

THE SUNDERING

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For the man who gives all, believes all, and loves
completely. Thank you, Bear, for being my
everything. I love you.

1

The fool.

Nyssa's icy eyes narrowed, and her spine straightened, shifting slightly upon her ornately carved flower and thorn-laden throne. In front of her cowered one of her courtiers, the presumptuous man caught in bed with one of her blind beauties. No one slept with a royal slave without having to pay, but that was precisely what he dared to do.

Drilling her fingers on the arm of the chair, she lifted her chin for him to speak. Not that she'd believe anything he told her. A smile hovered beneath her pinched lips, ready to break loose. She'd not forgive the transgressors or let them go free, no matter his excuse.

"I give you leave to explain," she said. "But think carefully before you do." His sun-darkened skin paled and his head bowed to the floor. It delighted her that with few words, she had the power to make mighty men quake before her. "Tell me, soldier. What gave you the assumption you could touch one of my prized ones?"

His response, though delayed, was almost too quiet to hear. "She isn't a slave, your Majesty."

"Oh?" She leaned forward. "Then tell me, what is she exactly?"

Behind her, the guards adjusted their weaponry, ready to enact her whim and to seal the man's fate. They were apparently smarter than the warrior on his knees. Death was the only way this debacle could end.

"Pardon, your Majesty." The man sputtered, pausing, and glancing up at her. Gathering courage, his protest rallied in the quiet room. "I

love her. The woman—she’s my wife.”

Nyssa’s frown scared him into quickly lowering his head again. “Your wife? Is that so?”

He quivered, his voice shaking. “Yes, my Queen.”

Nyssa stood, her snow-colored gown draping around her with serpentine grace. She took one step, two steps forward, down her metal and stone pedestal to reach the man below her. Without another word, she reached out her hand; and lifted his chin with her fingers. To his credit, he didn’t flinch—much.

“You say you love her.” Her fingers smoothed across his clean-shaven jaw to grip his flesh. The man was handsome, and as she examined him, another thought came into her mind. *Using him*. But that was too easy, and he’d given himself to another, a woman who belonged to her. There wasn’t anything she could do for him now.

“I do.”

He answered without hesitation. Nyssa’s lips curved into a smile, viperous and cold. She deserved her warrior’s attention. She deserved the devotion from her whores, and from anyone and everyone in the entire kingdom. No one denied her. After all, she was Queen.

She pondered him, his lean strength, and the impressive bulge under his trousers that even his fear didn’t hide, and it made delight tingle through her body. That delight quickly faded. Such a shame. He’d likely feel magnificent pounding into her.

“How interesting,” she said, making him flinch. He knew her reputation, yet he stole from her anyhow. If he thought she was capable of mercy, he was a damned fool. Nyssa pandered to no one. Still, it was nice to play.

She beckoned to the guard nearest the door. “Bring in the slave. I want to see for myself.”

The warrior raised his eyes. “W-what are you going to do to her?”

Nyssa’s smile darkened. “Wrong question, soldier, and you have so few of them left. My patience is short, and you’ve almost extended it. I’m Regent. And by the grace of the gods, I can do anything I want.”

The door swung open, and a naked, bound woman pulled behind a guard. Her neck and wrists decorated with heavy chain, her eyes blank and empty. Beautiful, with hair the color of sunset and skin pale as milk. Blinded, as all her girls were. Nyssa pointed to the fallen warrior.

“Put her beside him.” The guard thrust the woman forward, and she stumbled, dropping to her knees. The woman’s breath hitched and caught, tears running down her alabaster cheeks. Gutting the eyes didn’t halt tears from flowing. How glorious those tears were.

The Regent clicked her tongue in disapproval. “Careful, Hugo. She’s precious.”

The guard bowed, a sneer directed towards the accused crossing his face. “Of course, your Majesty. Many apologies.”

The soldier bowing before her shifted closer to her prized whore. Damn. He was bold. She’d admire it if she wasn’t planning on killing him.

Nyssa stroked her necklace, diamond shards that pointed and spiked and wrapped about her neck like barbed wire. Her throne looked similar, laden with gems, twisted and grotesque. She wanted to horrify those that gazed upon her magnificence. By the gasps of the courtiers each and every time one of them approached her, she did. She loved the skulls—crows—that lined her crown. Death. She controlled it, even among the birds and the flock. No one could go against her and live.

The soldier and his bride dared to go up against the Regent? She’d show them how she lived up to her title of Dark Queen.

The chained prisoner spoke, his voice broken. “Please. I beg for audience with the king.”

Her breathing shallowed, her eyes narrowing. She didn’t speak, watching as sweat dripped from the man’s forehead down his throat. A throat she’d gladly slice for his audaciousness.

Nyssa ruled in proxy, but it meant nothing. Her son inherited the throne. The day of his twenty-fifth birthday, if he lived, he’d gain Yrurra and control all that she worked for. Not that she’d let him live. The destiny for the pair who waited for her verdict, their hands reaching for the other, was damningly similar to the one her offspring faced. Total submission, just before the ax fell across their traitorous necks.

She wasn’t stupid or naïve. Even her guards had no loyalty to her, yet loyalty wasn’t what she craved. Obedience, fear, the ability to lie, to tell her whatever she wished whenever she demanded it: that is what her servants and the courtiers delivered to her, and she loved each tremble of terror given her way.

Her guards knew their master—her. Every one of them she castrated, taking their manhood and their right. Just as her harem were blinded, those who protected her were stained by the jealousy of her hand. Ruined. Under her like cowered sheep to the wolf that stalked them. She wanted fighters, not men. And what Nyssa wanted, she got.

If her Assassin was as good as his name, and if he found and recovered what she planned to later destroy, she'd gain everything. Each breath of life. Every soul that existed both in this realm and the next. Perhaps then she'd find a measure of peace, knowing no one could steal her reign away from her.

She was the only one who knew that Yurra bordered a shroud of time and space, of memory and ruin. Another land, another crown to shatter and destroy. She sent her Assassin there, to penetrate the forgotten portal and to massacre the world that paralleled and mirrored them. If he succeeded, she'd never have to worry or fear again. The throne was hers, but only if Sebastian of Zelal brought back his quarry.

The insidious anxiety that her assassin would fail paled the glory of this moment. Gore and temptation, parlay, and destruction, that is what brought her joy. Few things did anymore, and more so as her son's birthday impended. She wouldn't feel true satisfaction until the assassin returned with her foe.

Circling her prey, Nyssa eyed the kneeling pair with deepening avarice. *Such* a shame. If the warrior had been faithful to her, they both might have lived. But taking a wife, a woman from her blinded harem? They sealed their fate. Now they both had to die.

"Surrey." The warrior glanced up. "Ah, yes. I know who you are. You, who had such potential in my army. You wish to see my son?"

She could tell when he realized he wouldn't be given grace. His body slumped; his eyes squeezed shut. He spoke daringly despite it.

"My Queen. Perhaps, with explanation, the king will understand."

A hiss escaped her painted lips. The soldier stiffened.

"Silence."

His head swiftly lowered, rising again so that his eyes leveled her with disgust and dark hatred. If he were wise, he'd accept his fate. But by the steady glare he sent her, she doubted he'd go to his death easily.

"Surrey and Celena. My two betrayers," she said, walking around

them like a viper ready to strike, each time their bodies stiffening further. Their imminent destruction didn't stop the man from claspng his wife's fingers, entwining them together as though their love would save them.

With vicious callousness, Nyssa used the heel of her boot to stomp upon and to crush their fingers, grinding her boot, hearing, and enjoying the pop of bone, the conjoined gasps of disbelief and pain. Celena's shrieks echoed through the chamber. Her warrior stayed deliciously strong.

"Sur," Celena said, reaching out for her husband, the fingers on her left hand distorted, oozing crimson, showing a peek of ivory knuckle. He slid a worried look to Nyssa, then defiantly took his wife in arm. A frown crossed over her face. As their foreheads bowed to the other, anger grew. It became monstrous.

"Take her," she instructed a guard. "Slice her belly open. Feed her entrails to the vultures as you mount her head to my castle wall. No one takes what's mine, *never*. Let this be a lesson. As for my heartsick warrior?" She paused, the room waiting for her verdict. Succinctly, she answered the unspoken question. Would she give immunity? Her smile curled, devilishly coy. She sliced the air with her decision.

"Burn him."

A scream of retribution flew from the man's lips, ecstasy of terror laden in his cry, his bride's name shouting out with no remorse. They pulled Celena away, but even chained and guarded, he attempted to save her. Despite the weaponry turned against him, Surrey yanked two guards to the ground. Not that he'd be able to escape, for more soldiers lined the outer corridors. The Regent made sure of that. Fiery eyes met Nyssa's, eyes of wrath and war as her blind whore was dragged out of the room.

"Know this, you cold bitch," he said, fume and fire passing from his lips, finally restrained in a manner better befitting one ready to meet the grave. His arms held behind him, his face bleeding and taut as he warned her of an impossible fate, vicious hatred in his voice. "You may kill the two of us, but you haven't stopped us all. Beware, your Majesty. An uprising is ready, and then you'll be the one strung from a pike, celebrated by all as you rot in Hell."

Nyssa watched him dragged out, her pleasure revealed by the uptick of a smile. An uprising? She hoped so. It was about time those

insipid commoners took their shovels and mining picks, fighting a battle she'd longed to have for years. She was weary, and so, so bored. Nothing exciting happened to her, nothing to break the monotony... nothing except the rare displays of madness and rage on days such as these.

She'd gladly take more of them.

Sashaying back to her throne, Nyssa sat, waiting for the next demonstration. None came, and before long a familiar ennui slammed her.

"Send for my son." A delicate yawn escaped. "It's time the king learns a thing or two about commanding a nation."

Santh, the king's personal valet, piped up from his corner in the shadows of the room. The child was eleven, so his confidence was unfounded. The boy's bright blue eyes examined her, not a hint of fear in them.

"I don't think he can attend," he told her. "His Majesty is busy."

"Get him anyway." For the boldness of his declaration, when men older than he didn't have the balls, she'd spare him the public humiliation of a caning for daring her. "Drag him from whatever bed he's in and bring him here."

"Sure," he said, wily coyness in his reply. "Though I don't think he'll be appropriately dressed."

"I gave you instructions, you beastly little imp." She resisted the urge to claw him forward with the intention of a beating. "That's your duty, so do it." His grin irked and annoyed, his attitude plowing over her authority and smiting it with aplomb. Her sharply snapping tone didn't bother him. Nothing did, that obnoxious little brat. Nyssa raised her voice. "Bring him, you imbecile. *Now.*"

Santh scurried out the door, though she suspected his speed had more to do with his personality than her implication of threat. By the gods, children revolted her, more even than the filthy miners, and decidedly more than her own son.

As her fingers tapped, Nyssa gave orders to each sniveling, sycophant courtier that begged her favor, reciting law and sentence for any commoner that dared enter her sanctuary and letting the haze of her boredom consume her. Queenship was tedious, but the throne was *hers*. The offspring of her womb had no right to take it away from her.

When the announcement of the King bellowed through the room, Nyssa straightened in her seat, poised once more. It would never do for him to see any weakness. Not that it mattered. No one took her son seriously, least of all her.

His face looked sulky as he entered, disheveled, with trousers half fastened. He gave one look to the women flocking against the wall in the corner, then faced the throne. The coward. He never used his royal power and privilege to oust her. If he were smart, he'd do it before his birthday. Of course, she meant to take him down by then.

"Good to see that my son acknowledges duty." Nyssa leveled a steely gaze at her son but directed her wry venom at the boy that hovered by the king's side. "Leave. You've annoyed me enough. I don't want to see your face in my chambers anymore today."

Santh bobbed to his knees, a secretive grin pasted on his childishly smooth umber-brown skin. She saw through him, past the youth and into his loyal, shrouded heart. He didn't serve her, and she knew it.

She pressed her lips together to fight for having him banned from her rooms, the fiendish little wretch. If he were hers, he'd eat nothing but stale bread and drink brackish water for a week. But the boy wasn't hers. She had no authority over him except for what she'd already demanded from him.

"Go." She pointed to the exit, her patience ending.

Santh ran from the room, a whoop and holler following him in the air. Odious child. Even her burliest soldiers liked and tolerated him. She'd never allow herself a similar sort of sentiment. Having any consideration for one of them, the courtiers, or the common people, wasn't meant for her, a queen chosen by the gods.

The castle and the lands of Velle surrounding it were her home. She commanded it, governing it with a closed iron fist, at least until her son reached his majority at twenty-five. Then, by Yrurrian law, he took over leadership. She refused to have that happen.

Nyssa faced her son and steeled her gaze. Time to set him straight over the true ruler of the land. Yrurra, the home of the gods. The home of the Dark Queen. She never intended to hand her power over. Tiran must die. Anyone who opposed her hung from the castle walls, burned, and dismembered. This was her domain, hers. No one would take that away from her.

2

Tiran left the throne room after his mother tried once again to show him up before the courtiers, hatred, and deliberation in each step. He turned twenty-five in less than six months. Time was running out for him to strike. The attacks on his life were frequent, but subtle. No one could blame the Regent for the poisoning of his food or drink, attempts done when his taster grew deathly ill. An accident, or so they claimed.

Perhaps the barrage to his carriage by commoners bent on retribution against the crown would be his undoing. Jealousy from a maddened crowd? Those were the whispers the courtiers gave.

Maybe the surreptitious slicing of the saddle for his horse, ready to unseat him while he was out riding, would demise where nothing else had. The stableboy, surely innocent, was held for treason. No trial, just execution.

Tiran wasn't ignorant, and he knew whose clutch he almost fell under as he lay on the ground staring up at the Yrurrian skies, Death looking him in the face when his horse jumped the log, and the leather strap gave. He broke his leg. Next time it might be his neck.

His mother would be brought down. He promised himself and he assured those who followed him. He refused to fail.

Santh looked up at him, pausing and crossing his arms over his meager chest. "She's always watching you, your Majesty."

Santh whispered towards Tiran, his voice as shadowy as the dimly lit corridors. A frown furrowed his youthful brow.

"Every time you go in her presence, it's more likely she finds you out. Be careful of her, please, Sire. What if you don't survive the next

time she wants to kill you?"

Tiran huffed quietly. Consoling the boy was his job. It was also necessary, for Santh had become like a younger brother to him, a confidante in life when he had no other.

"The Regent is more obsessed with her looks, the whores that frequent her bed, and her damned plotting." Tiran smiled reassuringly, a gesture that fought to reach his eyes, or through his drowning voice. "She doesn't see what she doesn't choose to, my boy. We won't be discovered, I promise you."

Santh grunted dispassionately, sounding older than his age. Not unusual, since Tiran had found and brought the boy into his household after running across him in one of the village pubs, drunk as a polecat and starting arguments with men three times his size and age. Santh never showed fear. His devotion to the cause was without regret or mercy. He was damned loyal. Best of all, no one suspected him at espionage, least of all the woman Tiran needed to eradicate before the sun rose high into the silver-backed skies on his birth-date —his mother, by birthright if not by deed. If he failed by then, he was likely dead.

"I'll need that devotion when things turn to shit. I'll need all who believe in my rule."

Santh fisted at his youthful chest in salute, ready to war. Ready to do whatever it took to make his reign succeed.

Tiran accepted the affirmation. He was steel. He was a damned *king*. Fire and light, ice, and darkness. Time to show his cards and to put away the meek mask that hid the ravenous wolf inside.

"The Regent is up to something. She sent Sebastian of Zelal away, and by the gods, know that she will rot in hell before I let her gain anything more over me. Find out the Assassin's latest orders. He'll act by my side, or he'll die with the rest of them when I rise."

Tiran began walking again, Santh obediently following. The boy remained quiet.

"The Assassin left the fortress this morning, before the Regent's announcement of execution. I'll question the servants and those courtiers favorable to you. Believe me, my king, you will have your answers."

He saw the craving in the boy's face for battle and heard it in his answer. Such a war wasn't for Santh. As king, though, it was Tiran's

destiny.

“The queen has grown bolder. Her whims and her damning lies are completely unacceptable. It’s time to attack, and any games once played are over. By the time I reach my majority, she’ll have me dead if I don’t act now. I can’t—and I won’t—let my kingdom continue to be damned by her.”

His gaze narrowed on the boy, letting him understand the importance of his previous order. This was the Regent’s last strike. If Santh failed, his mother won.

“Find out the Assassin’s mission and report back to me. Divert him and any other if they get in the way. You know what to do.”

“I do, Sire. All will be accomplished, just as you say.”

They parted ways at the divide of corridor, Santh turning left towards the servant’s quarters to rally up information, Tiran going right and heading down the dimly lit passageway until he met the closed doorway of the Seer.

Damned man. Majid liked to pretend he was never in, but the old bastard never left his rooms. Not anymore and not for many years, not since the queen decided his prophecies undermined her rule.

Tiran believed all that the old man proclaimed, if not by truth, then by circumstance. He wanted, no, he needed the man’s prophecies to fulfill themselves, for he doubted he could hold off from staging war against his mother’s domination for much longer. But when truth revealed itself and the declaration had to be made, time and occurrence were on his side, just as those he’d gathered for battle were ready, eager to fight for him and for the side of justice.

The man living beyond the blue doors taught him everything he knew about life and about the kingdom. He listened and learned and understood. According to prophecy, the Regent’s reign would end with violence and terrible downfall. If Majid were right, a distant enemy would take her down. Waiting for that enemy to show themselves was the troublesome part. Letting that enemy override what was his to culminate was even harder.

