doorway.

"Come, son." Jullian Erhart beckons Kal toward the liquid silver door. He gives me a warm smile before heading over.

Jax, Pierce, and Axl follow, meeting their fathers and standing next to the floating door.

"Potential," Baydel calls me, some magic magnifying his voice so the onlookers below can hear him. "Come."

Icy rivulets make my blood feel thin and my knees wobble, but I force myself to move. Force myself to look at only my mates as I walk toward them.

Kal tucks me beneath his arm. "You will survive," he whispers into my ear before he kisses the top of my head. "You're the strongest person I know."

I grin up at him, holding back tears. I couldn't find my voice now if I tried.

The kings shift around me, Baydel holding a small golden glass vial in his hands. He shows it to the onlooking Occuli, then smiles at me. "The Athanry elixir," he says in a very practiced voice, nothing like the tone he'd given me minutes ago. "Enhanced with a drop of blood from the goddesses," he continues, still playing to the Occuli's attention. "The blood of our goddesses who guide us and watch over us until their reawakening. There are only four left." He motions to a velvet-lined wooden box with four more vials lying in it. "The goddesses only left behind five vials. Five chances at a mate," he says, glancing down at me, then lowers his voice. "In case you don't survive."

I don't even have time to flinch at his whispered words before he continues.

Jullian steps over to me, a gleaming, gilded dagger in his hand.

"Do you choose the princes of Lumathyst as your mates?" Baydel asks, and I swear I can hear the crowd below holding their breath.

"I do," I say, my eyes darting between Baydel and Jullian.

"Then take the dagger and repeat the sacred words I offer before sealing the promise in blood," Baydel instructs.

I take the dagger from Jullian, barely registering his encouraging smile.

"I choose you to be my mates," Baydel recites. "As long as my heart is beating, my soul is yours."

I swallow hard, looking at each of my Legends. "I choose you," I say, gripping that dagger in my right hand, "to be my mates. As long as my heart is beating, my soul is yours." I drag the blade over my left palm, wincing slightly as I cut into my own flesh. Blood wells from the cut, and I lift it, showing the kings.

“Good,” Baydel says, stepping toward me with the vial in his hand. “Now, drink this, Chosen, and walk of your own accord through the doorway. Leave our realm and enter that of the goddesses using this magic created by them when their sons were born for this very moment. Let the goddesses judge you themselves. Be deemed worthy or unworthy of the princes of Lumathyst.”

I’m shivering, and Kal squeezes me tighter against him, Pierce and Axl and Jax moving like magnets, trying to keep the cool wind from nipping at my bare skin. Terror races down my spine as I look at the liquid silver—it looks thick enough to suffocate me.

Baydel hands me the vial, lowering his voice just slightly. “You’re allowed to say your goodbyes, just in case.”

I take the vial, studying the golden swirling elixir inside. It has an iridescent hue to it, not unlike the doorway before me. Baydel’s eyes are vats of arrogance and pride, and I tear myself away from the sight, turning to face my Legends.

Kal kisses me again, then releases me so the others can take their turn.

Axl hauls me against him, my toes dangling against the floor. “This is nothing, kitten,” he says. “Show your claws to whatever comes.” His warmth seeps into my skin, making it easier to breathe as he sets me on my feet, slanting a quick kiss over my lips before he moves.

Pierce is next, taking my hand in his and kissing the back in his signature endearment to me. It makes my heart flutter in my chest.

“I’m listening to my father now.” He speaks directly into my mind, the intimate caress gliding straight down the center of me. *“The elixir is designed to test your body, your soul, your power. It will hunt for a weakness, anything to judge whether you can handle immortality or not. Don’t let it win.”*

I nod to him, hoping he can feel my determination, and then he kisses my hand one more time before making way for Jax.

My entire being wants to crumple at the sight of him. Wants to fall into my Nightmare’s arms and let him scare away anything that dares to frighten me. But I manage to remain upright as he stalks toward me, taking my chin in his fingers and tilting my head to meet his indigo eyes.

“You *will* survive,” he whispers, his features severe. I shudder at the mere idea of disobeying him. He brushes a kiss over my lips, just a fragment of what I need, what I crave. “You will come back to me.”

I swallow hard, finally finding my voice. “I’ll come back to you,” I say, then uncork the vial.

“Princes of Lumathyst,” Baydel says. “Move to the four corners of this balcony, representing the four goddesses who bore you. Wait patiently for your powers to unlock, should the goddesses deem your mate worthy and turn her

immortal.”

They each give me one last look and then move to the four corners.

“Chosen,” Baydel continues. “Drink and pass through the doorway.”

My fingers tremble as I bring the bottle to my lips. If I want to be linked to my mates forever, to unlock their real wells of powers, this is what I must do.

I throw the liquid back in one gulp, the concoction burning with a harsh aftertaste that threatens to come right back up. I take a deep breath, feeling the elixir slide through my body, warming every inch of my muscles, digging its way into every crevasse of my soul and filling it with…*other.*

I barely make it two steps toward the doorway before my muscles give out completely and I spin, falling backward right into the warm, thick, sparkly substance. It sucks me into it, holding me aloft. My head is swimming in a sluggish way, detaching from everything that I know and am.

I register my Legends, my masters of chaos reaching for me from every corner of the balcony. Their eyes graze every inch of me, branding me with love and support and…it *burns*.

Or is that the elixir singeing me from the inside out?

I can’t see the stars anymore.

I can’t feel the liquid holding me up anymore.

The silver substance around me slides over my chest, and it’s *so* fucking heavy against me.

It feels like fire, sliding into my very soul, wrapping its fingers around my heart and *squeezing*.

My heartbeat slows so much, it’s hard to breathe. I’m pulled from behind, the liquid enveloping me until I can no longer feel or see anything but darkness.

Please let me survive. For them. Please.

46

Rylee

I free-fall through the night sky, my limbs flinging upward, completely out of control as I plummet.

Clarity snaps through my foggy mind like the crack of a whip.

I jerk my arms and legs, windmilling them like that will stop me from splattering all over the ground that looks like a grain of rice below. I reach for my power, trying to lasso the wind so it will slow my descent, but there is *nothing* there.

Panic bolts through my system, the breath in my lungs too short and fast as I fall. Where the goddesses is my power? Why can't I—

The Athanry. The elixir. The doorway.

Maybe the elixir depleted my powers to make room for whatever the goddesses will use to turn me immortal. I remember how I felt before I started falling—the burning that soared through my body, overfilling me until I was spilling buckets of it.

The fall is never-ending, my panic climbing in intensity as I try and try to stop myself in the air.

I think of Kal, think of how easy it is for him to fly and—

Like snapping my fingers, I'm no longer falling.

I'm *soaring.*

I cut through the air as effortlessly as if I'm using my wind, but there is no end in sight.

Pierce said the elixir was meant to test me…maybe it's giving me a taste of my mates' powers, so I can fully understand them in their entirety.

I don't feel the bottom of Kal's power, don't feel the need to conserve it for when I need it most. There is an endless well of his energy flowing through my veins, and it's downright intoxicating. Or that could be the fact that I know I'm not about to become splatter on the ground below, but still—

The night sky disappears so suddenly, I scream, losing hold of Kal's power in my blood. I crash into an ocean that definitely wasn't there seconds ago. The impact shocks my body. The water is freezing, the cold biting into my skin so fiercely it burns. My muscles lock up despite my mind demanding they *move*. I didn't get a good breath before crashing beneath the water, and I'm sinking like

a stone.

A powerful current churns around me as I thrash and kick for the surface. But it's like something is locked around my ankles, yanking me down, down, down. My lungs burn, begging for the air I so desperately need. Panic makes my vision flicker, the iciness sluicing through my veins.

No, no, no. I can't drown here. I can't. I have to get back to my mates.

Something zaps inside me, like the crackling of a fire, and I'm sure it's my lungs exploding in my chest, but after a few more seconds, I realize it's Axl's power.

His power.

I want to smack myself, but instead, I mentally clutch that power and tug. My descent stops, my momentum propelling me toward the surface as I control the water around me. I clear it in seconds, gulping in lungfuls of precious air as my mind clears—

My body slams into a hard, polished emerald floor, the pain of the impact radiating through my bones. I cringe against it, then haul myself upright before I get trampled by the throngs of people rushing around the room.

They move as if I don't exist, bumping into me, their motions jostling me this way and that until I'm ready to throat punch the next person who does it—

It hits me at once—the thoughts.

All of them.

Every single person's thoughts, worries, dreams, fantasies, and fears slam into me like an avalanche. I rush through the crowd, shoving my way through the bodies until I find a solitary corner, my head bursting with an icy pain that digs through the center of my mind with razor-sharp claws. I grab at my head, massaging it with my fingers like that will make the voices stop, make the images flashing behind my eyes stop.

Pierce's power. Just a fraction of it. *Goddess*.

I close my eyes and breathe in through my nose and out through my mouth. He taught me a little about mental shielding. It's all about control and breathing. I can do this. Remember what he said… *Empty your mind until you are alone in the room you've created for yourself.*

Blowing out a breath, I picture closing a hundred doors. One by one, I slam a door on every distinct voice I hear in my head. The volume inside decreases with each one closed. My breathing comes easier as the roar dwindles, and my muscles relax when I hear nothing but my own thoughts.

Carefully, I peel open my eyelids, terrified of the crowded room, but it's empty. Nothing but the glimmering emerald floors and the blank walls. It's peaceful and welcome after the onslaught, and I'm able to stand up again. I flick

my fingers, conjuring the emerald ribbons of energy I've seen Pierce create a thousand times, and I giggle when one spirals from my fingertips. I can feel the ribbon of power like it's an extension of my body. It's beautiful and strange and endless.

It disappears when the room goes black.

I widen my eyes in an attempt to see better, but the darkness is thicker than midnight.

Only one power left. My Nightmare's.

I steel myself for what I'm sure will be a barrage of emotions flooding me, like the voices, but nothing comes. I move around in the darkness, trying to find anything that will help.

A light flickers in the farthest corner of the area, and I instinctively move toward it. The closer I get, the more dread fills the back of my throat. It's a distinct sensation, almost with its own flavor. I try to swallow around it, then freeze when I see Jax in the corner. He's dressed in his usual black, leaning against the wall, glaring at something I can't see.

"Jax?" I call out to him, but he doesn't look my way, doesn't act like he's heard me.

His indigo eyes are cold, hard, and this side of hateful. In fact, I can feel the hatred radiating from him, can taste it on my tongue. Goddess, it's haunting. What is he looking at?

I move closer, finally able to see properly.

It's…

Me.

He's looking at me while I talk to Kal, a smile on my face and my hand on his forearm. I recognize the memory because it's mine, just from a different point of view.