Patience had never been Tiran’s strongest attribute. If anyone tried to fulfill Tiran’s desire to destroy, they would be destroyed, too.

It surprised him that with such foreboding news, Majid could live. But even the queen knew better than to kill a bearer of magic, to eradicate a Seer, the last ones of the old ways. Even she respected

magical law, for it kept those in her reign under fear, subjugated and destitute, completely submitted to her will and whim. The commoners and the courtiers were a means to an end, a populace the queen expected to rise behind her. How foolish that dream would be once things boiled over and Tiran assumed authority over Yrurra.

The enemy from beyond the shrouded gates. If the rumor was true, it wouldn't be long now before they appeared. What grand and mocking jest it would be if the Regent's command to send the Assassin on another mission was just a cover for her attempts to keep her kingdom securely mantled.

No matter how she fought, the Regent would never win. Tiran meant to take over, and with the seer's blunt proclamation, it wouldn't be long now. His ascension to the throne was imminent and not even his mother could stop it. One day his temper would erupt, and he'd act, eradicating the woman who birthed him so that she was a shell of her former power.

He called out for Majid as he knocked on the door. When the seer didn't answer, the smelter of Tiran's voice heated and rose. He banged, shifting angrily from booted foot to booted foot. This was no time for dallying. If Majid didn't stand by his side, he'd die with the rest of them. But first the man had to open the damn door.

He called out. "I know you're in there. Open the door." Not a single sound came from inside. Tiran feverishly raised his voice. "Your king wishes to see you. Unless you'd rather hang and burn alongside the rest of the rebels for that rectitude and disobedience?"

The door opened one tiny crack, sewn-shut eyes greeting him, along with a huff of tea-fouled breath. The man's face, both twisted and grotesque, and his massive, lumbering body sent silent shivers creeping up Tiran's spine. The seer's off-putting appearance never stopped him before, and it wouldn't halt him now.

The small opening was enough for him to force his way into. Tiran's entrance into the sanctuary didn't mean the man liked company. The Seer tolerated it, and only because the man firmly opposed the queen, just as Tiran did.

"You're interrupting."

Soft and high-pitched, the older man spoke in a child's voice, a sweet soprano tone tucked inside the strong musculature of a man. The seer wrung his hands, trembling before Tiran, even though he

was the grandest epitome of magic, a magic not seen in their realm any longer.

"I don't care if I'm interrupting or not," Tiran said, easing inside the book-filled room until he reached a corner with two chairs sitting adjacent. It was ritual, both his harsh tone of voice, and where they sat whenever meeting.

Stacks of rolled parchment and a hive of old books tottered dangerously on the floor next to him as he sank into the closest chair, facing the large man who plodded towards him. Majid once confessed that his visions blurred the line between reality and dream, creating instability in both mind and form. The thought of that mental imbalance didn't create reassurances as the hulking man neared him.

Two fragile-looking teacups with saucers rattled in the man's giant fingers as the seer walked forward. The king had not come for tea, but for information, yet he'd drink the putrid brew to find out what he sought.

Majid never should have made it to adulthood, yet he was the man who became the greatest prophet that Yrurra had ever known. From time's beginning, the seers connected the common people to their gods. If the Ancients, or any other far-seeing seer, existed beyond the walls of the castle, they didn't show themselves. Tiran doubted they existed.

Heavy browed, strong-jawed, and massive-sized, Majid's scarred, and broken looks were partly the reason the elderly man stayed hidden, cooped up in the majestic lay of rooms. Books consoled him, and he asked for them instead of coin in payment for his skill.

Tiran's negligence in watching his feet sent a pile of books tumbling to the ground. For a moment, the air turned stale with disaster. Thankfully, Majid bowed his head at the mistake. The tea was set on the table, then the older man shifted his robes about him and also sat.

Tiran understood the ramifications of his actions, and he knew that his life had been graciously spared a hex or the magical cast of retributive anger for abusing the giant man's precious things. Perhaps the seer was right to put trust in the leather-bound tomes instead of man. Books never ran away, screaming in fright. They condoned the secrets of the realm Beyond without terror or doubt. Majid was a monster, and the visions he proclaimed destroyed any chosen recipients. One day the fulfillment of his greatest one would cause the ruination of both kingdom and of innocent men.

Majid couldn't see the books so precious to him. Once, under the spell of a strong, fermented tea, he confessed it was the weight, the smell of the leather and the paper that made him enjoy those gifts from Tiran to him.

The Regent was afraid of the seer's predictions, the ones that unseated her and took her throne. Because of it, the seer stayed out of her sight, always guarded, ruthlessly feared. Tiran didn't fear Majid's words, a lie he consistently repeated. After all, believing them meant his future, and he'd be a fool not to listen. Still, he wanted to piss his pants every time he came within earshot of the giant man. The shame of it made him come to hate the man who reared him.

Everyone knew the story of the monster before him. Nearly seven feet tall, huge, blinded early in life by the father who didn't want the demons inside the boy's mind to be heard or witnessed by others, he grew up alone. Some called him crazy, and perhaps he was. Freakish, he was an anomaly among the commoners, even among the greater sized warriors and men of the royal court. An ugly beast of a man, too tall, too strong, with dark visions and a darker potential of exacting them, he was feared for his size and for the prophecies that always came true.

Even though his foresight was the reason he'd been plucked from the mines and sworn into the Regent's service, Majid boldly stated his distaste of his entrance into the royal household. It didn't matter to him he earned his position with every correct prediction, every dream shared. It was that last dream revealed to his queen that earned him exile. No one knew exactly what the Seer told her. But Tiran planned to find out.

Tiran leaned forward, his tea forgotten. "You know why I'm here."

Majid nodded. Calmly the man took a sip of the foul brew, ignoring Tiran's impatience.

"Well, then? Speak. I don't have all goddamn day."

The seer's cup paused mid-flight. For a moment, the absolute knowledge that he'd overstepped that great man's law and boundary made him stiffen and his fingers tremble. But Tiran wasn't royalty for nothing. Letting fear sway his words, to force him to back down, wouldn't happen. Not while he had a throne to topple over.

Silence, and the steady tick, tick, ticking of the clock mounted on a spare spread of wall filled the air. Majid took another sip, ignoring

him.

His jaw bristling, Tiran shifted and rose to his feet. A beefy hand reached out at him, curbing any wayward movement.

"Don't test me. I don't like to wait."

Majid spoke. "You'll wait because I haven't finished Seeing."

Tiran's breath caught. His eyes raked the man's face, excitement in his voice. "You've seen something, haven't you?"

The seer said nothing. He nodded instead.

Silence loomed, achingly quiet and bigger than life. Fidgeting, an act wholly differential for a royal, Tiran braced himself for the magnificence ready to be revealed. All would be rectified, just as soon as the seer spoke.

Silence.

Silence.

Silence...

Then, in a gush of wind, a wind that came and blew around all that surrounded him, the thread binding the seer's eyes split and opened. What was blind, envisioned.

Majid *saw*.

With a sharp snap of wrist, he pointed at Tiran, an erratic, crazed flickering emitting from the empty sockets where his eyes should have been. His voice boomed, and another stack of precariously perched books at the side of him fell as the noise echoed through the large-chambered rooms. Tiran was coldly and violently aware that the seer who faced him had been filled with a darker entity, one of strangers. Strangers he hoped never to meet.

An Ancient?

Tiran heard the stories, because like any well-educated man, he taught them from the cradle on. Those mighty beings were long gone, back to another Realm. The Ancients could not break free of their prison, attempting reconciliation to lands that once belonged to them. Never again would they impose their powerful magic upon the children of Man.

He knew the stories. Yet, for the first time, with the power radiating from Majid, Tiran doubted those Ancients truly disappeared. Maybe the old tales, recited and adulated, were falsely claimed. Thunder, lightning, and wind traveled ahead of the deadly storm of the seer's words. The boom faded into a quiet hush.

The air stilled. All that could be heard was their ragged breathing. Then, in a vicious jolt of awareness, power pummeled against and across him. It hurt; it fucking killed. Tiran's chest felt torn asunder, his heart ripped and pulled out for display. He clutched at it, staring in horror at the man before him. Pain like it shouldn't exist, yet it did. He felt it now.

The seer's sweet soprano engulfed him like a shroud, the glorious song of his vision chanting out in a deep, bass-toned dirge. It was demonic. Angelic. Frightful. Tiran hurried and covered his ears, but he could still hear it. The words were impossible to ignore. They pounded at him, scourge and venom, plague, and war.

"The Light and the Darkness. The Light and the Darkness."

Majid snapped an accusing finger at him. Another boom. A brace of wind blustered past, then a chill settled in the air. Ice and fire. Rain and brightening sun. The seer's empty sockets met his, shimmering light from beyond. *Death and Destruction*. It was them, the Ancients. Perhaps not in form, but with terrorizing spirit. Pained, Tiran bore witness to a darker vengeance, those immortals stealing his paralyzed gaze from the floor where he wished it still were.

He cowered. He didn't care.

The Ancients spoke. They *consumed*.

"Stop!" Tiran's pleas were just as empty as the Seer's vile, gnashing words and terrible eyes. "Stop, please! Don't let them come in."

It was too late. They had already arrived.

"The Light and the Darkness."

Majid spoke, his neck snapping back sharply, the black void of his eyes facing the ceiling. He shook. His body radiated from their power. His words haunted, eradicated, burned. Those ancient ones filled him. They spoke in garish refrain. The Seer continued, helpless, as useless among the oldest power of the worlds as Tiran. Another victim claimed. Another spell cast outward, carved out from the deepest mountains, and rock-filled gullies, and from the peaks of jubilant air.

Tiran squeezed his eyes shut but quickly reopened them. Ignoring the beast wouldn't make it go away. Neither would pleading for an extension of mercy. There was none.

"The Realm will break and bend, bend and break. Her way will open, open without fail. She comes, our warrior with her raised sword and mighty arm. She comes, as our queen gathers for the impending war. Be on the watch, you innocent"

ones, and beware, you unsavory ones. Because our sister, our mother, our savior's arrival is nigh."

A screech sounded in the tense, stale air. Bones cracked, though not his own. The knuckles of Tiran's hand, braced against his chair's arms, gripped and dug into the buttery wood while the Seer's throat muscles jagged and reflexed. They were breaking him. They demanded tribute. Effused with dark emptiness, they relentlessly stole what wasn't theirs to own, while the seer's soul tried to escape. He would die, and they would have scant regard.

Fat tears of horror and fear rolled down his sweaty face as Tiran shivered and shook. Perhaps his humanity, that fragility borne to man, would save him? Perhaps, but it was an uncertainty. Underneath, the cushion of his seat wetted and stained as urine released from his weakened bladder. Majid's head thrashed back and forth, pained. Tiran felt the man's agony. That agony was also his own.

"She will never be yours, you unsavory ones. Our queen is coming. O you of innocence, your queen will soon arrive."

The Seer's head dropped forward, a stench of decay and the incense of magic in the air. It was over. Gone, like a flume of smoke dissipating in the breeze, the Ancients disappeared. Tiran didn't bother to consider the other man's state of mind or how his body curled up like rot. None of that passed through the king's thoughts, because honestly?

Tiran didn't give a shit.

Staggering to his feet, ignoring the puddle on the floor and the wetness across his seat, Tiran ran. Right now, his cowardice was the last thing on his mind, only escape and never, ever returning to the seer's elaborate show of rooms again. Let the man destroy himself by the visions he dared to see. Let him starve and destruct with indignity, for his gift of foresight was one that no human should ever have gained.

Fuck Majid. He and his visions could go back to the hell they came from.

"Wait."

The seer's voice was weak. Troubled. Fearful... for him.

"Wait, Sire. Let me explain."

"Fuck you." Tiran reached the locked door. He unlatched it. The

door stuck, and the handle wouldn't turn.

Then, from the knob of the door, a zap of fire throttled out, singing his fingers. Forcing his voice to stabilize, for he had to keep some amount of presence about him, inwardly Tiran quaked as the magic directed at him.

"I'll see you burn for this, Seer. You've just gone too far."

The Seer's voice was tired. He was alive, and whatever destruction caused to his body miraculously mended. His eyes, however, were empty sockets. They hadn't restored that to him. "No. You won't destroy me. Because now you need me now more than ever."

"I need no one. You forget who you speak to. I am king."

Majid slowly, wearily, shook his head. "You won't destroy me, and you won't destroy *them*. This I know. Listen, your Majesty, if you want your people to live. Listen, and use it well."

Tiran ripped open the door, pausing. He'd listen. But it was the last damn time.

The Seer spoke with certainty and warning in his delicate, small voice. "She's coming, my king, and you won't stop her. The queen of the Ancients will arrive, and sooner than you think. Be forewarned. For she isn't coming alone."

3

Devil-Dog looked at the newest offering outside the castle, charred, sliced, and misshapen. Already the bodies were covered with the refuse of the skies and land, carrion picking at the remaining flesh, worms poised at eating whatever decay dropped to the ground.

Male and female, they hung from the castle walls. After punishment, it declared to the commoners not to piss off the Regent. Do it and share the same fucking fate.

Shame that the warrior, now rotting and strung to the wilds, hadn't the conviction to face his outcome proudly. Usually soldiers fought to the end, but this one fought for his wife. Surrey and Celena. What pitiful creatures, determined to flaunt their love. Dying because of it. Chained separately, they'd been strung side-by-side. Not that it mattered. Their death throes were terrible ones. They were hardly recognizable anymore.

The Regent kept the ugly reminders of her executions on the North side of the building. The northern towers and walls were her secret. Secret, except by them, and those ready to die. The commoners spoke of it, guarded, afraid to meet the fate of those gone before them. The place, the Regent's secret, wasn't so secret, after all.

Devil Dog sneered, then their face and body morphed, a slide of skin and slippery outer garments. What was first a warrior, with a name, with family, soon looked like an elderly man. They had many personas, all of them false. Not once had they been suspected or caught. Even if they were seen, no one would believe their transition. That's why they, and not royalty, owned the land. That's how they

decided the fate of those who assumed control over it.

Ancient One. Devil-Dog. Destroyer, and Judge. One of those who went bump into the night. One who knew everything.

They'd been hiding for centuries, incognito, a fury among the storm. They'd hide centuries more. No one suspected them—not even the queen. It was how they meant it to be.

Quietly, they faded into the background, tucking the one thing they always wore under their shirt. Shadow's Blood, the original conduit. Men fought for it. Died for it. The poorest of the land were the only ones who dared looking for it. What fools. They'd search until they died.

Devil-Dog finished changing, finding each wrinkle of loose skin, and adjusting it into place. They'd been summoned, so into the castle they went. With royal sanction, they entered the throne room. They bowed.

The queen lifted her fingers from the arm of her chair. They knew what that meant. Grovel. Kiss and not bite. They hid a gruesome smile and did as obligated.

She stood, coming before them and lifting their chin. It was permission to stand. They did. She took their hand, guiding them to come beside her. She sat. They took their place on the stool beside her chair. Their bones creaked. Their soul rankled.

One day, they'd see that her punishment was out in the open. For now, they watched, learned. Readied to make her pay.

Her eyes sharply examined them. If they didn't show appreciativeness for her words, she'd doom them to the same fate as the couple from the morning's debacle. Too bad, too bad. They'd not die for anyone.

"I sent for my Assassin."

They were the proper sycophant, showing interest when they had none. "You employed him for a mission?"

She leaned forward, hovering over them, her obsidian hair teasing their nostrils. "Yes. A wonderfully impossible mission."

"He'll fail?"

She sighed deeply. "All of them fail. He will as well."

They lowered their head as if they respected the bitch. No one did, no one who guessed the truth at the monster she was.

"I beg, your Majesty. What did you ask of him?"

She inhaled vilely, a serpent's greedy hiss. "I want him to go through the portal and bring my enemy back to me. You are my precious one. You may know of it, but I trust no one else."

"The portal? Isn't that a failed mission to begin with?"

"Yes. He'll fail, and then I'll send another stupid warrior. If the people of Yrurra believed it to be real and not a story, I would have to fight others away from the invisible seal. In this case, I get to choose who goes... and then who dies."

This time they couldn't avoid the bite. "Why send him, then? I thought you approved of your soldier."

Her eyes hardened. "He's being married."

Of course. Jealousy. It was the reason so many hung from the castle's walls, and why the portal had become a gateway for her retributive rage.

"And you wanted him to die." This wasn't a question, and she didn't treat it as one.

"If he dies, it's his mistake." Her gaze was a terrible, dark thing.

"He'll suffer, that you know. But, if I may ask, why not take his bride-to-be and simply kill her? Do you want to lose your warrior?"

They saw her face change from cruel justification to ugly interest at their offering. Pride kept her from accepting it. "She's not worthy of my attention. Surely you know that."

"And if he finds the portal?"

The Regent gave a long-suffering sigh. "He's still dead. No one makes it back from the other side alive."

Truth, at last, spread from her painted lips. She claimed the portal. Shame it wasn't hers to own.

They delighted in how little she knew them. They were from time beginning. They would be until time ends. Like others of their kind, they executed life on both sides of the portal.

The queen didn't know who they were. They smiled.

After hours of playing her willing slave, they were dismissed from the court, easily transitioning to another skin, another name. Another lie to be told. Time to visit the poor and beleaguered. Time to visit the bride-to-be, Mato. They enjoyed her, for she hid from the world with smiling lips and careworn body.

They enjoyed her... and in this, their name was Ru.