Hunger pulses right alongside the hatred with a dash of fear. I look back at Jax, my heart aching as his emotions storm me.

He hated me; we'd already established that. And he had every reason to, but now? Now I know he loves me. He knows how much I love him. Still…these emotions are intense and threaten to ruin everything I know in my heart.

Fuck, he lives his life like this every day? Feeling all these raw, unforgiving emotions? But he can control them, too. I've seen him in action. If he can do it, so can I.

I walk up to the phantom Jax, focusing on his power humming inside me. I stroke it into submission—his power is so much more combative than the others'. I hush it until it's purring, begging me to keep playing with it. Then I send a burst of love soaring over the hate pulsing off of Jax.

His muscles relax, the deep grooves in his brow melting as his eyes soften. A sigh slides past his lips, and he uncrosses his arms, looking at Kal and me the way he does now—in the real world, not this test, this trial.

I step away from him, closing my eyes as I distinguish each of their powers inside me. Axl's is crisp and churning like the sea. Pierce's is intricate and delicate like a spiderweb. Kal's is warm and humming like the sun. And Jax's is smoky and stubborn like the shadows.

It's too much and not enough, just like my mates. I want them to consume me, use me, love and protect me, just like I want to do to them.

"Rylee Gray," a feminine voice calls, and I whirl around.

The darkness has vanished, replaced by a light so bright it burns my eyes.

I blink repeatedly, adjusting to the difference.

I'm no longer alone in a blank canvas of a room.

I'm standing among the goddesses themselves.

I drop to a knee, dipping my head in a bow deeper than any I've ever done for the kings.

Light laughter fills the space, the sound almost musical. "Your mistrust of our mates isn't unnoticed," the same feminine voice says, and I dare to look up from where I kneel.

"Goddess Evaluna." I whisper her name, recognizing her from the dress of night wrapped around her. My eyes trail over the others, their beauty severe, almost brutal where they stand before me. Goddesses Tareena, Eirdis, and Neph are giving me prideful, surveying looks as Evaluna dips her head in acknowledgment.

Goddess Neph steps forward, her feet bare, a gown of glistening gold and red covering her. Long blond hair flows over her shoulders. She looks like the sun and radiates a warmth I recognize in her son. "You have more than a drop of my blessing in your blood," she says, her voice smooth and comforting.

I nod, my voice tangling in my throat.

"Is this real?" I ask. "Or is this an elixir test? Why did it let me feel their powers?"

"What do you think?" Eirdis asks—Pierce's mother—dressed in a gown of purest purple that radiates against her brown skin. Spiders of black and gold shift with movement over the fabric, and she has the same intellectual eyes as Pierce, the same challenge silently boring from them.

Think. Feel. Process.

"It feels real," I finally answer.

Their power, their presence threatens to swallow me whole, not unlike their sons, but in a way that is more potent. If I ever felt small in my Legends'

presence, then here among the goddesses, I am as insignificant as an ant.

"You don't give yourself enough credit, Rylee Gray," Eirdis says. "Rise."

I immediately obey, instantly wishing I was wearing anything but the scrap of silver the Athanry demanded. Goddess meetings should be more formal, right? Not this mess.

Tareena sighs. "It's a shame. I like this one. She was different."

"Agreed," Eirdis says. "She's so bonded to them that even in her condition, she created a space where she and their powers were one."

Obviously, they can all read my mind, but for some reason unknown to me, I'm not afraid.

I should be…

Why am I not?

"Probably because there is no fear here," Neph says, sadness in her eyes replacing the levity from moments ago.

I furrow my brow, some certainty that I can't quite place banging on the back of my mind.

"Haven't you realized?" Evaluna tilts her head.

"The pain you felt. We did not concoct the Athanry elixir to cause the potential harm." Eirdis moves toward me, eyes scanning my body. "Don't you feel it?"

"Feel what?" I ask, suddenly feeling nothing at all.

Not the pulse beneath my skin or the breath in my lungs.

"Oh, how tragic." Evaluna purses her lips as she glances to her friends. "She doesn't know."

"Know what?" I beg.

Evaluna gives me a pitying look. "You're dead."

47

Jax

One second, I surrender myself to the bond that connects me to Rylee as she undergoes the Athanry, dreaming of all the ways we're going to spend our eternity, and the next—

Searing pain snaps through me, like being struck by lightning.

Something in my soul severs…as if a vital piece of myself has been chopped off.

Rylee!

My eyes snap open, my heart racing.

I slide my hand over my chest, checking to make sure I haven't been stabbed in the heart.

Pierce's eyes are wide with panic, too, and Kal's and Axl's.

Something's wrong.

That connection that bound Rylee to me moments ago, the one that was blazing hot with an icy fire that froze and burned me from the inside out, is deadly *numb*.

Internally, I grapple for it, reaching out with my mental fingers in an attempt to catch it, but it's as useless as trying to grab smoke.

I race toward the doorway, where Rylee is suspended in the silver liquid.

She falls forward the second I touch her, the liquid releasing her in one quick move.

"Rylee." Her name is a cry from my lips, her body slamming into mine with the weight of a free fall.

I gather her into my arms, dropping to my knees before the statue of my mother. She's not breathing. I press my ear to her chest, desperate to hear her heart beating.

Nothing.

There's nothing.

Rage and grief and despair split me open from the inside out.

"What's happened, son?" Baydel asks, but I can't see him, can't hear him properly as I hold Rylee.

"Jax!" Pierce is there, next to me, then Axl and Kal.

"She's…she's dead," I roar.

I *feel* it.

"I can't feel her anymore," Pierce says, grief coloring his voice.

"No," Axl growls. "No, she can't be."

"Jax…she's…she's not breathing," Kal whispers as if the breath from his lungs has gone thin.

"Rylee!" I scream her name, gently shaking her, running my hands over her body in search of a pulse that isn't there.

"No," I hear Pierce say behind me, and Axl and Kal.

I can hear them all, can feel the weight of their powers as they drop to their knees where I hold Rylee, her lifeless body still warm in my arms.

Tears spill over my lashes, rolling down my cheeks as I try and fail to revive her. I blow breath into her lungs and push against her chest in an effort to make her heart beat.

"Pierce! Help me," I scream, looking to my friend, begging him.

My screams break him from his shock, his despair.

"*Help* me," I cry out again from where I'm working on her chest.

She didn't make it. She didn't survive the Athanry.

"She's strong…" Axl whispers. "How did she not survive?"

I glare at him, my power crackling outside enough to make him flinch.

"She's strong enough!" I yell. "She is."

"Jax." Pierce draws my attention, his tone commanding as he waves at me to stop working on her chest.

I do as he says, watching as an emerald ribbon of his energetic power slides into to the center of her body, folding itself into her skin until I can't see it. I look from her lifeless face to his and back again, holding my breath as I desperately wait.

"No." Pierce whispers the word, injecting her with more of his power, so much that her body jolts before me.

But she does not breathe.

My mate.

My match.

She's dead.

Kal is shaking as he smooths his hand over her forehead, tears welling in his eyes.

Axl slams his fist against the floor so hard it cracks.

Pierce stumbles backward, shock and regret clinging to his face.

My entire world shatters beneath me, and rage splits me open like a cracked egg, my power spearing out in every direction around me in a terrifying snap that sends the entire audience of the Choosing ceremony *running*.

Screams of terror fill my mother's sacred temple as they rush out of the building, my power biting at their heels, lashing out at anybody it can as my grief consumes me.

"Jax!" my father screams, but his elite enforcer is pulling him away, forcing him out of the temple for his own safety. The other elite enforcers are doing the same with the other kings, until the temple is completely emptied out and there's no one left for me or my power to attack.

No one but the Legends and myself.

"She's mine," I yell up at my mother's statue, stomping toward the small table set up near the doorway.

I glance down at the wooden box containing the other four vials of elixir. The last four chances at ever having a mate.

I snatch one up, uncorking it with my teeth.

"Jax, what are you doing?" Pierce asks, suddenly at my side.

Axl and Kal aren't far behind, each of their faces mirroring my own grief.

"She's ours," I say, holding the bottle toward them. "I'm going to get her back."

"Like fuck you are," Axl says. "Not without me." He grabs a vial out of the box.

"These are the last vials," Pierce says, ever the logical voice.

"They are." My entire body shakes with adrenaline. "You can stay. All of you. Try again another time if I don't succeed. But Rylee is my mate. I know it. There is no one else for me. Either I get her back or I die."

"She's *our* mate." Kal uncorks his own bottle. "I don't need another chance."

"I don't, either," Pierce says as he looks at each of us. "We drink this, and there's a good chance we may be lost to trials that were not meant for us."

"You don't have to do this," I reiterate, looking at my friends. "You could stay behind, remain here in case the worst happens—"

"Not a chance," Axl says. "Legends live together, and we die together."

I nod and bring my bottle to my lips, my friends doing the same as we all drink the elixir that was meant solely for a potential mate. But I don't give a shit. This took Rylee to the goddesses? Then it'd better fucking take me, too.

The liquid burns down my throat, feeling like I swallowed a bottle of razor blades, but the pain is nothing compared to the grief ripping my heart to shreds.

I glance at my friends one last time before I feel the weight of a thousand universes fall atop me.

My back hits the floor, and I manage to roll to my side, my heavy eyes on Rylee as I reach for her—

48

Jax

"You know, son, I have always loved your flair for drama." I hear my mother's voice, and suddenly I'm conscious again.

I stand in an intensely bright space that goes on forever in all directions.

I try to hold my hand up to block the blaze from my eyes, squinting against it, but there's no escaping it.

"Mother?" I step toward the sound of her voice, and then she's there, standing among my friends' mothers, three of whom are looking down at something lying on a marble slab in front of them.

"Rylee," I say when I notice the body on the slab.

It's only then that I realize I'm not the only one who said her name.

I race toward her alongside Axl, Pierce, and Kal. All four of us running toward our mate, who lies at the feet of our mothers.

"Axl," Axl's mother says as he reaches the marble slab first, then Kal, then Pierce, and then me, skidding to a stop. My grief overtakes me once more as I see her lying there…not breathing…not moving.

"She's strong enough. She loved us for *us*. And you denied her immortality?" I ask, anger drenching my tone as I look at my mother, who's every bit as devastatingly beautiful as she is in my memory. I point to Rylee. "You give her back to us," I demand.

My mother gives me a chiding look, and one tilt of her head has me dropping to my knees, her power so all-encompassing, I feel like I'm being stretched in every direction at once.

"*We* did not do this," she says in a tone I've never heard before.

She's angry. So fucking angry.

Her power recedes, and she sighs as I drag myself back to standing.