4

The horse plunged through the underbrush, its roan-colored flesh briny and glistening with a thickening coat of sweat. Sebastian of Zelal held the reins in a sturdy grip as he leaned over the horse's mane to avoid the low-lying tree limbs and the thorny bushes that reached high and covered the thin path. His gaze stayed watchful, for he wasn't the only predator in the thick woods.

He wasn't afraid of the beasts of the wild. They weren't the monsters, and he convinced himself he wasn't one either. No, it was the others on his path, ruthless men that dared to approach him when every motion he made was to warn them off, hunting after him as if he were the prey. Him, the Queen's assassin. Stupid bastards. Didn't they know that with a simple flick of the serrated knife hidden in his boot, or his bow and the quiver filled with poison-tipped arrows strapped along his back, that he could easily send them to their graves?

He had been taught, as all males in the Colonies were taught: to kill or be killed. Unlike them, he showed promise from a young age that his skills of deception and mercilessness far exceeded the ordinary man. It was a trait that the Queen found useful. Without them, and if she chose, he'd gain the condemning sentence of destruction and death. Just like her, he was feared. A killer. A man who gained nothing by extending any hint of compassion or leniency.

He never wanted his royally given position. Gladly, he would've been content to work in the mines and to marry his childhood sweetheart. But Mato was dying, her family lived in poverty, and he knew the only way to save her was to give himself over to the needs of

the Queen.

Nyssa, the Dark Queen. How he hated her, the loathing embittering him to his coveted role in her royal court. He was given the privilege to serve, but the job given wasn't one that he enjoyed. If she ever knew it, his head was hers, ready to pike upon a burning stake, his body a wasted crisp.

Mato lay dying, but her last words before he ventured towards Velle, the northernmost part of Yurra, towards the Queen's royal lands, land laden with gardens and riches and many pleasurable things, repeated over and over in his mind. Mato grounded him with her sweet innocence, but it was her words that kept him sane. Her unassuming strength made him whole.

He recalled every moment they spent together. She was too weak to do more than squeeze his hand. Her eyes, darkly rich and soft with affection, focused on him and not her pain.

"Come back to me," she said. "Baz, no matter what happens or what she expects of you, please come back to me. Make me a woman. Make me your wife."

Mato never asked him what happened on those missions that kept him away from her. It may have been her fear that his promise of matrimony meant less to him than she did, or perhaps in her faithfulness she showed absolute trust, one from a loving woman to the man she believed in. That desire for deliverance from poverty and circumstance, her need for the intimacy and devotion that he had a hard time showing, remained unspoken—until now.

She didn't speak for a long moment. Her face paled when his eyes met her own and he didn't answer.

Accusations hovered like a soggy cloud over them, ready to burst open. The deluge never began, pandering off to a standoffish distance. His distancing, not hers, because Mato was too good to be selfish, and too good not to care for him, even if he couldn't care for her back.

Her fingers squeezed his larger ones, begging quietly with the simple caress. He indulged her affection, but only because it was Mato that gave it. Even though it was a struggle not to strain away, he knew she felt his reticence to touch her in return, to tell her all she yearned to hear. As her mouth puckered and tears stayed adrift, his silence became a mountain, a pinnacle she'd never be able to climb, no matter how she strained against rock and limb to attain it.

Mato said nothing more. So neither did Baz.

The hush between them continued, too long for it to be comfortable. Then her hand dropped from his. Maybe it was exhaustion. Maybe she gave up, knowing whatever the queen demanded must be done. Finally, when the silence became unbearably long, and his mouth pressed shut with no intention of repeating any vow, Mato sighed. Her eyelids flickered, and she nodded, resigned. A few tears rolled down her cheeks. Baz looked away. The chasm of solitude widened, and when he looked back, he saw she'd closed her eyes in sleep.

He should have told her he loved her. If he were a good man, he would take her into his arms and never let her go. But Sebastian was neither kind nor gentle. Baz leaned over her and quickly kissed her forehead. When he got back, he'd change. For her, he would be kind, generous, giving. For her, he'd be anything she wanted, even if what she wanted him to be was a lie.

Voice muted by the desire to leave, to free himself from the noose that choked him, he said, "I'll come back to you. I'll give you everything, I swear it."

The noose was one that her father, Jin, placed around his neck by a promise that Sebastian regretted, a promise he wished he could forget. He'd never escape it.

What he told her didn't matter. She didn't hear him, anyway.

He gazed at her for a moment longer. She made him weak. She also held him accountable, those sloe-colored, expressive eyes reminding him to stay hers. His weakness was fine, at least when they were alone. But they were rarely alone, and in his respect for her, he made sure that she didn't get involved with the shallow crowd he was forced to stay in contact with. Mato could never endure the backstabbing and lies from the queen's courtiers. They were predictably crass and wicked, tainted by accumulative, dirty wealth. He took their lies for granted, but he'd not allow their dark deeds to ruin his devoted, naïve bride.

The vultures of the royal court preyed on vulnerability, regret, and shame. As the Queen's Assassin, he couldn't allow emotion or sentiment to sway him. His gaze hardened and his body straightened with military precision, showing himself as the warrior he trained to be. He adjusted his weapons across his body. Then, after bracing himself, Baz stepped into the open air, the cacophony of truth

stabbing him viciously, like a blade rammed deep through the gullet.

Most of what he told her in the past years was consolation, an ugly pack of lies. This time he might not return, back to Mato's side. If he failed his queen, his head would greet others from a steel pike, hanging along the castle's walls. If that happened, he only hoped Mato forgot him quickly.

Damn Nyssa. Damn her for taking his youthful years away from him. Taking him away also from the only woman he ever felt affection for or completely trusted, separating him from her when Mato had so little time left to live.

He hated his queen. He hated until the urge to kill nearly consumed him. As he left her court for another one of her missions, Sebastian's urge to maim and destroy wasn't curtailed to his prey. His fingers itched to give into unreasonable whim, to take the life of the woman who controlled him.

Sebastian rode into Velle from his home in the colonies, bridging the gap from poverty to excess, his demeanor evolved from generous accountability to his future bride to the stony façade required to enter the royal court. To live where others died. His sanity demanded the change. Each time he was summoned, he hoped it would be his last. It never was. He belonged to the queen, and he'd die obligated to her. Returning to Mato was a dream, but one that he continued to reach for.

Now, at the Queen's bidding, he was on his way to an obscure, lonely destination, departing Velle and leaving his homelands in the mining fields of the Vesturin behind. To serve the queen in her impossible task, any life of his own halted yet again. The path leading south narrowed and dipped, the terrain turning rocky, its vegetation sparse. Baz crossed the Tanje River that flowed from the unnamed seas to the West, then he headed east towards the Dark Forest and the land of the forgotten, the rivers following it running quick and murky and dangerously deep.

It was a mission he doubted he'd return from: to find the portal, open it, and head into the unknown. His mouth tensed, his fingers tightening on the reins. He would quicker die from the dearth of food or water in his own homelands than to have his body rot in that forsaken place. At least where he came from, he knew its history, its flaws. This mission made him regret everything he did to obey his

queen; it made him want to run in the opposite direction than the Regent demanded.

Baz grew up believing the portal was a myth. Mato's father, the Vesturin's storyteller, narrated the story of the portal's other world, talking while the twinkle-bright of the glossed night encompassed, talking all the way into the dawn. Fire crackled in puny pits as the crowd gathered and listened, Jin's voice permeating their silence. Sebastian, unlike all the others that listened, had no faith. He still doubted, but it didn't matter. His life, and his future with Mato, depended on finding the portal and getting to its opposite side.

Nyssa's command rang in his ear, her fingers clamping upon his, exchanging a token of words and a command of station he bowed to. He listened, despite how he loathed agreeing. He listened, as he always had. She was his Queen. She was his master. Sebastian had no choice but to be her slave.

"Find her, the woman named Alore," the Queen said, drawing him in with the intensity of her presence. Wicked beauty radiated from her, accentuating the authority she wore around her like a protective cloak. Obsidian hair coiled around her face, her body like something of the myths. She was exquisite, but deadly. By her smile, she knew the hold she had over him.

Sebastian's head bowed with the strain of fortitude, sweat beading his brow. Showing vulnerability before his queen was both immediate and hated. Despite his hierarchy and the lofty position among her courtiers, he knew the law. Obey, or become another casualty. His posturing before her didn't stop the realization that at any moment, she could have one of her beefy guards step forward and slice his head from his neck. Posturing filled her greedy need for control.

Failing her wasn't an option. Neither was giving into the intense craving to fill her with the greediness of his blade, to disengage what was left of his moral conscience, and to eradicate what was left of hers.

"Find her, that woman who is my nemesis," the queen said, her intoxicating perfume of orchid and poppy and a strange, delectably scented spice making him woozy and compliant. His gut turned to jelly. Terror riddled in his heart. He found himself helpless to stop it, and he had little doubt that the Regent wanted it that way.

"Bring her to me, no matter the cost. Do whatever is necessary, but

do not harm her. That is my privilege, and my right.”

“And the portal?”

She smiled, a beneficent lie. “Go through the forsaken lands and you will find it. It should be a simple enough task for my mightiest warrior.”

With a commanding word from her, he'd be in her bed. If he complied, he'd be dead by the time the sun rose high in the silver-tinged sky. Sebastian knew the truth, and he knew it well. No one fucked the queen and lived.

He tried to clear his head, the compelling scent coming from her like poison. *Mato. Mato, Mato.* Repeating his future bride's name like a mantra kept his head bowed and his hands to himself. No good would come from conceding to forbidden, unnatural lust.

Hate superseded that erroneous passion. The queen's intoxicating fragrance and curvy body smothered him like the crime she wanted him to commit, any logic he had left hinging on the shreds of truth and humanity he clung to. He closed his eyes and shallowly breathed, the cloud of tantalization dissipating with each narrow suck of air.

He'd obey, even if it wasn't what he wanted to do. He mounted his favorite horse, satchels filled with food and water pouches heavy. He didn't look back. A warrior never failed.

As he followed the line of the Jalec River heading south from Velle, through the Dark Forest and along the ridges of the mountains due east, it crossed his mind more than once to return to his home, to the Vesturin where those in poverty slavishly mined to gain the Regent's elusive riches. Shadow's Blood. The gem's rarity made it more valuable, but in his entire lifetime, Baz never once knew anyone able to uncover the blackish-red jewel, no matter how they toiled, or prayed, or yearned.

It had been sighted... just once. That was enough to make zealots of the worst believers. The rise of those lusting after a higher power, the men of the New World Commonwealth, began not long after. The fanatics spread over the land like a scourge, looting, and killing, and raping—all in the Ancients name and glory.

Baz did everything for Mato, even at the peril of his own life and career, even if his secrets made him dead inside. He'd continue to risk everything to keep her from that life of ruin, out of those mines that killed so many in the province.

Sebastian knew his role. He destroyed home and family without compunction, acting as the merciless hand of the Queen. He fought. He betrayed. He was a man that didn't give a damn for anyone but his fiancée.

Day after day, he traveled. Days turned into weeks. He didn't slow or relent.

Wearily, he continued riding; the day beginning to wane into the silvery spread of the moonrise. Trying to keep his future bride in his thoughts, he remembered every detail of her. Besides Mato, Baz had no one, no one else he prized, and no one else he wanted to.

Ru, the boy who kept him from harm in youth, guarding him with obsessive manipulation, sly intelligence, and unusual strength, was now nothing to him. Ru was a stranger, a hated one. Baz acknowledged him whenever they intercepted paths, yet he disliked speaking to him at all. Terse conversations or total silence signified all that they'd become.

Ru overstepped. The sin was intercepted long ago, but Baz would never forgive him, even if Mato did. Though he'd never been a jealous man, when it happened, Sebastian longed to reach for his knife and to gullet the bastard. He resisted the urge, as he resisted anything that made him appear violent or abrasive in front of her. More death wasn't anything she should have to endure.

Despite her engagement and Sebastian's hold over her, Ru seduced his future bride. Mato cared for Ru. That alone saved Ru's life.

Ru, the opportunistic bastard, cornered her and took liberties. He may not have taken all from her, but kissing her wasn't just for lust. It was for adversity. Baz conceded when Mato begged leniency. And now, as he traveled far away with no expectation of returning, he had no choice. Before Sebastian said goodbye to Mato, he asked Ru to watch over her, to see that she was kept safe from harm. He tried not to regret it.

"Do what you have to do," Baz said. "Lie, cheat, steal. Make sure she doesn't go hungry or let her run out of the firewood that keeps her warm, or fucking allow confrontation from anyone. Do anything you have to do to protect her, even at risk to your own life."

Ru's answer deserved a face-pounding. His slippery voice stank of deception as he immediately agreed to the terms set before him. Maybe it hadn't been the smartest move, but to leave Mato alone,

vulnerably defenseless, wasn't even a possibility.

"I assure you," Ru said, his eyes greedy. "I'll treat her as my very own."

Sebastian resisted the urge to throttle, to maim, to conquer. Instead, his voice calmed, an eerie tenseness swelling up between them, their combined pride festering and singeing, their personalities clashing with the same fierce intensity they once had as boys.

"Don't try anything," Baz said. "Not one goddamn inappropriate thing. Mato deserves to feel safe, but especially from the likes of you."

Ru threw his palms up, the smirk discounting any air of agreement. Baz swallowed raging irritation.

"Hands to your fucking self. I'll be damned if I allow her to suffer just because I'm gone, and if I had any choice, you'd be my last to take care of her."

He snarled, hating that he had to go at all. He would, however, give her this, even if it were the last gift he ever gave. His voice stiffened, his body full of quiet rage.

"Know this, you slippery fucker," he said. "When I return, and I assure you I will, Mato's mine. *Mine*. Remember that when you want to spread your filth over her."

Slithery-smiled, Ru's gaze coiled, a venomous serpent with his innocent victim. Mato dangled within reach of his deadly fangs. Baz wasn't vulnerable to Ru's brand of raptor-like stealth, but Mato was. It wouldn't surprise Baz if Ru grabbed her attention while she was alone and defenseless. He likely would try, the bastard.

Baz forced himself not to consider it, or he'd go stark raving mad. It didn't matter what Sebastian wanted, anyhow. He'd do anything—*anything*—to keep his bride safe. Even at the risk of begging for his foe's help.

"You don't love her." The truth bled, even if the wounds weren't easily visible. "I could leave her alone. But..." Ru's gaze was avarice and sharp.

"You aren't capable of taking her away from me, or I'd never leave her in your care. Go. Work the mines as you were born to. Slave harder than you ever intended to, keeping my bride content. If you leave Mato without, I'll know." His gaze swept over the blond-haired man standing before him. "And once I find out," he told Ru with deadly calm, "I'll fucking kill you. That's not a threat. It's a goddamn

promise.”

“You’re not a threat,” Ru said, “Or you wouldn’t be here. Your throat would already be slit, and your body left as fodder for the crows.”

A sharp burst of amusement left Sebastian’s throat. “You’re still the same asshole, Ru. I respect that about you.” He leaned in. “But believe me, I don’t screw around when I say something, and I don’t make threats I can’t keep. That’s your warning, your only one.”

Baz kept to his vows, including the vow he gave to Mato’s father, made from youth on. Baz meant to keep it. The words from Jin ran over him like a coat of honey, sickening sweet. A promise he’d not soon forget. *Take care of Mato, no matter the cost. Make her your bride. She is meant to wed. I want her to wed you.*

Ru had always wanted her. Too fucking bad. Mato was his, even if what Ru accused was true. Baz didn’t love her. Not the way a future bride should be loved. The knowledge that his affections were unlikely to change didn’t matter. He promised her father. Sebastian’s promise meant taking care of her for life. The vow, made over Jin’s death-bower when he was twelve, was how it started, and that is how it would also end.

His horse was tiring. Baz was near his breaking point as well. Heat radiated all around him, the sun’s sticky glare against the desert rock making him squint. In Yrurra, light radiated from night to dawn, and from dawn till night. It couldn’t compare to the effervescence now burning his eyes and skin. The desert-lands laying deep along the southern tip of the Yrurrian province were just that—barren, yet feral. The sun killed.

His stallion buckled, the wheeze of its breath the last thing Sebastian heard as he fell, barely escaping the horse’s falling weight. The Reaper’s scythe swept low, striking with alarming precision, his stallion the first casualty of this daunting mission. Sebastian feared he was next. The wind knocked from him at the fall, and Baz crouched on the dusty ground, his knees holding the weight of his forearms, wheezing. Several minutes later, he knew he’d better move. Or if not, he might not move at all, ever again. It was easy to give in, but Sebastian had never taken the simple route of life.

Baz lay there, unmoving, his motivation melting from him like the heat that melted down from the sun. He couldn’t leave the horse in the

open to rot. Scavengers would soon swoop down at the scent of stench, and in his state, they'd catch him, too.

Among the rocks and brambly thorns, he dug, then when finished, rolled a stone to mark the animal's grave. Even though his horse would turn to dust, the headstone was testimony to the animal's faithfulness. Staring at the grave, angry desperation swelled over him.

He lost time of how long he lingered, keening in hushed agony. *Water. Sustenance.* A distraction from the hellish landscape. He needed relief, but as the day crept by, Baz still had found none. A smart man traveled as the silvery moon stood high in the sky, and as a soldier, he knew what invaders might choose to do with him if he were caught unaware. He had seen no one, but he knew to look for the danger before it came.