"If you didn't do this, then who did?" Kal's eyes are on his mother, who's looking at him with nothing but pure adoration and love. She radiates every bit of goodness that's in Kal's heart.

"We're not allowed to say certain things," the goddess Neph says, looking at each of us pitifully. "There's a delicate balance that we must not upset."

"Fuck your balance," I snap, and my mother's eyes go bright as starlight. "Give her back to me."

“As I told you, son,” my mother says, “*we* did not take her from you.”

“Was there some flaw in us?” Axl asks, his brow furrowed, tears in his eyes. “Something the elixir revealed to her that made her realize she didn’t want an eternity with us?”

“We mustn’t say,” Eirdis, Pierce’s mother, says.

I roll my eyes.

“Give her back to me,” I demand again.

“Please,” Kal says with an air of desperation that makes me flinch. “Mother,” he continues, eyes pleading as he looks at his mother. “She’s the one. I know it. Tell me there’s something I can do.”

“There is a way.” Neph shifts on her bare feet, her gold-and-red gown swaying. “But it will come at great cost.”

“Name it,” I say. The others nod avidly.

My mother tilts her head again, placing the tips of her fingers together in front of her. “Are you so eager to agree to a price you don’t yet understand? I thought I raised you better than that.”

“That is my mate.” I point to Rylee. “There is *no* cost too great to bring her back to me.”

Surprise flits across my mother’s face, but she dips her head toward Neph.

“The cost will be great,” Neph says again, looking at all of us, but her eyes linger on her son with a sense of longing that makes even me hurt. “You must give her all of your powers,” she explains.

“Won’t that…kill her?” Kal asks.

Neph gives him the slightest shake of her head. “You must willingly give her *all* of your power,” she says. “Your fully unlocked, unweighted powers. With no guarantee of her ever returning them.”

I tilt my head, looking at my mother.

“She speaks the truth,” my mother says. “If you truly want her back, then your power, in all its entirety, is the price. Grant it to your mate, and she’ll have the ability to give it back or take it all at will. She could keep it for herself and rule as queen of Lumathyst for the rest of forever without you. Your very immortality will be linked to her will. Do you trust her enough for the sacrifice?”

I look to my friends. Not one of us knows what it’s like to live without our powers, not to mention surrendering our chance of ever ruling over Lumathyst and making change for our people.

Neph draws a dagger of purest white from her gown, unsheathing it. The sharp blade glimmers in the unflinching light around us. “Spill your blood atop her,” Neph explains, “as she did when she chose you, and it will be done. Your powers will cease to be yours. She may not even choose to come back, because the

choice will still lie with her. She's in that restful in-between now, and I can tell you from experience that it will be hard to leave behind and return to the harsh realities of the world."

There's a beat of silence.

"Is she worth this to you?" my mother asks, flicking her fingers, and a wooden box identical to the one my father held appears in her hands. She cracks the lid, revealing four more vials of Athanry elixir. "You could take this back with you, my son. Take it back and try for a mate again."

I curl my lip, rolling up my sleeve to expose my wrist over Rylee's body.

Pierce, Axl, and Kal follow.

"Suit yourself, son," my mother says, the wooden box disappearing. "I do miss you." She takes a step back. "I hope you don't regret this choice."

I notice that the gazes of the other goddesses are on their sons, but there's only an instant before Neph speedily slices that dagger across our wrists and our blood spills upon our mate.

Seconds pass before I feel my power leaking out of that small wound, as if my entire life force is being dragged out of me, a magnet pulling everything else to another location.

It's so powerful, I drop to my knees. My breathing is shallow, my body trembling as I fall to the ground.

My friends soon follow, and I blink heavily, seeing my mother give me a wry smile before everything goes black again.

49

JAX

Instinct barrels through me, my mind awakening before my eyes open. I roll to the side, hearing a *clink* of sharp metal sinking into the marble floor right near my face.

I barely have time to take stock of my surroundings before dodging another blow from a long sword that nicks my cheek.

I roll away, popping to my feet, my head pounding and my body feeling so much lighter than it ever has before.

"Faders," I hiss as I notice a dozen of them converging on the temple. My friends are still groaning awake near me. I reach internally for my power, prepared to send them all running screaming, but there's nothing there.

Nothing but wisps of air where I used to have a well to draw from.

Pierce, Axl, and Kal make it to their feet, and I dodge another sword swing, gripping the Fader's wrist and landing a kick to his middle, sending him soaring in the other direction.

I quickly scoop up Rylee's body, my heart breaking when I realize she's still not breathing.

She may not choose to come back.

In the end, she may not choose us at all.

I carry her around the statue of my mother, tucking her near her back against the balcony railing, making sure she's well out of sight before I rejoin my friends.

"She's still not breathing," I say.

"Fuck," Axl growls.

"We have no power." Kal curls his hands into fists.

"What if she chooses not to come back?" Pierce asks, fear lacing his tone.

I suck in a deep breath, calculating the odds of us surviving this with no weapons save for my blades.

I pass one to each of them and roll my neck. "Then I suppose we'll meet her on the other side."

50

Rylee

“People either desperately want you dead or desperately want you alive,” the goddess Evaluna says.

“That’s not really a new concept to me,” I say, but I bow to show her I mean no disrespect.

“The choice is yours now,” the goddess Neph tells me, her voice ever kinder. “You can stay here, in a place of eternal peace and quiet, or you can return to the chaos and the Legends you claim to love so much.”

The choice is simple for me, as every instinct in my soul is still battling to try to get back to them.

“Know this,” she continues. “You will have full control of all their powers. Not the small dregs that you saw in Lumathyst, but the full force of their infinite possibilities. That, matched with your own powers blessed by me, can be damaging to the mind.”

Apprehension crawls up my throat.

“Will it change me?” I ask, my hand sliding over my chest, where my heart should be beating.

“Does it matter?” Evaluna asks.

I swallow hard, contemplating how to better phrase my question. “Will I hurt them? Be a danger to them?”

If my mind is at risk due to the powers…I don’t want a slip in sanity to result in harm to them.

“That will depend on you,” Neph says.

Fuck, so there’s a chance.

I suck in a deep breath. I’ve endured so much—the harsh conditions in the mountains in the Ashlands, my parents going on the Never List, enforcers like Turner treating me like garbage, and my sister disappearing. If I can survive that, I can survive my mates’ powers.

“How do I give it back to them?”

“How does water roll down the side of a mountain?” Tareena asks.

“It’s not so easy to explain,” Neph adds.

“Time is running out,” Evaluna says. “Make your choice.”

“I choose them,” I say confidently despite the uncertainty wavering in my

soul.

Evaluna steps closer to me, and I bow low, doing my best not to drop to my knees from her sheer power. “Hurry,” she says. “They’re in danger of meeting us again, but on fate’s terms, not their own.”

“Be wary of who wanted you dead,” Neph says, only adding to the adrenaline racing through my body. “We did not craft that elixir to kill you.”

Tareena and Eirdis nod to me, and then all four of them give me a singular wave, and my entire body rips into a million pieces—

I struggle for breath, swimming up from a pitch black so deep and dark, it’s heavier than anything imaginable.

Sounds hit me all at once.

Chaotic, rage-fueled thoughts echo inside my mind—Axl’s voice and Kal’s. Pierce’s and Jax’s. I can’t distinguish between the words, only the guttural sounds as they fill me from the inside out.

I pry my eyes open, cringing against the onslaught of thoughts storming my mind and the weight of the emotions accompanying them.

Grief.

I’m *drowning* in it, but it doesn’t belong to me.

I can’t breathe around the anger, the rage, the unmistakable pain of loss.

I roll to my side, immediately emptying the contents of my stomach onto the marble floor. The violent action pushes the powers back, allowing my mind to clear enough to blink the fog from my eyes.

I’m behind Evaluna’s obsidian statue, the sounds of a fight happening just beyond it. I crawl, my legs feeling too wobbly to stand—

Goddess, my mates… They’re fighting off a handful of Faders, powerless.

They have nothing beyond Jax’s small blades, and they’re *losing*.

Kal has a cut along his right arm, Axl has one above his left eye, Pierce is on one knee as he gasps for breath, and Jax…he *looks* like a nightmare, chaotic and terrifying as he thrashes despite being severely outnumbered.

I have to get to them.

I will my muscles to work, try to lift myself under the weight of all the new powers prowling beneath my skin.

This wasn’t supposed to happen.

This…this is too much.

I close my eyes, desperately trying to catch each power, to grip it and mentally wrap it around the bonds I can feel snapping inside me.

Sun.

I feel the warmth of the sun first, and I leap atop it, grabbing it with one mental hand and Kal’s bond with the other—

“Rylee?” Kal’s voice is drenched in hope as he yells my name, as I feel his power zap down that bond and return to him, making me feel lighter—stronger, somehow, despite surrendering his power.

Sweat dots my brow, but I stay right where I am, doing my best to send Axl his power. His is so damn slippery, his water strong and vast and mischievous. Instead of trying to catch it, I will it to swirl around Axl’s bond—

“Fuck yes, kitten!” I hear him yell, followed by the sounds of water crashing inside the temple.

Good. *Good*.

Two to go.

I might pass out again. No. I need to push on. I take a deep breath and focus.

Pierce’s emerald ribbons flutter in the recesses of my mind, searing hot as I grab them and throw them like a spear at his bond.

And then Jax’s… Of course his is the most elusive, like shadows and smoke. I internally search for it, swimming through my own mind and power.

There—the shadows, they curl at my mental attention, and I direct them to spiral around Jax’s bond.

A growl rumbles from Jax, not too far away, and relief snaps through me so quickly, I would’ve fallen over if I wasn’t already on the ground.

My mates have their powers again, and they’re using them to push the Faders back.

“What do we do, boss?” a man calls from somewhere below, and I spot a Fader in the corner of the balcony as they do some sort of hand signal over the railing, followed by that same whistle I heard during the attack at Sapphire Cove.

The boss then disappears behind the statue, likely leaping over the railing to the stairs below.

Shit. I need to move, to go after them, but my legs are so damn heavy. All I manage to do is peer over the railing nearest me.

All the Faders are retreating.

“Rylee!” Kal flies toward me, landing softly at my side. His arms are immediately around me, helping me sit up properly.

My head rushes from the movement, but I cling to him.

“You’re okay,” he says on a released breath, eyes scanning me. “You’re okay?”

I nod. “I’m all right, Kal.”

“Kitten.” Axl’s voice is rough and low as he rushes toward me. “Fuck me, we thought we lost you.”

“I’m here,” I say, reaching out to him, each embrace from him and Kal giving

me strength.

"Darling." Pierce says the word inside my mind, the bond between us trembling at the mental closeness as he propels himself up and over the balcony railing with his emerald green energy. He drops next to me, hands on my face. "Are you harmed?"