The desire to return the way he came clouded over any rationality. He wanted his homeland. He yearned for it—the cool breeze that wafted up and over the Vesturin from the seas, even the dustiness that rose from the quarries along the mines. He wanted it more than anything. As the sun rose further in the sky, his mind fuzzing and blurring along with his tired eyes, he gave up that dream. He'd never go home. Never again.

He was exhausted, bone-weary, his skin drying into papery husk. The tips of his fingers bled from where he climbed over rock and thorn, while his muscular thighs ached from the burden of lifting his body over crevice and blighted ground, time and time and time again. Baz was miserable, but misery was a welcome companion in this sun-golden wasteland. At least he had the pain. It reminded him he was still alive.

A blur of shadowy white crossed his vision as a wave of dizziness swept over him. Unless he found water soon, he'd faint. Then what good would he be, vulnerably exposed and limp on the ground for whatever predator that came along and found him?

He envisioned his enemy now, the one guarding his most precious gift, Mato. Ru would laugh at him for his failure, mockery aced by a smarmy grin. Imaging the expression from his former friend roused Sebastian somewhat. Returning to Mato drove him, vital and real, the cost of death not enough to stop him.

As a wanderer in a distant land, his only recourse to survival were the words that blew across his dry lips, an offering from his queen. An

ode to her cunning, but the benediction that kept him alive. He knew two things that might save him, repeating them endlessly in rote.

The Great Door of the Obelisk, the queen said, a haunting of brushed lips over his hot flesh. Her touch made him cringe. Others found her beauty to be a treasure. Not him. Baz wanted to rip her sultry smile from her lips. He wanted nothing to do with her, his obligation the only thing keeping him from disemboweling her greedy flesh and leaving her to survive or to die.

Find it. Open it. Retrieve my greatest foe. He remembered the words because they meant salvation. He must find the portal. Excuses and pitiable exhaustion couldn't stop him. If he wanted to survive, he must obey.

Somewhere in the filthy grime of the desert he trampled upon, that passageway existed. No one knew exactly where, not even the queen. Finding the door meant life. It meant one day returning home to Mato.

Sandy-covered lashes blinked, concentrating with the chill of unease. He was so tired, so ready to concede defeat to the stale, breathless air, and the harsh humidity that pummeled thickly against his weary body. The reckless hope of finding the portal consumed him like a drug, carrying him forward, step by step by bracing step. He floundered, nearly falling to his knees.

Where the hell would a door be out in this wilderness? Sweat poured down Sebastian's face, down his neck, down to his rapidly pulsing heart. He paused, considering the landscape. Her mission was impossible. He was a fool for not driving a knife through her while he had the chance. To die in imprisonment in his homelands was better than death in a land of nothingness.

The queen's offering was obscure, the key to unlocking the Obelisk, and one step closer to fulfilling her desires—and through it—his. *Pain of Life. Humiliation of Hope. Shadow's Blood.* No one, in the lifetime of that command, ever comprehended the scouring of her words.

Sebastian did.

His fingers caressed a ring, simple and mounted with a single stone. Baz wore it always. It hid under his shirt by a thick cord fastened around his neck. If he got through the hidden gate, if he survived what man was surely never meant to enter, the ring was his offering to his bride. Because what no one knew was its existence, a ring set with *Shadow's Blood*, half to a circular whole. Jin's last gracious gift, a

family secret. Now his to guard and then to share. Mato held the other half, and when joined, made the union of both stone and marriage complete.

Shadow's Blood, rare and precious. The gem burned warm against his skin, the stone carefully mounted upon the thin silver band. The leather cord holding the ring wrapped like an albatross as it circled his neck. It was a condemnation, a damning of the worst kind.

He wasn't a religious man, nor a man given to superstition. Yet holding the ring clutched against his body, he almost believed that there was more out there, out beyond the Regent's cruel oversight. Opening the door and returning through unscathed required epiphany and prayer, the kinds which Baz had never uttered before. He whispered his bride's name from cracked lips.

Mato...

She wasn't there, and neither was the portal. Minutes passed, or perhaps hours. Time eluded him, just as finding the portal's entrance eluded him. Heading southward for a destination not on the Yrurrian maps, Sebastian acknowledged for the first time that he would die out in the wilderness alone with no one but her to mourn him.

Maybe it was a fitting end for a man that caused so much heartache and destruction for others. Sebastian sank to his knees and closed his eyes.

Death was better this way, after all.

5

He didn't know how long he lay there, but the bird flying around his head was getting on his fucking nerves. It wasn't a vulture. He could have handled those, but not this strangely colored pest, a bird of purest white, with stripes of yellow and black upon its wings, a bird of beauty. Such a bird wasn't found in Velle, nor in any of the mining colonies. He swatted at it with the scant amount of energy he had left. It wouldn't go away, and neither curses nor aggression stopped it.

"Leave me the hell alone. If you're so damned smart, *you* find the opening." He was crazy-talking, and he knew it. Maybe that meant there was hope for him. After all, if he could talk, he could live.

Baz still hadn't found the portal, and if the forgotten, cruel lands of the hellish desert didn't kill him, his queen would. He refused to die this way, a coward. A failure. He found a reserve of energy, but when failing to move more than a few inches, venom spouted out from his lips. Venom and filth and every disgusting thing he'd ever heard, all shouted at the top of his lungs.

He swatted at the bird, who flew lower and lower each time his arm swooped the air. Maybe it ate carrion. Baz fumed, as he wasn't dead...yet. Its presence stirred him, rousing him to wrath and recovery.

"My god, Mato," he said, his most frequent prayer, the superstitious incantation of his bride's name, bursting out from his lips. Anger met the agony, all because the fucking bird wouldn't stop flapping around him. He rolled to his side and gained purchase to his feet. "Mato. Do you see me now? You'd never marry a man who can't even get a

damned bird to go away.”

She wasn't there, not in person anyway, but her spirit fueled him. His bride hardly left her bed anymore, sickness taking over her body, but even in her fragility she gave him strength. She always had.

The necklace around his neck swung against his chest as he rose. Bitterly, he tucked it back under his shirt, reminding him of why he was here, in the middle of the desert. Alone.

The necklace, always hidden, was an omen, a dark and depraved reminder of his servitude. *Pain of Life. Humiliation of Hope. Shadow's Blood.* He touched the reddish-black stone, the ring of deliverance on its leather cord. The ring shackled him, warning with a lewd promise. To fuck up his vow would destroy him and Mato both.

The ring meant power. After all, the secret of carrying it weighed across his chest for years. Even now it crossed upon his neck, a talisman of all he'd be denied. Family, a future, a woman to stand by his side—for however long Mato had left to live.

Jin's benediction, the cruel pressing of the ring into his palm those years ago, his fervent promise to the man he wished had been his father, worried and set Sebastian's brow. Meaning came to him, sharp and deliciously sweet. If the ring were meant to open the portal as Jin claimed, Baz still hadn't found the opening.

At the moment, all of Baz was agreed. Jin was wrong. There was no mirror-realm. If so, he'd never find it.

Baz sunk back down to his knees. Death better come quick, for he was an impatient, but decisive man. If the desert didn't kill him, his blade would. Weeks he'd wandered the desert, roaming the land that few visited and fewer returned from. Time tugged at him, pulling him farther from his mission and further from returning. Maybe it was time to give up.

He brought out his knife. He stared at it. If he had tears, they would be falling. *Mato...*

The bird circled his head. Baz swung, ready to murder it for bothering him in his last hours. Tauntingly, it chirped a song, one of goodbye and of good riddance. Then the damned thing crashed into a wall of nothing.

The bird fell. Stunned. Paralyzed.

Dead.

He didn't care about the bird's demise. It irritated the hell out of

him, anyway. What interested him was the way it died—hitting air. Hitting a nonexistent wall, one that shouldn't be there.

The goddamn portal. It had been there all along.

Sebastian's gaze narrowed back upon the snowy-toned avian, ready to capitalize on its demise. Its death brought discovery, hope. Reward.

In a low crouch, he rocked on his knees, uneasily aware of the precariousness of the situation. His mouth tasted like ash: stale and filled with regret. This was it, his last fucking chance to turn around, to collect Mato, and just run.

Hands outstretched, he gambled. He silently pled for the portal's dark intelligence not to find him out. To uncover that he was a fake. That he was nothing, just as the villagers and the courtiers viciously whispered. Terror made his gut ache. Cold chills swept over him. He reached, his fingers plucking at the fiery, still air.

The Great Door of the Obelisk. His fingertips skimmed against the barrier to the other realm, hard like diamond, yet rough and textured. A demon's tongue. A Beast, ready to slaughter. As he ran his fingers out and over the invisible wall, a zap of electricity buzzed out, running up his arm to his heart. It should have hurt, killed, denied. Instead, it felt like a lover's kiss, persuasive and enticing. He reached out again, giving the wall a cautious tap.

It didn't open. Nothing in the fucking hell happened. The land hushed. Then, in another burst of power, magic-sourced lightning ran up his arm. He felt the buzz straight through him.

Baz crouched on weak legs, exploring the wall of invisibility. Sentient and aware, it mocked him. Cruelly it beckoned him forward. *Die, die, die*, it said, the words a whisper running wild within his brain. Sebastian refused, not while he was so close to revealing its magic. Not while hope stirred alive.

Again, he thought of Mato. She was depending on him to return, to make her a bride. He stopped dragging his fingers along the sandpaper-smooth callousness of the portal's opening. Better to be cautious. He swallowed back the smoky singe that lined his throat, fisting his fingers. He stood.

Another leap of power snapped out at him. The portal begged him to trust it, to enter the unknown. Hesitating, Baz stared at the nothingness. Then, resigned but ready, he shouted the same battle cry

he gave before war. His eyes narrowed. His voice harshened.

“To Victory! Or to fucking Death!”

Then, with his eyes spread wide and opened to intangible fear, he plunged. Right into the belly of the Beast.

##

Sebastian woke, his body abutting a towering slab of granite, head pounding and his heart refusing to calm. The surface he lay on was unlike anything he'd seen before, black, and narrow—a path more than a road. He touched it. Hard like stone, dark as pitch, the pathway to a Purgatory he dared not contemplate. He scooted back, away from the foreign object that rose to the darkened sky, his chest heaving.

Where was he—or when? He made it through to the other realm, but as he looked around, he recognized nothing. His brow furrowed into a scowl, for this place was supposed to be Yrurra's mirror-land. Yet, it couldn't be. He wasn't in a desert, though the air was thick and muggy. Instead of the rocks and dry sand of the desert he'd left behind, trees lined the pathway, dead ones with spiraling arms offering penitence to the sky above. And the people, representatives of the queen on this other existence that should have met him upon his arrival, weren't anywhere around. He was alone, just the starless Heavens, the skeletal trees, and the odd, winding stretch of road that led into a maze of trees.

He'd been lied to. This wasn't a replicated world, not from land to tree to sky. It mocked him, scorning him with its facade of familiarity. A foul curse left his lips. This simmering, dark place was obviously Hell or its Purgatory, a dark Shadowland that hovered between the living or the dead, and Baz was trapped within it.

Before he could contemplate finding his way back through the portal, he paused. The rock in front of him hummed, a slow buzzing of life. He crawled forward, reaching out to feel the massive stone.

It was alive, mocking him. He swore it. But how? It was carved of rock, yet it stood there proud and triumphant, a shrine on its glorious pedestal. Its four-sided, void face laughed at him, a cold predator, a ruthless foe. Eyeless, without breath, the object was sentient. It

shouldn't surprise him, for in the short time he'd wandered the desert, an unseen awareness plagued him. The stone's humming turned into a shriek as he reached out, as he touched it. It didn't like his hand upon it. Him, an Unknown, a man without world or land, a stranger.

No matter. It spoke to him in a way they both recognized.

Violently.

His hand yanked away, singed. The tips of his fingers were red and bright, scalded, as if by flame. Sebastian growled; a warrior ready to attack. He quickly realized that his ready stance to go into battle only made him look stupid. Yet he couldn't be wrong. The thing, the being or power inside the obelisk, whatever it may be, hated him.

Did it know his mission, his goal to take down a woman of its world? Even if it did, the thing let him through from Yurra to this darkly gilded mirror-realm. Taunting and teasing. Mocking, with a readiness to kill. Perhaps it would do nothing at all, and he was a damned fool.

His chest tightened with doubt and an arrogant fume. He was a soldier, a man crafted from youth, the greatest warrior Yurra ever knew. He couldn't be afraid. Besides, that fucking thing *burned* him. As trained, a roar burst out, the only warning a soldier gave before charging forward. It followed by the soft hush of ineptitude. He wouldn't do a goddamned thing, not beyond huffing and puffing like an old man ready to expire. His fingers fisted and dropped, itching for the blade by his side, the inclination to draw it against the unmoving enemy nothing but comical absurdity.

Baz was a warrior. He'd seen almost every dark deed that man could do to another. But even he didn't know what the hell he was warring against. And he doubted he'd win, even if he tried.

Sebastian couldn't resist reaching out one more time, for after all, giving up was the surest way to die. Body bent low in a battle-crouch, his fingertips spread out and skimmed the stone.

Fire. Wrath. Darkness. *War*.

It sang to him, a song of tribulation, a rallied cry, one that soldiers shouted just before they marched in and assimilated everything. Baz knew that song by heart. He was trained with that chant on his breath. By it, he would also expire.

He edged back on the pathway several feet, eyes focused on the stone, hearing the buzzing slow to a soft hum. He wasn't stupid. That

thing was alive, and it mocked him.

Baz was so weary and groggy, he didn't hear the woman approach until she stood behind him. Her throaty voice, wry yet sweet, plundered his senses. He removed his knife from its pouch, showing her that despite any actions previous, he was still a warrior in charge.

"At ease, soldier," she said, too near for his comfort. "I've never heard of any wars won by battling against mortar and stone."

He gave her a cold, calculated look. He hated she crept up on him, hating more that he let her. "What is this thing?"

She laughed, pointing to the pedestal as if the monstrous entity were nothing. "That?" Her fiery-colored head tipped to the side, contemplative. Pretty pink lips pursed in thought, a canny wariness in her sweet tone. "You're not from around here, are you, soldier?"

"Answer the question."

Her lilting voice went hard, and the brightness of her lime-green eyes dimmed. "You don't have permission to speak to me that way."

He met harsh with harsh. "Who are you?"

The woman turned and walked away, disdain covering the tone of her voice as she called back to him. Though she was ready to disappear into the night, he heard her—loud and clear.

"I'm the woman who can help you. You look like a man who's lost his way. Too bad you're useless, just like the rest of them. Now, warrior, prove yourself, or you'll die as the rest of them do."

6

Did the man think she didn't know what he was? Alore walked away from the stone, heading deeper into the trees. Her guard, Taig, waited for her there on the cusp of the city. A surly man. A dangerous man. Her first words made him stiffen, though her voice was purposely, cruelly upbeat, a connived lilt in her tone. One of her great pleasures in life was getting a rise out of the man. Sometimes, like now, he made it too easy.

"He's here," she said, her voice granite. Another threat, another reason to hate who she was. Death filled the air, a beacon that drifted from her fingertips to the ashen sky.

Immediately, Taig pushed away the edges of his jacket to expose the gun belt and other attached weapons hitched to his side, showing her just what he was capable of. He was a man of war, cunning and capable, and her only ally in this far-reaching game she was bound and determined to win.

So protective, her famed, lethal-minded soldier. His protectiveness, though, was unnecessary. Alore hid a triumphant grin as his face faltered and he pushed his fingers away from the killing instruments at his side.

It didn't really matter how she taunted and prodded her soldier to react. The stranger hadn't bothered to follow her back through the woods. She almost wished he had. At least it would have given them both some action. Taig was already ruffling at the idea, ready to sink his chops into the man, ready to destroy the foe.

"The soldier is here? He made it?" Taig said, displeasure edging the

gravelly tone of his voice.

She nodded in response to his question, eyeing him warily. He huffed, no doubt affirming what he'd already suspected. Most of them got through. It was only a matter if they survived the journey and stay alive, as most of them burned to a deadly singe while on the invisible, branched out path.

She knew what churned through his mind at the moment, and judging by his loud grumble, he'd soon follow the sour expression on his face by readiness and action. Taig loved pain, the pleasure of seeing her enemies bleed out. To see the enemies' chest rise with one last puff of air, deflating permanently. Filling his palms and covering his fingers with a rebel's lifeblood, made him chuckle with the darkest kind of mirth. He was cruel that way. Compassionless and determined to succeed, he did his duty religiously. Killing to keep her safe. Killing because he could. Killing because the horror pleased him.

He acted as her companion, her only one, in a land not fit for either of them. Most of the time, that was enough.

"We should leave. You can't be here when he finds you," he said, his jaw gritted tight as the words snarled out.

"I can't go. You know that."

Taig jerked his head toward the trees. Now he was in full-on protector mode.

"He must have greater skill than those sent before him," he said. Alore nodded slightly.

"The others were useless wastes of men." His fingers drifted back to his weapons, gripping them with capable ease and no qualm, a reassurance to her he could do his job without regret. "Not that it'll do him any good. He'll soon be dead."

"No matter what he's capable of, I handled the situation."

"Did you? I think, my queen, I should apprise that on my own. No one deserves your mercy."

He stalked towards the monument on the other side of the park, but she followed, halting him before he reached the line of trees. His body went tight and tall, hating that she stopped him.

"Wait," she repeated.

She could hear his jaw and teeth grinding. Daringly, he said her name, a hushed reverence.

"Alore..."

He couldn't go without her say-so, of course. He was her guardian, but she was his master.

"Tell me, soldier," she said, placing her hands on her well-rounded hips. "What would you plan to do with him once you saw him? He's a warrior, same as you."

"I'm the best. And it's simple. I'd kill him."

After all these years together, he knew how she warned those who made it through to return to the other realm or to die in one unfamiliar to them. Otherwise, they'd face her soldier, or worse, they'd face her. If they were smart, none of them would choose that. However, too many of them didn't leave when invited, and they died. Not that it mattered. Through the exertion of their arrival, they were nearly dead already. This man would be given the same opportunity. Somehow, Alore doubted he'd take it.

When she gazed earlier upon the mirror-realm's newest offering, that handsome soldier sending death-glances to the conduit-stone, she wished he'd decide wisely. Otherwise, Taig would have no choice but to kill the stranger. And Alore? She would let him.

The latest one wouldn't run, though. She could already tell he wasn't weak as the others were. No, he wouldn't get scared away. But she wished he would, for the chase of a man who gave a bit of resistance would be beautifully horrific and terribly thrilling. It was just what she and Taig both needed and deserved after so many years of nothing.

More than ever, she understood how alone she was. How alone she'd always be as long as she lived in this forsaken place.

Taig meant to keep her safe. It was his duty. His duty was unnecessary, a veneer of shining paint upon a gilt wall, meaningless. Alore looked weak, but that was a lie. She could take care of herself. She could ravage the world if needed. Mightiness shielded itself by the facade she wore, one of feminine frailty and sweet charm. Those invasive, worthless soldiers always fell for that side of her. Perhaps this time, she'd let the mask slip a little, just to see the wonder and the awe crossing over the stranger's face. By then, though, the soldier would already be dead. If Taig didn't kill him, she would. No one gazed upon her true self and lived.

She knew her sister wouldn't give up. It was how they'd been since they first opened their eyes to the world. Scratching, biting, clawing

for dominance. But while Nyssa held a measure of regality and positional power already, Alore did not. That was the difference in their personalities: one ready to control right away, right now, and by any means possible.

As for Alore? She also wanted to control it all, but in due time, and only when that time was just right. Then, with fire and ice, with storm and pervasive winds, she'd take over the whole godforsaken world. *Both* of them.

That day was swiftly approaching. The soldier arrived too soon after the last one.

Taig stared down at her, his hard, masculine face lined with the quiet edge of disturbance. He would crack teeth if he didn't loosen up.

"She didn't wait long, the bitch," he said. "You're not rested from the last occurrence, my Lady."

She knew she looked tired, her body depleted, hair twisted in knots, bruising circles under her eyes. Even though it had been a long night, waiting and watching, that show of weakness was also veneer. Alore knew who and what she was. She wore the Shadows, and the night embraced and dripped from her fingertips. One day, she'd live as she was meant to. Live, when she'd been quietly dying in this world apart.

She'd gain the information she wanted from the stranger, by seduction or by lying. By everything in her arsenal. Then, as she was born to do, she'd empty him completely, sucking all power and strength and mightiness from his bones. It was what she was best at: destruction, rot, manipulation—all wrapped in a pretty, delicate shell.

It was laughable. She and her twin weren't that different at all.

Taig was right. She wasn't back in full form. But she refused to fail, to let her sister win. To lose any gain she'd attained over the millennia.

"My Lady? What would you have me do?" Taig's anticipation was her own. "Let me beat the bastard a bit, at least."

His onyx-dark eyes gleamed, a black hole to stare at and to be sucked into, never to be found or return from again. Alore ignored him, tipping her head back and observing the drifts of night as it touched the sky. Ochre, and violet, and blue deepened fully into shadow. Darkened into a night that, by her power, one day would never end. Such perfection. A shame that she had to be here, in this forsaken land and city, instead of where she should be.

Home.

“Leave him alone for the time being,” she said. “I want to interrogate him.”

Taig grunted, displeased. He always enjoyed doing that part of his job. He’d listen though, and with the same compliance he’d always shown. That’s not what she craved. She wanted his love, his hate. His hulking frame to push rules and restriction far, far away until all that was left was them.

She stepped forward, her toes meeting his, her body a hairsbreadth away. He looked down at her, the fire of battle only a part of what crossed his face. Lust. Determination. Denial. He wouldn’t act on any of them. In all their time, Taig never abused the line or took what he flagrantly wanted. Damn hateful, ancient law that separated the commoner from the elite. Damned honor. Damn him.

To spite the Heavens and the Earth, Alore cupped her tiny, slim fingers along her guard’s stern jaw. He held still, his gaze devoured and burned. Lightly she ran them over the stubble, hating that he wanted to consume her body and soul, but was prideful and cruel enough that he continually held back. Not once had she gained any ground with him. She tested him, reminding him she had the control, but quietly imploring him to take it momentarily away from her.

Her invitation remained unaccepted.

Alore wanted to scream her frustration to the air, wind, and sky. She knew the truth, and self-denial was part of it. She was royalty, a force beyond all reckoning. She knew what else was true. Royalty and those born from the Heavens above never mingled with lesser ones, no matter how the inclination to do so taunted and teased and consumed.

If only he’d ignore the rift borne between them and do as he wanted. His eyes told her enough. But actions were needed, not the silent begrudging that the divide between them brought, his stiff, still body revealing anger, and objection, and doubt.

Taig would never make a move. His respect extended into the cool removal of his heart. Then again, they’d been playing this cat-and-mouse game for a very long time.

His dark eyes kept on her face. But her guard didn’t budge. Another ruinous shame. Alore stepped back, her hands skimming his jaw once more before she turned away.

“Let’s go,” she said. “My sister can go to Hell if she’s not happy with the results of her latest ploy.”

Taig grinned, pulling out his gun and holding it with expert hands. He was more than ready to finish the fight, but so was she. It was time her sister realized that she'd lose.

Alore was meant to rule. And no one, *no one*, would take that birthright away from her.

7

He'd already left, gone to do the Queen's bidding. Nyssa, the damning and cruel Dark Queen. How she hated her for taking Sebastian away. And how she loved the deceptive taste of freedom his absence made.

Like the rest of those living in the Colonies, Mato disliked living under the structure of the Regent's tyrannical rule. But having the royal assassin as her fiancé had benefits. Baz made sure she never worked the mines. And he provided and protected her and her family. Yet Mato was twenty-six years old, and the eldest of her clan. She'd have to learn how to survive without him.

What if one day he didn't return from one of those Regent-assigned missions? He was hated in the Colonies, loathed, in fact, all throughout Yrurra. By connection, Mato and her family had no friends. To keep safe, they lived in the roughest, dingiest home on the outskirts of the Vesturin mines. Her family faced the horror of dodging foul words and fouler objects whenever they entered the town. No one wanted a son of Death to come near them or to live in their crowds. And no one wanted near them the woman Baz would soon marry.

The rest of her family glutted themselves with work, into facing disease and destruction by searching for the queen's elusive Shadow's Blood ore, while Mato wallowed in guilt for not having to join them. The ironic thing? She was the one family member whose lungs filled with the mine's red-dust, with blood, and with the distasteful burning singe signifying the imminent decline to the crypt. Despite her future husband and how he shielded her, Mato wouldn't evade the shadow-kissed woman of the grave. In fact, she was already halfway

there.

Baz, for all that he protected them, and with the scanty reserve of affection he gave, couldn't puzzle her back together when she finally fell apart, broken pieces and an empty shell all that was left of her. But if she was broken, it was her fault, too. She wore the badge of his promise. She was contained, his bride of fortune. A minion of betrothal and request. As with most creatures held by a force stronger and bolder and callously indifferent, she didn't struggle or cry out when the hands of her future lay themselves like alms.

Mato sat up slowly as the eternal fingers of dawn rubbed across the sky. Her sister Grace lay sleeping, and gently she kissed the four-year old's forehead. Grace blinked and opened her eyes, half-asleep, before she rolled over with a grumbling pout. Soon her youngest sister would join the others of the Colony, picking rock, sifting ore until the wealth of the vein petered out.

Sweet Grace. Her brother, the spindly, precocious Garth. Her aunts and uncles, cousins, and their wives. All of them met that fate. Except her. She was chosen by the queen's Assassin, the damning desire for her to become his bride acting like an unbearable load upon her back, a millstone around her neck. She allowed it, the ostracizing, the taunts, the pain. It saved them, just as Baz first rescued *her* from a life of indignity.

She refused to break now. Not for any of them. And not while the youngest still needed her.

Mato pasted the facade of contentment back on her face. The barb of wire symbolizing fidelity and trust wrapped around her finger, cinching tight. A coil of arrogance and lies. Her engagement ring, a pretty, simple silver, bought—mistakenly—a bit too small. The stricture for wearing it bled her dry. She'd never escape, not from wedded bliss, nor from Baz's rage when, or if, he found out the truth of who she truly was.

Frowning as her body winced with pain, Mato stood and wearily pulled on one of her dresses. It was new, and she didn't deserve it. She wished it were worn and threadbare so she wouldn't feel shame.

The only difference between wealth and survival, was that for her survival she hid behind painted-on smiles and the balmy touch of exuded comfort. With the accepted proposal, she cast aside the shackles of ragged filth and a pauper's fear. Mato wore Sebastian's

bond, yet she wished it torn away from her. Beneath the silver band that betrothed her to the queen's favorite, the disease of her deception spread. Reality beckoned, a metastasized cancer. Her failure strengthened and decayed. In her soul, she knew one thing: she was already dead.

Bound by promise. Bound by lies. Because of the family who needed her, Mato would keep it that way. Through marriage, by deception, by hunger and by need, she'd never get away. Maybe she failed because she was scared and too weak to try.

The thing about inertia? Of cowardly regrets? They eventually festered and withered away. Being Sebastian's was both a blessing and denial. It was being wrapped in love's persuasive vine while she twisted until her heart and terrible soul rotted and rejoined the wasted ground. Mato yearned to bloom. To burst into color even when she looked tired and gray.

In Yrurra, the land knew only light: dawn and eternal day and the bright emaciation of stagnated illumination. Mato's heart, in stark reverse, was darkness. Dry, and scaly, and cool, disturbed decay, she knew how unworthy of love and of acceptance she really was. Unworthy, in fact, of anything good at all. While she wore the ring of the Assassin, she couldn't act or behave the way she wanted. Not now, not until she picked up and ran far away from her obligations and from the disastrous want filling her belly and glutting her soul.

Because the truth? She sighed, picking at the seams of her sleeve. The truth was... she didn't love Baz and never would. That was a secret she'd take to her grave, for it was better to be married and kept, then alone and barely surviving.

A shadow crossed the doorway, and startled, Mato looked up. Quickly a frown touched her lips, and just as quickly disappeared.

Ru. He opened the door and checked on her. She hated that man, loathed him with such intensity, she nearly cracked at the efforts to appease it. Sebastian put Ru in charge of her well-being, but she'd rather he forgot that obligation. She'd rather he forgot *her* entirely.

"Go away," she said, turning her back to him. It was the only way she'd disguise her trembling.

She felt the shadow of his wrath before it sank into her arm. Ru stood over her, disgust pasted on his face.

"Finally found your voice, Mouse?" he said. "I don't agree with your

tone of voice.”

She stiffened, knowing he saw through the bravado to her fear. “Better than silence,” she retorted. “You weren’t pleased with that, either.”

“You play the victim very well.” Ru let loose of her arm. It stung. “But it doesn’t suit you. I’d rather hear your lies and your venom than to hear you simpering at me in that detestable way you speak to your future groom.”

Mato sighed, turning to face him. “Why are you here, Ru?”

“I’m here to take care of you. That’s what you wanted, isn’t it?”

“No. I don’t want anything from you.”

He circled her, then sat down on the edge of the bed where Grace still slept. Looking over his shoulder to her sister, Mato almost swore that she saw a hint of affection touch upon the monster’s face. But she was mistaken. Ru had no feelings. Not beyond anger, and hatred, and dismay. He certainly had no fondness for her family, for by connection, they were a part of her. And Ru hated her just as much as she did him.

“I’ll ask you again. Why are you here? We don’t need you.”

His chuckle was slow and cold. She froze under its claim. “I came here to take you with me. I’ve got shit to do today, and I can’t have you roaming about on my watch.”

It was impossible that he’d found out her secret. No one had a clue, and if she had her way, they wouldn’t ever.

He stood, holding out the palm of his hand to her. She ignored his fingers, instead heading to the single bit of furniture in the room beside the bed. The battered old dresser stood there like a misguided trophy, a hand-me-down that had seen much better days. Mato grabbed the brush on top its scuffed surface and ran it through her hair, then she set the brush down decisively when done.

He was still there, watching. Keeping him waiting, deftly she braided and coiled the dark strands of her long hair about her head, a coronet. Her crown.

It was best she ignored him, to forget his scathing presence in the tiny, crowded room. The swollen-headed man refused to budge, yet still made his power known, just by being there.

She knew Ru, and he wouldn’t leave her be, the same as if he couldn’t decide whether she should defy him, or console. Neither,

most likely. He'd rather keep her permanently quiet. A pillar of salt, a woman who cowered as she turned to run, a woman that he placed along the crook of his elbow. Chained. Bound. And his.

"Come here, Mouse." By the Goddess, how she hated him. "You don't want to refuse me."

She whipped around, a snarl on her face. "Baz didn't leave you here in order for you to just take me anywhere you pleased. You're here by his command. Listen to the Assassin, or he'll have your body hung and burned like the rest of the betrayers."

She didn't like assuming the worst of Sebastian, but she knew she was correct. He experimented with death, but little did her fiancé know she was the fucking Grave. Most went in blind, expecting salvation. Ru, stupid Ru. He was a damned follower, just as the rest.

She knew what others thought as they looked at her—shy, sweet Mato. She was a woman guilty of treason—the leader of the New World Order Commonwealth. Ru joined it in his youth, but she was born into her role.

Mato was the neck that maneuvered each participant, quietly and circumspectly directing the entire clan. As a woman, she kept silent of her role, as was fitting and proper. No one knew her position in the tribe. Not Baz. Not Ru. Not anyone.

She'd like to keep it that way.

Ru's eyes narrowed and a cruel disregard spread over his face. "Now, Mato," he said, so gently it put her immediately on edge. "We both know the truth. It's not my body that will be quartered, then burned." His pale cerulean-colored eyes pondered her while she imagined the worst. His voice turned raspy. Seductively, he whispered, exposing her as the monster she really was. "Does your fiancé know?"

She swallowed, stiffening her back further. "I hide nothing from him."

Ru laughed, the sound sending shivers down her spine, chills of excitement and alarm. "You should know better than to lie to me, my devious little Mouse. Who better to deliver the darkness than the master of darkness himself?"

She snapped back at him, mocking him in her rebound. "What nonsense are you spewing? If you refer to the Shadow Queen, there's no such thing. By the goddess, you can't still believe those silly stories

my father told, can you?"

"You believe them. Besides, Jin hated me," Ru said. He came near, towering over her. Mato disliked her delicate height and figure, as now her enemy found fit to use it against her. "What I can't understand is why you hate me, too."

"You know why."

Another chuckle escaped his lips. "Still? Mouse, what happened then isn't relevant anymore. It was a long time ago."

"You hurt me," she said, doing her best to ignore him. She took a step away. He followed.

"I wanted to hurt you. Let's not forget, Mato. You liked it."

Shrugging, she hid how her fingers shook. She kept her face blandly removed, neutral to his taunts. That expression on her face was his answer, the only one he'd get.

Undeterred, Ru continued. "I can hurt you again if you like."

Eyes flashing at him, Mato used her puny-sized fists to push against his wall of a chest. "You promised. You said you'd never speak of that —"

"And yet I am." He covered her fists with the cupping of his hands. Warm. He was always so warm, despite the freeze of his voice. "Do you want it? Should I repeat history and continue to deny Sebastian his greatest wish?"

Her virginity. She promised it to Baz. She allowed him to think he'd be her first. But she lied then as she lied now. Mato's chin dipped, furiously debating giving in. No one ever treated her as Ru did. Vicious. Heartlessly demanding. Wickedly cruel. They were the same, he and her. Two kindred souls, damned for their ruthless, unorthodox love.

Mato turned her face away. "I think you should go now," she said, her voice almost too soft to be overheard.

Ru's face turned dark, like obsidian night. He released her, and Mato felt the chill of his departure from tip to toe.

"For now."

Relief, and the overwhelming surge of penitence, stirred her. Mato kept her fingers by her side, but they itched to reach out, to cling to him.

His voice hardened. "I give you this reprieve, not because I'm good. You know I'm not."

She nodded, her throat tightening. His voice swept over her, by warning and by dark devotion. "You're not good either, Mouse. So, when I decide I want you, when I call in that blessed reprieve, you'll come crawling to me. Just as you always have." His taunt made her ache. He called her name again. She looked up. "We both know you've always been best when looking up at me while down upon those knees."

He leaned in and sniffed the fear, laden as sweat, dripping down the column of her throat. His teeth flashed; he sunk them in, gnashing and claiming, and reducing any chance she'd have at getting away unscathed. He silently left, promised glory imbued by his harsh and punishing withdrawal. Only then did she reach up, touching the bruised spot upon her neck. She'd have to hide it somehow, hide it before tonight.

Baz wasn't the only one she deceived, nor was Ru. Mato kept secrets, many of them. Baz didn't know she was unfaithful. Ru stayed thankfully uninformed. No one knew, and that was how she wanted it.