I shake my head, giving him a reassuring smile before I wrap my arms around his neck. My strength is slowly returning.

"I'm not harmed. Exhausted. Confused. But I'll be okay." I hope I'm telling the truth, but with the way I felt when I held all of their powers? I'm not so certain.

"Butterfly." Jax's voice is broken and raw as he climbs the stairs, his indigo eyes practically glowing as he stalks toward me.

Kal, Pierce, and Axl move away only enough so Jax can wrap me in his arms, drawing me up to my feet and holding me tight against him.

I grasp him with a desperate grip, my legs trembling but supporting me enough in his embrace.

Jax shifts to look down at me, cupping my cheeks. "Do you still want to choose us?" he asks, his voice broken. "Do you still want this life? After everything?"

I furrow my brow. "How can you ask me that?"

He leans his forehead against mine. "You died…Rylee…" His voice cracks, and I can feel the bond between us tightening, shaking.

"I would do it again," I say, turning to look at each of my mates. "I would do it *all* again." I glance at Jax. "Tell me, mate—am I lying?"

Jax visibly swallows and shakes his head.

"I love you," I say to him, then to Axl and Kal and Pierce. "My love is not so wavering that a little thing like death would weaken it."

"But the powers," Pierce says. "Darling, I felt what they did to you."

I nod, blowing out a breath. "I'm not saying I don't have a learning curve ahead. We all do."

Kal steps closer to Jax and me, and Axl and Pierce follow until I'm surrounded by my mates.

"I love you," Kal says, smoothing a hand over my cheek. "Whatever you need, you know we'll help you."

I lean into his touch, smiling gratefully at him.

"As long as you're with us," Axl says, reaching out to gently squeeze my hand, "I don't care what the cost is."

My heart swells at that, at the knowledge that they gave up everything to save me.

“Your mind is a brilliant thing,” Pierce says, mentally caressing me and turning my insides warm. “We will solve this new problem. You will not be left alone to find answers.”

“That means everything to me,” I admit, since in the beginning of all this… losing my sister, not finding answers…I felt *utterly* alone.

Until them.

Until my mates.

Jax’s hand smooths along my lower back. “Whatever comes,” he says, looking down at me, “we’ll face it together.”

Those words slide along all four of the newly solidified bonds inside me, the bands of light connecting me to my mates pulsing with love and relief and hope.

“Together,” I say, eyeing each of them and allowing that hope to wash away everything else until there is nothing but one certainty.

I love them and they love me and there is nothing we can’t face together.

51

Rylee

"We should make sure this temple is clear," I say, realizing that while we've been reconnecting, any remaining Faders could simply be in hiding, waiting for our next move.

"We need to get you home," Axl says, stubbornness etched into his features.

"I'm fine," I assure him. "Making sure there are no Faders waiting in the shadows to start another fight is what's most important."

"*You* are what's most important, darling," Pierce argues.

"No," I say, arching a brow at him to show him I'm not budging. "You can't —"

"You stay here," Kal cuts me off, eyes pleading before he glances at the rest of my mates. "With our powers back, we can easily clear the space." He looks back to me. He's tried to argue with me before and knows I'll win. I love him all the more for it. "*Then* we'll take you home, where you can rest."

I think about arguing, think about demanding to go search with them, but I can feel it through the bonds—not one of my mates will take me or leave my side if they think I'll go wandering off on my own.

"Fine," I say. "I'll stay here."

"We'll be quick," Jax says, dipping down to kiss the top of my head.

They each hesitate for a few moments before I flash them a look that has them collectively heading off in different directions to search the temple.

I rub my palms over my face, doing my best to breathe deeply, grounding myself in the present. If I don't, I'll give in to all the questions and worries rising in my mind like a tide, threatening to sweep me away.

A flash of movement flickers in the corner of my eye, and I freeze.

I blink a couple of times, turning slowly toward where I saw the movement, certain I'm imagining things.

One step, then two—

There it is again, just behind the statue of Evaluna.

My heart stutters in my chest.

The Fader from earlier. They didn't jump over the balcony like I thought.

I should call for my mates, but I don't want to give away that I see them—

The Fader takes off.

Shit! They spotted me.

No time to call for my mates. I race after them.

The other Faders called this one *boss*, and they are *fast*, but I use my wind power to propel me, catching up in a matter of breaths.

I lunge, hoping to subdue them so we can question a Fader like we've been trying to for months now—who better than the boss to capture so we can finally understand what their motivations are?

They dodge my advance with a fluid grace that has apprehension bursting on the back of my neck. I don't have time to analyze this unease, not when the Fader hurls blade after blade at me, soaring through the air, aimed at my throat and missing by mere *inches*.

I shift my stance, ducking and dodging and pursuing as the Fader keeps evading my every move while working their way across the balcony, hunting for a quick escape.

The breath burns in my lungs, my body and mind exhausted from the Athanry, from dying and coming back, all of it. But I finally get close enough to land a punch.

A feminine groan slips past the Fader's lips as I move to grab her wrist—

She ducks away from my touch, bending almost in half as she slips to the floor.

Icy fear bursts beneath my skin, some buried instinct *screaming* at me.

She lands a kick to my gut that forces the air from my lungs so fast I see stars. I double over, and she takes the opportunity to run in the opposite direction, toward the edge of the balcony that hangs over the temple's stairs far below.

I gather my breath in forced heaves.