Her king. Her lover. The reason she kept on playing Ru's charade and didn't look back. Tiran would save her from the miserable life she led. Her king would overthrow the Regent and put her by his side on the throne.

He promised. And within her thighs, she held him to it.

8

Heading back to her chambers without the new bed partner she had her eye on earlier, Nyssa closed the door behind her and leaned her head back onto it. Her eyes shut while she eased her breath out with a sigh. It was a long moment before she opened them again.

Another day, another hanging. She smiled cunningly, pleased as always when her day went well. At least it proved to be more than the humdrum of the past week. Those days were barely tolerable, the ones where there were no infractions, where she had no judgment to give. Where nothing made it interesting, or different, or further proved the validity of her reign.

It always surprised her that the courtiers didn't revolt over the way she ruled. The way she *must* rule. Such simpletons, easily led and easier to ravage. She was admittedly cruel, cold, and heartless, but she loved the power of owning the land. Yrurra was hers, and she meant to keep it that way. Perhaps she governed with a mighty fist, but she knew from experience what happened when rebellion took over.

After all, she'd been the first to rebel, all those years ago.

Her sister, her foe. How she loathed her! By all counts, and if given the chance, Alore would steal what was Nyssa's by right. The Regent would stop that before it happened, nipping any waywardness in the bud before it became a problem.

She sneered, kicking off her heeled slippers and curling her toes in relief. Her entire persona was carefully calculated, from how she dressed to how she styled her hair. To reflect power, mightiness, prestige, ready and able to instill allegiance: all of it was thought out

weeks in advance. If only her son took a page from that book.

It gave the illusion of comforting warmth and sympathy, the fact she had an heir, promoting a vibe of motherly affection towards a man-boy who all knew didn't take his responsibilities seriously. Yet, how was she any different? To the astute: not at all. Those who looked past the surface of her relationships realized that they, too, were fake.

She hardly bothered pretending to care anymore, for what was the point? After all, her son wouldn't change. She hated the insipid law demanding that any male heir took over on their twenty-fifth birthday. That should've been the first law she eradicated once assuming the regency. Now it was too fucking late. Generations of talk meant that years later, everyone knew. The book that contained them was repeated, permeating from village to village, through province and across land.

She could control her son, but her sister? A scowl covered her face. Alore had always gotten everything she ever wanted, although Nyssa was the elder twin. Now, by their parent's command, was it fair that Alore got Yrurra, the land that was Nyssa's by birthright, the one she was meant to have for the rest of her years?

Alore was the first she must eradicate, to kill without regard, to maim with nothing left behind. This would happen, and soon. It must, in order that there wouldn't be uprising against her.

She only had to get rid of her blasted son.

She tapped her lower lip, pondering how best to enact his downfall while sauntering towards the innards of her bedchamber. She collapsed in her favorite chair. Kicking her legs up and pulling them under her, she sat quietly a moment, contemplating. Her son was the next she must take down.

It was better that he didn't realize the full scope of his lineage. Perhaps, like her, he hadn't inherited her parent's magnificence. But what if he had?

A growl escaped her lips at the thought of someone other than her gaining that kind of power and control. A harsh chuckle followed, one of disbelief and canny retribution.

If Tiran did inherit, his life meant nothing. More than nothing, for by her methodical plan, he was already dead. It was fact set in motion from the moment she conceived. No matter how she tried, her body wouldn't expel him. When she birthed, his father kept him safe from

harm.

Tiran's father wasn't here now. Nothing, and no one, would stand in her way as she concluded the act she first intended when she discovered she was with child.

With a sinister smile, her forefinger soothingly stroked her lower lip. Who better to lead the dual-lands than someone who appreciated its worth? Someone like her. *Only* her, if she had her way. Realization of how close she was to gaining it lifted her into rapture, for there was one thing that Nyssa knew with absolute certainty. She always got her way in the end.

She heard a light knock at the entrance to her rooms, drawing her immediately from the thrall of planning and conniving. Nyssa stood, making sure she looked presentable, disregarding her bare feet. After all, only her closest advisors and her whores ever knew her in dishabille, and it would stay that way.

"Enter."

The door clicked open, a small, pretty face showing through the open crack. "Pardon me, Your Regency?"

Nyssa sighed, beckoning the woman in, even while striding purposefully towards the door to shut it behind her. No one must ever hear what was about to be spoken. Perhaps what even might be done.

"What have you learned?"

The woman flushed. "I gained entrance to his Majesty's rooms. Yet, I'm uncertain if—"

"I'm not awarding you to think." She enjoyed the stain of discomfort and fear overriding the woman's beautiful face. Another shame that she couldn't have saved this woman for her. But Nyssa had other plans, more devious and deviant ones for the female cowering in front of her.

"Have you gained favor?"

The woman nodded. Nyssa strode forward until their toes nearly met. The woman shook, pleasingly terrified. Looking the woman over, Nyssa read the woman's sincerity through the disgusting bleach of color from her skin and her quivering lips. Such pretty lips. Hopefully, they were being put to good use.

"Then. What. Have. You learned?"

She wouldn't ask another time. It showed weakness, the inability to instill loyalty and fear. Nyssa refused that indignity her entire reign,

and she certainly refused to do it with a pretty, though perhaps useful, slut.

The woman's face turned blush again. She was a paid whore. Nothing should faze her. Nyssa grew interested.

"He enjoys bed play, my queen."

"Go on." Nyssa barely controlled wrapping her fingers around the woman's neck and squeezing. Timidity and vanity never gained a place when hand in hand.

"He loves women, of course. He brings in many to join us, and his bed play is rather vigorous."

"I'm not asking for a blow-by-blow account of my son's sexual activities."

The urge to dismiss the woman from sight with one executed word and a far-placed room within the dungeons taunted her. She bade the woman to continue. Her son wasn't obvious to his proclivities, and if he was rough, as the woman suggested, the information was a bit of blackmailing bounty. No courtier wanted to look foolish, or to realize their king deceived them, even in a minute way. That small omission would be his downfall. Nyssa hid a triumphant grin.

"Has he mentioned anything incriminating during his throes of lust? Any slip of the tongue, any betrayal?" That was the information she needed to behead him. But the woman shook her head, a flush bright upon her cheeks.

"No, your Majesty."

"Very well." Perhaps it was the truth. Time would tell. Her eyes narrowing in on the whore, Nyssa reached to the tabletop beside her and lifted a blue vial, shaking it slightly so that the contents churned.

"Here. Take it. I don't want the king's bastards roaming my hallways. Continue fucking my son. But be forewarned. If you don't provide me what I wish, just remember that I'm an impatient woman."

The woman blanched, hurriedly nodding. The point was made, and with such a lovely display of cowardice on the other female's part. Nyssa inwardly preened, though outwardly she kept the same level, neutral face.

"Of course, your Majesty." The slut repeated it for emphasis. Annoyingly so. Pursing her lips, Nyssa motioned for the woman to leave. She did, scurrying away and shutting the door quickly behind

her.

Pennyroyal: toxic when used in larger doses, the poison that lingered in the body as it did its deed. Little did that woman know, it would cause her eventual death. For now, the herbal tonic aborted any brat lingering in the female's womb. Nyssa meant what she said about bastards. Or rather, future heirs. She would have no one threatening her throne, and especially her son's pasty-faced, whiny, and illegitimate offspring.

Nyssa pursed her lips, staring at the closed door. Did she know her son secreted lovers into his rooms? Of course. She wasn't queen for nothing, though admittedly the news the slut brought wasn't what she'd assumed it would be.

She admired his attempts to connive her, but mostly she wanted to throttle anyone who hadn't told her the truth before this. Her son was hiding things, things more than his preferred sexuality. That sort of thing was exactly what Nyssa intended to root out from under him. Thankfully, with his new bed partner, she had.

Didn't he understand the role he was given, the one she beneficently given? No, and that would be his undoing.

Nyssa was queen, the Regent and the leader of the Yrurrian lands. People begged to curry her favor, begged to rise in rank and authority, to gain a coveted position among her royal court. Only the most imploring sycophant, the most ugly-minded and deviant Yrurrian, attained that role.

Like to like. Poison to poison.

She hated simpering idiots. Fools. Simpletons. Her truest followers were cruel and callous, just like her. But they had the foresight never to take her down. After all, they knew their fate should they ever attempt it.

This woman, her informant, the daughter of poverty and shame? She was nothing. Soon her use would be over, and she would die. Just as the rest of them who dared betray her would die. Just as her son would, as well. Tiran, king of the land of Yrurra, and overlord of the province of Velle, would be butchered like a usurper, taken from the line of royal ascension. Never to shadow her throne room again.

Nyssa stood before the mirror in her vanity chamber. She was lovely. But she knew the truth.

Her beauty was a lie, too.

She entered her bathing chamber, disrobing and casting her gown to the floor for a servant to pick up and remove. Leaning over, she turned the gilt faucet at the head of the deep, wide tub so that the water gushed, carefully avoiding her reflection on any gleaming, slick surface. Her nudity offended her, sickeningly vile and grossly imperfect. She knew how she looked. Her servants knew to avert their eyes. It meant their life, for there wasn't one of them she wouldn't slaughter.

The only ones to envision her true form were the royal whores. There was a price for gazing at her in that vulnerable state. All of them were blinded after she finished with them. Unfortunately for them, since the morning's debacle with Celena and her husband, Surrey, they would also immediately be rendered mute.

Nyssa refused to listen to their treacherous squeals of horror, or worse, to endure the indignity of watching the realization of who and what she was as it crossed over their faces. It would spread like wildfire, and then where would she be? Alone. Restless. Eager to fuck and to kill with no victim to shame in their suffering.

Greediness made her gather lovers like a bouquet around her, either having them executed after they fucked, or keeping them as one of the precious ones of her harem. Nyssa didn't care whether they might have preferred death.

No queen was without. Merciless and without moral compassion, she refused to end her days without taking others down with her as she slinked and grappled her way towards the pits of Sheol. Even there, at least, she'd have her adoring slaves.

She knew what she was, even if others never comprehended. She was monstrous, an evil curated and made. Her pristine surface deceived, allured, denied. She had a delicate face, exquisitely beautiful. She growled, knowing the truth: her body reflected all the tormented years of her life. Underneath the filmy, gossamer gowns and swags of lace, she was decrepit. Hideous. Aged. Less than magnificently perfect.

Alore got the gift that Nyssa wanted—the body of a young woman with a face to match. She knew how her twin looked, even though it had been years since their last meeting. Envidable in looks, her sister could have pride of figure and form. She had never been subjected to the process of decay that Nyssa endured. No, not Alore. Not their parent's favorite.

The bitch.

That gift from their parents was only one of the many reasons Alore had to die. And when her sister's life-force ended, Nyssa would hold the mirror-kingdoms in the grasp of her hand, not a single soul able to take them from her.

She leaned her head back as she settled in the bath. It was wearying to portray someone weaker than what she was born to be, to act like one of her subjects, a creature with scant force.

Power. She wanted it, needed it. And because she didn't lie to herself, she knew that gaining it wouldn't fix things. It would only make things bearable. Without a king by her side, Nyssa was still alone. Dreadfully and painfully alone. No amount of force or coercion could rectify it. Like wish and dream, it obscured, a veneer on oil. This was her cold, harsh reality. Until she succeeded, nothing would change.

Nyssa was alone. Worse, it was all her damned fault. That was a reality that stung her pride, that looked her in the face every day. It was in Tiran's expressions, so similar to his father. Oren, the only man she'd ever loved. The only one she ever dared lower herself to be real and honest with.

Oren was dead, and Nyssa was to blame. The thought aroused humiliating shame. It wasn't an emotion she cared to repeat. It was why she'd never fall in love or marry again.

She exited the bath, padded naked to her bed and climbed in. Sleep: a mini-death, one that all mortals faced. Sliding unwillingly into sleep, her body relaxed with one last bit of macabre humor. Even in repose, she scared others. The servant who woke her would be imprisoned for seeing the Regent at her worst. She knew the servants wagered who would be chosen to go to the dungeons next, some of them ready to face execution or exile rather than do their duty.

Yes, death. The only cure for that devilish love-madness. The only rectifier for what must occur the day Nyssa finally plunged the scourge of Sheol into her son's beating, damnable, and cursed heart. Death. It was only a matter of when or of how.

9

His mother was insane. Not that the entire kingdom didn't know it. He was the one she hated most, and yet Tiran wanted her loathing, craving it like purloined sustenance. He starved, he denied, all to find that masked elusiveness never revealed. Like water or the bounty of food, he needed to feel the snide disapproval he received every time he looked her in the face, to feel the wrath within her eyes, and to be soothed with the absolute disgust of her attentions. At least having those meant she hadn't completely forgotten him or the hold he held over her.

He was king, and she merely his Regent. Justice wouldn't be long in coming. Neither would vengeance, the same declaration of retribution she'd made against him from the time he was a young boy.

He lived, thanks to the nursemaid his father put in charge of him. Not that it did Helen any good. Her death still haunted him, the vision of seeing the only woman he ever cared for hanging for the birds and beasts to devour.

He hated his mother. But he wanted her approval more.

Tiran wished for any bit of indulgence coming from her foul-tinged lips. His mother was correct in her estimation of him, that he was a terrible, insufficient leader, one who ridiculously held out for his mother's love. A love he'd never gain, no matter what he said or how callous he acted.

She made him feel six years old again, tiptoeing into the throne room she shared with his father, holding out to them his greatest treasure. Maybe this time she would smile. Maybe this time she'd give

him audience. But the book was the last thing she wanted to see cradled in his fingers. Her sneer stuck in his mind even now, the accusations she made reverberating in his head like yesterday.

"Oren." She turned to his hollow-eyed father. "Do you see our son? Look at what he holds in his fingers, as if reading stories were a suitable past-time for a future king. It's weak, infantile. See what we raise? A boy without a future." She scoffed, while his father stared blank-eyed with a hint of confusion crossing his face.

He clutched the book to his chest, stammering his reply. "This is my favorite one, Mother. Don't you like it?"

He knew he wouldn't find an answer.

"He's always in a book." She pressed a response from his father, who Tiran wished would refute her and give up his silence. Oren didn't speak, and he certainly didn't speak up for him. The queen sat stiff and straight in her chair, scorn in each word.

"Ridiculous nonsense. It's certainly not fitting for a royal son." She sighed dramatically, taking his father's fingers in her slender ones. "Where did we go wrong? As a mother, what could I have done differently?"

Tiran froze in place, standing awkwardly before their thrones, fidgeting from foot to foot. Her cruelty made tears come to his eyes and his fingers clamp the book's spine until it cracked. It was trash now, garbage. Unwanted, just like him.

Saying it before his peers and the rest of the royal court, she claimed it loudly and with the authority of a woman who ruled in her husband's stead. She said it as one who had the right to rule him, too. Her words stung, they burned, they singed every part of him that felt love for her.

She continued, her eyes wandering over him with darkness and cool dismissal. "Do you see him? I can barely stand to look upon him. He's our son, yet I fear also he is my greatest failure."

His father said nothing. Not that anyone expected him to. He hadn't spoken in all the years Tiran knew him. Some said he'd been permanently muted, his tongue removed, his mind ciphered of all thought, his rationality gone.

His mother paraded his father by her side, as though she were proud of Oren's insufficiency. But him? Tiran, she ignored, dismissing him, calling him useless and unwanted.

His book spurred the vocalization of her hatred. That silly, stupid book. How he wished his father might defend him, but that kind of thinking was also silly. The king of Yrurra was nothing inside. A shell. A nobody—just like him.

His mother tapped her fingers on the arm of her throne, dismissively regal. “Go to your rooms, boy. I’m done looking upon you today.”

His father’s face stayed blank, smooth like water over his near-perfect handsomeness, silently obedient by the Regent’s side. Tiran hated him, too. Just once, he wanted his father to take his side. It was better to wish for the winds of the West to stop blowing towards the craggy mountains of the East. Something like that would never happen. He’d never gain approval from either of his parents.

How could she love and want his father, when Tiran stood before her, willing and able to return her affections? He wanted his mother to love him.

Now, as an adult, loathing filled him. He knew his mother for what she was. Disgusting, a menace to his crown, a stranger to good and to all things that were right and honest. He refused to be like her. He’d die before he became so.

So why, as an adult ready to gain his majority, had he threatened Majid with his life? Tiran may have been more like her than he cared. He pushed the doubt away. Tiran was king. People were meant to obey him. Majid must follow any law that he set forth. Even if it meant going against a force more powerful. Even if it meant the seer’s destruction. The Anorim was the conduit, and Majid’s job was to connect the spiritual and obscure with reality and sanction. If he died, it was the risk of being who he was.

Tiran frowned, rubbing his temple and blinking his dry, tired eyes. His own father had once been a conduit, and it was rumored that was what started the former king’s reign of silence. If the stories were true, Oren dared to see the Beyond, his visions going against something far greater than a mortal could ever be. Even being Anorim couldn’t save him. Because of the audacity to see those visions, he was forever punished. Or perhaps the more likely truth was that his father had been an imbecile to begin with. Tiran came to terms with that fact a long time ago. What he couldn’t understand was why his mother stayed with him, why she allowed a ruler by her side that gave no

input and could never be a loyal husband to her.

Tiran doubted, because he'd never seen sign of any magic in himself. If his father had been Anorim, Tiran wouldn't have to beg Majid for answers. He'd have his own. And taking over the kingdom wouldn't seem so impossible, for he'd have skills that his mother never would.

Back in his chambers, Tiran sprawled across his bed, staring up at the tufted fabric ceiling with his hands linked behind his head. He heard the door creak open and the person on the other side tiptoe in, knowing it was Santh before he even spoke. For a spy, he wasn't being discreet. The boy intruding in his sanctuary was normally a damned little sneak, but if he wished to remain quiet right now, he abysmally failed.

"Go away," Tiran said. He didn't budge, eyes penetrative on the drapes surrounding him. "I don't need to hear any useless talk right now." Tiran sighed and lifted his head as Santh stomped determinedly across the floor. "Go. I don't have any patience left."

"Sire." Santh's voice went sharply falsetto before rumbling down. "You ordered a whore for every night this week. One is waiting for you outside."

Tiran sat up, pushing back the dark hair from his eyes, and positioning himself on the edge of the wide mattress. He was already growing hard at the idea of losing himself in a warm cunt. "She knows the rules?"

"Yes, of course, your Majesty. She'll say nothing."

"Good. Let her in."

"Did you order her, my king? She's been here before. Asked for you and gave the amended password, your Highness."

"Wait. Deny her entry for the moment."

Santh turned, his momentum halted. "Sire?"

"She asked for me?"

Santh nodded. Tiran groaned, standing, and shrugging on a linen shirt and hastily tucking it in. Better. Now he looked partially acceptable for company. Such a pity that the woman was going to die. His cock withered as he set himself straight.

"Is something wrong, your Majesty?"

Yes. Something was damnably wrong. No woman, save for one, came to see him twice, for after he bedded them, he banished them from the palace. Having someone talk of him would ruin everything

when he finally toppled the crown.

Tiran hummed thoughtfully, his gaze upon the door. "Bring her in. And stay, Santh. I'll need you as my witness when this no doubt gets reported to my mother."

Santh frowned, but skirted over to the door, opening it and ushering the woman inside before jetting back to his side. She lazily followed, a sultry smile upon her face. Yes, Tiran remembered her. Lush, ebony-colored, silken thighs, and a moan that could be heard throughout the corridors. He'd enjoyed her. Shame. For his mother's spy was taking the last steps of her life.

Understanding crossed over the boy's face as the woman entered. Santh covered his forehead, chin tucked low and lower lip puckering out. His voice hushed, just loud enough that only Tiran heard him.

"I apologize, Sire. I should have—"

"Don't fret." Tiran stood, tall and imperially by the side of his bed. "I know how the queen manages things." Raising his voice, he allowed the woman to overhear him. "You couldn't have known that we'd have a traitor in our midst."

The woman's face turned ashen. She knew, of course, that when Tiran spoke, she'd been found out. But the jaded whore attempted to reconvene, to deceive him further. Poor decision, for now she'd not merely die, she'd be gutted for her crimes.

"Thank you, your Majesty, for letting me into your quarters." She stepped forward—an act, one of the best he'd ever seen. "I had to see you again. You have..." She hesitated at the snarl covering his face, continuing her ploy. "You have such prowess, such skill. I've thought about you all week."

"Really?" Tiran cocked a grin, knowing the truth of her being well-pleasured. Everyone in the nearest rooms likely heard her climactic finish. None of that mattered when she was about to betray him. Liars were tried by a jury of one, and there was no remorse in his heart for them. His grin slipped. "Who gave you leave to assume anything? Why are you really here?"

She trembled, her throat bobbing with distress. Any other woman would be on her knees, begging for his forgiveness: with a wet little tongue, sweet and seductive lips, and the dangerously sharp, scraping edge of teeth. He loved every part of extolling forgiveness. Except this whore thought herself above that, above him. He denied her

forgiveness, for as her king, the magnificent ruler and heir to the Yrurrian throne, he was the only one she must serve. *Not* his mother.

"I-I'm sorry, your Highness. I thought—"

"You thought you'd not get caught." He rounded her, ferocious dignity in his lean frame. "How much did my mother pay you? What hold does she have over you, you stupid wench?"

The woman didn't meet his gaze, but he saw her stiffen with righteous indignation. He knew then just how right he was. Tiran circled her, the bitch with a falsely cowering figure. Her stance gave the illusion of offering benediction. She lied. Nothing about her showed subservience.

"How much did she pay for your information?"

Any hint of fear in the woman's eyes disappeared, replaced by hate. Firmly caught in his trap, her pretty lips puckered, her cheeks sucked in, and then foully she spit her venom by his feet. He barely stepped back in time, his bare toes curling under in disgust.

"I don't answer to you." Her chin jerked upward. "And believe me, *Sire*. I would have done it for free."

He leaned down to look her in the eye. "Oh. But you *do* answer to me," he purred. Slowly, he ran his forefinger along her smooth cheek. She might have stayed his bedmate, perhaps for a time, and he certainly would've enjoyed her. Her pleasure that evening induced his own. But there was nothing Tiran abhorred more than betrayal. Nothing, and certainly not her disrespectful, crude behavior towards him. His sneer met her icy gaze. She met his eyes unrepentantly.

"I obey my Master, my queen, the only one fit to rule our land. I don't owe you anything."

"I think you owe me everything. If you care for your life, you'll answer. Honesty might buy you time to soothe your conscience and to say your goodbyes before you hang. What did you tell the queen? What does she know of me?"

"The truth!"

He didn't understand her madness, but it hardly mattered. Tiran growled, startling her. He strode forward, pushing her backward with each regulated step. Hitting her thighs against his bed, she straightened, aware how he trapped her. Her eyes widened, and she puckered her full lips. Perfect; she understood. Now the real interrogation could begin.

Yanking the hair at her nape in his grip, Tiran roughly yanked her towards him, the fingers of his opposite hand forcing her chin up. He wanted to see her fear, her realization. Her absolute apology.

“Liar.”

Her tremors became violent. She knew her fate. Yet, like the deplorable slut she was, she didn’t back down from it.

“I think you told her who I really am.” His words were soft, and his touch gentle. When she finally understood her disastrous move, then he would act. But before then? He’d enjoy her.

The skin of her throat pulsed with life’s blood. Her heartbeat pulsed erratically, soothingly seductive. Tiran palmed her throat. Squeezing. Stealing the life from her.

“Let go of me.” Her eyes burned, lust and hatred intertwining. She liked it rough. It was a fond memory.

“You think to command your king?” He ran his nose along her dewy skin. She smelled sweet. She smelled like impending death. The whore gasped again, a harsh inhale reminding him how good it could be when his women fought him.

Despite the hunger in her eyes, she didn’t concede. That sobered him and he pulled his body from hers. She gave a soft sigh, making him immediately regret his removal.

“I think I serve whoever is best suited to rule. You are not a king. You’re a fraud, and we will never let you ascend the throne.”

He caught her words, trapping them between his teeth, sucking his lip in while he furiously pondered. She had to be wrong. He made sure he knew his obstacles, and he’d never heard of any significant uprising against him.

“There are others?” His eyes roamed her face, ready for her to tell him another pack of lies.

“Others?” she said, scoffing. “We’re an army. Against us, you are meaningless. We’ll do anything to overthrow royalty and rebellion from the gilded throne and to bring our kingdom back to its former power. That, you stupid man, means that you die as we consume the land.”

“Who are you?” His tone, though quiet, masked his rage. Only a fool with no will to live would dare presume to go against him—a king. Underestimating him would be her ultimate folly.

“We come from many parts. From all over the kingdom, spread far

across the lands. We are a hive. We are locusts, and like the scourge, we'll conquer our enemies or any who oppose our incentive." Tiran stayed silent, letting her hang herself by those jabbing, revelatory words.

"Where did you come from?" Santh said, standing just behind him. She smiled, her eyes like tar. Sticky with fume, verve, and pout. She turned her attention back to Tiran, gaze wandering over him with gloom and broody disgust.

"Some were born into our Society, others made." Her eyes flickered with dark justice, with retributive hate. With an intriguing gleam of passion and debasement and cruel want. She was perfect for him, the exquisitely debauched lover he'd longed for. Even Mato couldn't compare.

"You're not one of the queen's supporters?" Santh questioned, as bluntly curious as usual.

She laughed mockingly. "Oh, little boy. We're so much more. We are those of the common lands, and we will defeat any who stand in our way."

"Enough!"

Tiran brought his hand back to her throat, the demand gutting out from him. She shuttered, her mouth closing tightly, as her body shivered with delight, interest in her onyx gaze. She liked his command. She'd defy it, too, judging by her knowing smirk. Unfortunately for her, she wasn't the only one who knew things.

"You're after Shadow's Blood," Tiran said. "You're after any living conduit who can help your cause. Do you think I don't know your mission? Your secret has been whispered about in the colonies for years." She smiled, beneficent to his knowledge. Tiran's strained whisper filled the quiet room. "You think you'll open the portal and gain the shadows. To awaken and disturb the gods from where they're forever exiled." His voice chastised her, intent on what he knew to be true. "You'll fail. You've always failed. This time is no different."

Another hint of pleasure escaped her lips before she chuckled lightly. "You're wiser than you appear." She bowed her head in acknowledgment, continuing with scorn and fire in her eyes. "We will do whatever it takes to recover the darkness, to bring the light to shame. To bring the two kingdoms together. To burn fire, storm, and flame. To make the shadows rise, and to return them all as one. But

you're also wrong, your Majesty. There's so much you don't understand."

"My mother doesn't have power. How foolish you are to follow her. If you believe her, or think she'll help you, you're deluded."

"Neither do you have any merit or magic." She grinned viciously. There was only one reason she'd talk and be so defiant. She thought she'd won. "As for the portal? We've made it through already. We're halfway there. The mirror-lands are opened up. Nothing will stop us now. Tell me. What have *you* ever done for us?"

Tiran stumbled back. Majid was right. Someone was out there, an enemy, someone guided by the Ancients, ready to take him from throne and kingdom. Over his dead, rotting body would he ever allow that to happen. He'd never let this woman make demands, to take from him what was rightfully his. But if she were correct, that in their triumph, the portal opened...

"My mother did this?" he asked, feeling dizzy. Sweat clustered on his brow as the cloud of sound dimmed. She must be lying. The Regent hadn't the ability to do anything so defiling of law or reason. She was wicked, but his mother kept order, as protocol dictated.

The woman's sneer twisted her perfect, pouty lips. The idea of kissing or touching her now was repulsive.

"She wasn't aware of the ramifications," she said. "But yes. She's found us a way."

Understanding riddled him. *The Assassin*. He was the one who broke the portal's unyielding spell.

"Impossible," Tiran said. Another thought filled him, stabbing at his innards, a partial glee for his astuteness, yet distaste for the woman's abhorrent attitude towards him. "The queen thinks you obey her."

The whore laughed. "We obey no one. She is merely the one who allowed us through."

His fingers twitched against her smoky-dark skin. She was soft, vulnerable to him. Tiran debated killing her now, before anyone caught wind of what she'd informed him. He believed her. That was the terrible part.

"You let the queen defy the ancient judgment?"

"You're a fool," she said, her long lashes lowering as she examined him and found him less than worthy. Her curled, snarling lip told it

all. "We'd let any of you cunts believe and act however you want if it served us. The queen is no different—and neither are you."

Tiran straightened his back, his spine tall and stiff. Santh came up behind him, knowing him, realizing that with that statement, her judgment was nigh.

"Call the guards." Tiran ordered the boy softly, looking at his prisoner in the eye. She stared him right back. "I have an intruder. Tell them how she tried to kill your king."

Santh ran to the door. He swung a panel open, calling to the uniformed men outside.

"Do what you wish to me. I'll be replaced by another, then another, and another still. We are many. And we will survive and overthrow any obstacle in our way, fighting anyone until that day the shadows reign supreme, and the mirror-lands are one."

"You're a fucking lunatic," Tiran said. "And you will die for it."

The guards entered. He turned his head to them.

"Take her. This tainted slut gained entrance to my private chambers, daring to bring an attempt against your king's life."

"Of course, your Majesty," the guards said. They quickly bowed, then reached out and grabbed the squirming, clawing, biting woman.

"We will win," she said, calling out as she dragged from the room. "You'll never gain both kingdoms. Only the lady of the Shadows is fit to be our queen!"

Her words sounded down the corridor, her screaming and obscenities ringing in his ears. She couldn't be correct; the portal hadn't opened. No one had that ability. No one, especially a commoner who rose in rank to become the queen's most trusted killer.

Tiran hadn't been completely convinced an opening existed. Hope was a dangerous thing. His hope to be the one to rule the kingdom, faltered. If the Assassin got through to the reputed other land, what hope did Tiran have for rulership?

None, that's what.

The door closed. Heavily breathing, Tiran glared at it. Santh sidled up beside him, tugging on his elbow.

"Sire?" Fear gaped in his voice. "Do you believe her?"

Tiran said nothing a long minute. Then he looked down at the dark-haired boy and gave one sharp nod. Santh's eyes flickered, unease on his youthful face.

"I believe her. But I sure wish like hell that I didn't. Because that changes everything." Santh looked up at him expectantly. Tiran swallowed, bile drawing back down his throat. He faced the boy, intention and determination driving his vow. "It means I have only one choice, one decision only that I can make."

"What's that, your Majesty?"

"My goal has changed. Now I bring down an Ancient," Tiran said, his jaw tightening until it locked. He chuckled mirthlessly, his voice soft. "And I die in the process for even trying."

10

Mato touched the taut skin over her womb. Pregnancy continued to elude her, and there wasn't much she could do about it. Just plan. Decide. Act upon her sacred whims. When she arrived at her destination, hopefully her plotting would come to pleasing fruition.

Her finger, too, looked overly bare. No ring, save the one that Sebastian gave her, adorned it. His wasn't the ring she yearned for, that she wanted proudly displayed while worn. That was something to work on for another day. She'd be late if she continued thinking of Baz and how their conjoined future already stifled her.

Sighing, Mato trudged further along the wooded path leading to the palace. Staying hidden at this time of night wasn't as easy as it would seem. The villagers of each passing borough sat outside in the balmy night air, as they were poor and had little else to do except exchange conversation and bid each other pleasant dreams when they departed from each other in the early night. They watched in judgment, fingers holding pipes or babe, the children that were still awake shrieking as they ran in circles around their caregivers. Mato hated her neighbors, and she loathed the whispered things she wasn't privy to.

If they knew the truth, if they knew her deepest, hidden secrets, they'd hate her. That was a matter for tomorrow, when she could think clearly and didn't have machinations of bedding the king on her mind. If she thought about them at all.

Getting through the front doors of the palace wasn't difficult, just time-consuming. Mato only needed to flash the top, rounded

plumpness of her breasts and the guards knew to let her through. It was getting past that obnoxious little brat that her king kept as valet that proved nearly impossible. *Santh*. She sneered, then sighed again. If she weren't careful, he'd ruin all her plans.

Her secrets were her own, and those who dared broach them met the fury of targeted silence. If they knew better, they wouldn't cross her. She had a long list of those she'd condemned once her plans followed through.

Mato had just visited the healer living at the edge of the colonies for brew to promote her fertility. She warned her visit would stay hidden, or the old woman would face consequence. The healer shrugged, but stayed quiet while she worked. If she didn't care for or heed, Mato's warning, she soon would. Disobeying meant death, for her and for any other. The moment Mato raised the crown to her head and gave life to her basest desires, those who thwarted her would pay.

Nothing would serve her better right now than to gain the king's babe, to feel it turning and twisting and rolling inside her, a coveted life paid for by the wages of her lies and with spread legs. Her empty womb ached for that moment. Then he couldn't turn her away, and that annoying child that stayed by the king's side couldn't either. But until that day, she knew better than to boast. Giving birth had already been denied her for many months, and the healer warned that Mato's illness kept those aspirations at bay.

What did the woman know anyhow? She would conceive, and anyone who doubted that would see the wrath and her indignation that followed.

Mato knew there were others that frequented Tiran's bed. Simple enough. From the same woman, she also paid good coin to get an expulsive, pennyroyal, the preferred herb for forcing termination and to make a woman's bleeding begin. The healer hesitated only a split moment before handing the pouch with the herb over.

The difficulty for Mato lay in concealing the fatal tonic from both her lover and his current toys before those bed partners drank the tainted brew. Making sure it happened meant the seduction and conniving of a squadron of men: the guards to beg against, courtiers to sway and convince, and the kitchen staff to woo. Fortunately for her, when others looked at her, they saw an ill woman, not a female, on the

rampage of destroying and annihilating all competition. Wine that bitter must be suspect, but his sluts cared more for coin than knowledge. Anyone intelligent would know their lives were at risk for becoming the king's current bed-slave.

Mato was the anomaly, for no one knew she attended the king. Worshipping at his altar upon reddened knees, she did so with the same circumspect discretion that quietly led her away from the palace after each rendezvous. If targeted, all would know she was a fraud. Mato knew the truth, how she appeared in other's eyes. She stayed invisible to the lust-hungry crowd, a dying woman amongst the crown of beautiful people that surrounded his Majesty. Having the Assassin as her future husband warding away those who wouldn't normally let her pass.

If the rebellious guards that let her through the outer walls suspected Mato's untruths, they said nothing. Imbecile men. To gaze upon her exposed flesh as though leering at her made her honest, also made their stupidity apparent. Her concern? The healer, bound by a promise sealed by death, by the newfound bevy of fortune, and by cautiousness, had Mato scurrying as quickly as she could from one location to the other. The woman could ruin her. Thankfully, she was too old and too blind to attend the palace demonstrations, its fetes, or its stately executions. And if that woman knew her wages were paid in the nearly worthless rock of the Vesturin instead of meager coin or the impossibility of gem, she kept judiciously silent.