I can't lose this Fader.

We have to know how to stop these people.

She's almost at the edge of the balcony.

My mates are going to kill me for this.

I wrap wind around myself, spiraling for her so fast that I plow into her and we crash over the railing—

And fall through the air.

Panic makes my heart skip as the free fall takes us. And all the while, the Fader struggles in my grasp like she can slip away and land safely on her feet.

Instinct takes over, and I slow our descent with my power, landing us on the temple stairs in a tangled heap.

I still have a good hold on her, her back to my chest, my arm firmly around her neck as I haul us to standing—

One move, and she slips out of my grasp like she's made of nothing but

smoke, whirling on her heels to face me, dipping a little as she does.

My heart stops dead in my chest.

I *know* that move.

I've spent countless hours perfecting that move—

"Erin?" Shock barrels through me as the Fader stiffens, a blade in one hand as her entire body goes rigid.

My stomach plummets, panic slicing through my veins as my brain puts two facts together.

I'm fighting the leader of the Faders.

And it's my *sister*.

Devastation threatens to knock my feet out from under me, but I manage to stay standing.

"Rylee!" Kal roars my name, drawing my attention behind me.

He's there, soaring toward me, along with Pierce and Axl and Jax. Their eyes are rage-laced and focused on the Fader who is holding a blade near me.

Everything slows down, the moments happening in a rapid succession of heartbeats.

Pierce aims his insurmountable power at the Fader, those emerald ribbons of energy in the shapes of spears.

Kal's flight, his hands outstretched, ready to rip the Fader's head from her body.

Axl's water, swirling in a vortex that will drown her in seconds.

And Jax, letting loose the two knives in his hands—

"No!" I leap in front of Erin, the word ripping out of me, and the intent behind it yanks their powers back to me so fast it steals the breath from my lungs.

Jax's blades sink into my shoulders.

"Rylee!" Jax screams, but Kal falls from his flight, slamming to the ground right in front of him.

Axl stumbles without the rush of water in his control, his feet kicking out from under him as the water washes beneath him.

And Pierce is gripping his chest as if he might topple over any second.

I crumple to the ground, their powers snapping inside me so quickly, so violently, I can barely feel the blades in my flesh.

A warm hand catches my head before it cracks against the marble stair.

My vision blurs, fading in and out as I reach a weak, trembling hand up to the Fader looking down at me. "Erin?" I whisper, my heart slowing.

I'm drowning in the power, *their* power.

Emotions and thoughts.

Oceans and skies.

It’s so much.

Painfully, too much.

The Fader shifts, using her free hand to untuck her mask from the neck of her uniform.

“Hey, sis,” she says, her eyes apologetic as they dart to something behind me. “Forgive me,” she pleads, jerking her mask back down. She gently lays my head on the floor and runs—

“Butterfly.” Jax’s voice is broken and raw as he reaches me. *“Why?”*

Axl and Kal make it to me next, then Pierce, each of them crowding around me.

I try to speak but can barely lock onto my voice. Dots sparkle around the edges of my vision as I turn my head to look up at Jax, finding devastation lining his face.

My body seizes in his arms, a white light cracking through my mind, searing and hot like lightning. I convulse, trying to fight the pain.

Trying to fight the onslaught of power.

My heart races in my chest, too fast…it’s *too* fast.

I hear them arguing, unsure of what to do.

I hate that I’m not stronger for them.

Hate that my body feels frail beneath their power…power I wasn’t built to hold.

I try to push it back to them like I had before, but it’s stuck, clinging to me, wrapping its fingers around my throat and squeezing.

I go limp, the breath rushing from my lungs.

“I…” It’s hard to speak, hard to breathe, but I manage to look at them, each of them, wishing I could take away the pain lining their faces. “I still…choose…you.”

“No!” Jax roars, his hold on me tightening.

I’m fading. I can feel it.

“No, goddess damn it,” he snaps. “You stay with me! Fight it, Rylee! Fight it!”

My eyes shut, the darkness sweeping in like the shadow of night.

“Stay with me!” Jax cries.

And I’m certain those are the last words I’ll ever hear.

TO BE CONTINUED



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About the Author

JADE PRESLEY is a pen name created to write romantasy stories that pair rich world-building with characters that will make you blush and leave you thirsting for more. When not writing, Jade goes on epic quests during game night or hangs with her family and Irish Wolfhound in her Colorado mountain home.

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The Games Gods Play

a novel by Abigail Owen

Living as an office clerk for the Order of Thieves, I just keep my head down to avoid notice. Until I tangle with Hades. For the first time ever, the mercurial King of the Underworld has entered the Crucible—the deadly contest the gods hold to determine a new ruler of Olympus. But the gods have *mortals* compete in their stead. Why did Hades choose me—a sarcastic nobody with a curse on her shoulders? And why does my heart trip every time he says I'm *his*? How can I know, when he has more secrets than stars in the sky? Hades is playing by his own rules…and Death will win at any cost.

Star Bringer

a novel by Tracy Wolff and Nina Croft

The sun is dying, and the Nine Planets' only hope of survival rests on a space station and the alien artifact it's carrying. Now seven strangers with deadly secrets are trapped together: a princess, a prisoner, a con artist, a warrior, a priestess, a mercenary, and an asshole in charge of us all. Every faction in the galaxy is hunting this ship—we just need to stop drinking, fighting, and screwing long enough to evade them all and save the freaking universe…somehow.

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