Lies. Once ragged and sharp, they spat from Mato's lips in a purge, festering in the palace air that sparkled with jubilation and the fragrant dew of success. The courtiers were clueless, even while they planned costumes for the next ball and recklessly ignored what stood in front of their face. They were fools, but they were *her* fools, the people that when made a lady, she would convene over. Even the king did not know how wicked she was. Lies. They kept her from despairing. They made Mato bold.

She must bear his Majesty's child, or regret would settle down into her like a baseless hell. Her goals were as crass and unworthy as the ruby-throated air that nestled in the valley-sunken boroughs along Velle's borders and into the wasted, putrid lands that belonged to the mining colonies. How, without lies, would she leave the Vesturin—her home—with its dust and stagnation and death, there to stand in her

proper place by the king's side, as his preferred and only woman? As his enemy, but also his greatest conscience? Biting back scorn and wrath, those things were becoming impossible. She wouldn't attain anything, not unless she worked to do something about it.

She knew the king. He made promises he'd never keep, not for a commoner, not even for her. She wasn't fool enough to believe any man who spoke of the grander things of life and of liberty as though they could come true. None of that would ever happen—not while the Queen Regent sat upon the throne.

Mato was smart, and nothing would change her goals or her mind: to become more than she was born to be and to go where others of her tribe could not. To be Queen. To be feared, revered, and adored. To rule the land. The inner chambers, the royal corridors, the throne made of woeful obligation—that would be her prize. Her family depended on her cunning, her shamelessness, and the softness between her thighs that others believed untouched. All the sacrifices she made in order to feed and to shelter them resolved, as clear to her as the eternal light. She was saved from the cold, from poverty, from hardship.

Baz gave them money. It wasn't enough; it was never enough. Leaving the hellhole of the Colonies would take more than a kiss upon the cheek and a bag full of coin. Sebastian thought he provided, but that too was a lie. *She* did, with greedy wiles and the lush sweetness of the cunt she made sure that the king continually craved. Everything she did in order to save her sister, Grace, giving her youngest brother the courage to go beyond his poverty-stricken boundaries and to find his own way in their forsaken world.

She didn't intend for any of them to stay at the mines. It was her duty and her desire to make things better for all of them.

Lies were necessary, and because of them, Mato would solve all their problems. She released their bond with the curvaceousness of her dying body and her meticulously sharp and devious mind. This would and must happen, just as soon as she gained entry to the palace and gained permission to go back into Tiran's bed.

Mato's lungs protested the distance, the silvery light of the late hours focusing down on her as she walked. She hated the constant array of the light. The sun never fully submerged into the crown of darkness, not in Yrurra, nor in any land among the kingdoms. That was the price they paid for securing the portal all those years ago. The

wicked price they all paid, a deprived consolation for keeping the shadows and the last remaining queen at bay. They shut the door upon the queen that capriciously might have saved or destroyed them, and it disallowed the late hours to eclipse into night ever again. A shameful, wasteful sacrifice they all made the day the Sundering tore a rift between the two worlds.

Maybe her kinsmen were fools to believe that they hadn't needed her, that sacred and elusive Shadow Queen. Or maybe in their folly they secured their lives. It was reputed that she was a bloodthirsty female, not prone to forgiveness, a woman who never allowed second chances for anyone.

Mato smiled. A woman rather like her. Just in case she sinned by the thinking the injurious idea of being anything like a god, she hurriedly recited a prayer of fearful allegiance. The words made her cough and wheeze. Phlegmy, bloody tinge spat out to the ground and was hidden by the thorny underbrush. Mato shakily coughed again. Weak. So damnably weak. Her body betrayed her. Thank the gods that her mind stayed sharp.

It was because of her father that the legends spun through the villages, bedtime stories that flourished despite the years. The portal stayed sealed, but superstition was bred into her. Jin made sure of that. They were only stories, but Mato circled her heart, then slashed across it, a ward against being taken by those devastating beings. She wiped her mouth, saliva slicking her lips.

Better safe than sorry, or sorry and dead.

She paused a moment, gazing up at the eternally lit sky, the silvery pastel signaling that the morning was merely hours from being upon her. She must hurry if she wanted to get to the palace and demand entry before the day's merchants and beggars slew the cobbled streets. Becoming one of the many seeking the king's favor wasn't in her best interest. After all, she was above being a simple commoner. She bedded the king. She knew his private and guarded name, and she knew that one day — with his gilded oversight — she'd sit at his side as queen.

None of that would happen if she slacked. Mato walked faster, her legs burning with fatigue and her mind cloudy with anticipation. Hours now she trampled through the under path of the trees. Hours to think and to plan. Hours to doubt and to worry. Complaining or

giving up, turning back to her home with no result, wouldn't fix her situation. It certainly wouldn't get the herbs she hid in its pouch, tied snugly against her inner thighs, into the wine of the king's current bed partner before she fermented with child.

Siding with her enemy, the queen? Perhaps. Nyssa could prove useful to her. Mato's steps quickened, excitement lingering with each dizzying pace.

Siding with the queen? It was not only possible, but a rule of survival. As day began, Mato neared the gates to the palace, unfamiliar guards standing before her. They kept their faces forward and bodies rigid, while she circumspectly loosened the ties on her blouse until the edges draped discreetly open. It was a precarious balance. Too much skin and she'd be confused for a whore. Not enough and she'd be denied entry.

"Hello, soldiers," she said, stepping forward, the limned light catching the slope of her cherubic face. That, and of her lush bosom.

"You can't go any further." The gray-haired man grunted, watching her and the rounds of her breasts with avid attention. "Step back. Better to go back where you came from."

Mato frowned. "I mean no harm. I'm a simple woman—"

He cut her off, voice frigid but eyes hot as they roamed over her. "I care nothing of who you are or what you've come for. No entry. I care nothing for your alliance with the Assassin. Cover yourself. This is a royal court."

He knew who she was. The bastard, for daring to turn her away. Mato kept her voice gentle, her face serene. "But I've come so far."

"I gave you an order, wench. Leave here."

Mato flushed with anger, doing her best to hide it. How dare they? If they only knew who she was to their king, they wouldn't attempt turning her away.

"No entry." The younger one mimicked the elderly man at his side. "Your kind aren't welcome here. Like he said, go home."

Mato paused. She'd never been denied. Usually, showing the taunt of dusky nipples convinced any man on duty. She sucked in a breath, her teeth sipping the air.

"You don't understand, gentlemen. I've come on business."

The older man snorted, adjusting his weapon to the side so she could see how she affected him. His erection strained at his uniform's

gaudy-gold trousers, though his words dashed and pummeled hope back down to the ground.

"You and every other madam begging this past evening have said the same." Disgust slid over his sappy-green gaze. Desire mingled in but didn't win over his bullheaded determination. "No entry."

"I'm not like the others," Mato snapped before she pasted the innocence back onto her face. There had been others who'd arrived before her seeking admittance, a damning significance. She hoped it wasn't too late to join her king in his bedchamber alone. Now it was imperative to get inside, for Mato wouldn't go home without success. She gently shrugged her shoulders, the edges of her blouse slipping further apart. Her voice softened and appealed. Her voice *lied*.

"I've gotten royal permission," she said. "Please. Let me pass."

Tiran promised that she'd get through the doors, but she should know better than to trust a king who knew nothing of a commoner's rigid politics. To them, a woman forsaking her fiancé and willing to risk indignity to see a lascivious king showed her to be low, dirty, shameful. Unworthy of their time, and especially the glint of time permissive by royalty. The guards didn't budge, crossing their long-swords in front of her, barring her from the door.

The younger one sneered, joining his elder in denigrating her. "As those women said as well, slut. Move. Your kind isn't welcome here."

Mato tipped her chin up, fighting elementary, unbidden tears. Tiran would handle this wretched situation for her.

Maybe.

She swallowed a spurned cough, imagining the alternative. If Baz were here, he'd use his men's weapons and ruinous words against them. It would be worth any indignity and reprisal from him later to see these men's humbled downfall. Her fiancé was on a quest for the queen, though, and as usual, Mato had to fend for herself. Baz couldn't fix anything for her now or ever again. He proved that when he left her behind.

"The king would disagree," she said, more confident than she felt. The men shared a look. Pressing, she continued, "Do you want to see your sovereign displeased?"

The younger guard spoke. "All you, parading here hoping you'll gain entrance. You're wasting your time. How stupid do you think we are, to believe he sent for you?"

Mato shook her head in disagreement, clenching her jaw tight. Men such as them didn't deserve an ounce of honesty.

"That's not the sort of business I have in mind, soldiers. I'm here on a different mission altogether. I've come from the healer. But what I carry, the king doesn't want announced."

"Yeah? What's that?" The older man narrowed his eyes.

"Do you really want to find out?" she said. "Your lives and your security are at risk if I tell you."

There was silence, quiet that extended and unnerved. "You may pass," the older said, after contemplation. "But you take it upon yourself if my compatriots inside aren't as lenient."

Mato bowed her head. "Thank you, sirs. I'm sure there won't be any trouble at all."

No trouble for her, at least. Once she spoke with Tiran, the soldiers from the outer guard would be replaced and ostracized. No one dare contradict her if they wanted to keep those coveted positions.

She hid a smirk, entering through the palace's lower gate and into the open-air corridor. Pasting on a face of serenity that alluded to physical frailty, Mato circumspectly adjusted her blouse before she met anyone else who might recognize her. It would never do for her to reveal skin now. Inside those doors, she would soon be queen. And as queen, the people walking about were under her jurisdiction. Naked breasts and exposed nipples weren't dignified—at least, not out of the king's bedchambers. If things went according to plan, Mato would command each one of the crowd, but until that happened, it meant becoming the woman others expected to see. Passive. Beautiful. A useless, feminine decoration under protection from a mighty man.

While the servants milled the area and merchants set up their booths for the courtier's amusement, Mato made sure she appeared like the others, another commoner ready to beseech the rich for immunity or prize. Better to reduce any familiarity with the crowd than to be revealed for what she was: the king's favorite toy. His precious, pretty little slut. The one he snuck through his hallways and into his bed, a pet he meant never to be seen. Mato, the one person besides that sanctimonious child, Santh, who knew the genuine man behind the king.

The soldiers at the front gates hadn't been far off in their estimation of her. But no matter. Once she gained the babe she longed for,

everything would change. It had to. She gambled everything to risk the reward. Having the royal signet placed on her finger, its symbol letting all know that she was the king's companion. Or would it be the cruel alternative? The alternative that she'd done it all for nothing, dying in the Vesturin, poor, a nobody, her family torn apart by disease and disorder? Not while she had a single breath left in her wasted, rotting body.

Pressing on, she kept her head low, face serene. It was only a matter of time before somebody caught her. Only time before her quiet invisibility shattered. By then, she hoped Tiran already made his request to wed. Otherwise, she risked it all for absolutely nothing.

As she filtered through the people, her attention drifted, too late to see the set of guards before her. Once more, swords blocked her path. Damn. She'd made it through to the private corridors, only to be caught.

Her teeth gritting, Mato pasted a fearful, teary-eyed gaze upon them. Let them think her weak, cowered by them. Stupid men. She had more power than any of them.

"What's wrong, good sirs?"

They ignored her question. "State your business," the taller man said.

"I'm here to petition the king," she said.

They grunted. "He's indisposed. And you're not supposed to be in here."

"I lost my way." Her voice was as false as the eyes she lowered in modesty. "Can you point me the direction of the throne room?"

They looked her over, brief nods and quickly exchanged glances confirming what she suspected. They saw her as defenseless, just as she intended. The tall one smiled, his voice lowering as though secrets were about to be interchanged.

"Tell you what," he said. "We'll lead you out to the main corridors ourselves." Magnanimously his chest puffed, misreading her tight lips. Arrogant ass. If he thought she was impressed by him or his words, he was dead wrong. And she'd just come from those corridors. There wasn't anything she needed out there. He continued; his gaze overly interested in what he couldn't have. "Let me escort you. Here, take my arm."

She delicately shifted away. "I-I'm fine. I think I can find my way."

“No bother, ma’am,” the short one said, watching her carefully with dubious eyes. He was the one she should be cautious over, not his fellow soldier, whose fingers brushed against the swell of her breast. His leer suggested it wasn’t accidental. “We’re going that way ourselves. Let us lead you.”

The younger man turned to his colleague, discussing Mato as though she weren’t there. “It’s better if I take her, Edgar. After all, you have seniority, and you know the rules.”

Edgar grunted. “Yes... yes. You’re correct. This female isn’t worth leaving post over. After all, the queen.”

His sigh gave every impression that he wanted the opposite of what he proclaimed, while his low grumble let Mato know just how much the guards disliked their Regent. They feared the queen, though, and fear was more powerful a motivator than willing obedience.

His grip slacked on her arm. Mato gladly stepped away—only to have her arm taken by another. By one whose grip nearly ripped her arm from her socket. Only one man handled her so roughly, and only one man had the audacity to threaten the guards as if it were his right.

“What is she doing here?”

Tiran. The soldiers hurriedly bowed. Heart swelling, Mato curtsied, discreetly looking from under her lashes. He came, her love. It was as if he knew she’d be ready for him.

He wasn’t looking at her. Not at all. His fingers would bruise, and the king’s sharp voice showed anger, not the normal silky caress he enjoyed whispering in her ear. Mato frowned, trying to wiggle free.

Mistake. Now both guards and Tiran noticed her. And it wasn’t for good.

“This slut shouldn’t have made it through to my private hallway. I repeat, what is she doing here?”

“Your Majesty,” the older soldier said. “Our mistake. Let us—”

“No,” Tiran said, immediately dismissive. “You had one job, and you failed. Report to your superior. I’ll be sending word about your sentence.”

His fingers squeezed, and Mato bit back a squeal. This was their game, the king’s, and hers, and she enjoyed every bit.

The guards blanched, unaware of the shadowed interaction going on in front of them. Tiran continued. “I’ll make sure she knows her place. Leave. I gave you an order. Don’t defy me again.”

The men bowed, then hurried away. Only then did her king pay attention. Just as she adored, his voice softened with sweet suspicion.

“What are you doing here, little bird?”

“I-I... missed you.”

She wasn't close enough to his heat and leanly muscular side, so she kept writhing, his harsh touch allowing only a fraction of what she wanted, forever needing more.

His grip didn't loosen. He dragged her closer, her body crushed to his. Only for a moment, though. Only one glorious moment to feel the blossom of his passions before he shoved her away.

“I told you never to visit me unless I send for you.” She'd been slapped, his words harshly putting her in place. “You deserve punishment. Are you prepared?”

“Yes. Yes, your Majesty.”

His smile was craven. This was the secret man, the king no one acknowledged, the monster shadowed in the dark.

Her monster. Her man. The beast that only she could adore.

He pulled her behind him, harsh and penalizing. The tiny pouch of herbs between her thighs was incriminating. He must never find them.

“Wait,” she said, a sob catching in her throat. “Please, your Majesty. Wait.”

“You command me?”

“No, sir. But I'm tired after my journey, and you're going so fast.”

“You shouldn't be here. And you'll follow me, or you'll leave. Which will it be?”

He knew the answer. Mato would never leave, not when her king wanted her. She wiggled until the pouch slid discreetly to the floor, someone else's problem now. If caught with it, they'd die. If she was caught with it, well... she knew the answer, and it wasn't pretty.

“I'll go where you demand, Sire.”

His smile went lupine sharp. “Good. My pretty pet knows her place.”

Her lover yanked her behind him, Mato's anticipation building. She loved his punishments. They were cruel, sensual. Hers to bear.

Kicking open the doorway to his bedchamber, Tiran pushed Mato to the bed, shoving her face-down on his mattress. He stepped back, icy silence filling the room. Mato dared to look under her elbow at

him. He scowled.

"Sire? What--"

"Shut up. You never should have come. What the fuck were you thinking?"

"I thought you'd want me here. I haven't seen you in weeks." Tears hovered on the precipice, then fell in copious silence.

"I've been busy."

Like that, he hurt her. Like that, the sting of dismissal slapped her tender skin.

"There have been other women," she said, scooting until upright. "I hate that."

"You don't have any choice."

"But... but Tiran—"

Mato quieted with a gasp. He'd never given her permission to use his name. She whispered it alone in the darkness, but now, her sin brought quickly to light. The king paced, silent. He kept quiet for too long, her refraction held high in the air between them, his stiffened stance like that of a parent ready to scold. Like a lover never willing to concede. As he spoke, it consoled and denied. More lies.

"Little bird..."

His words were sinister, menacing, and ready to implode her shattering heart. Not a lover's soothing hush. Not said like a man ready to forgive or forget.

"Little bird. Do you presume to address me?"

"I'm sorry," Mato said as she skittered from the mattress and then fell to her knees. A gleam came to the king's eyes. "Please, your Majesty. Forgive me!"

"You like our games, hmm?"

Her head bowed. "Yes. Yes, Sire. I do."

"You want them to continue?"

She sniffled. "Yes."

Without announcement, he strode forward, his arm reaching out as his fingers angrily threaded her hair. He yanked her head back, so that she faced him.

"I send for you," he said. "You never come to me. Is that clear?" Leaning down, his breath kissed the shell of her ear. "Remember that," he said, cold and removed. "Remember, while you suffer in abandoned silence."

"Master," she whined in frustration and denial as he stepped back. "Don't leave me."

"I have other company this night, little bird."

She hated him. Cruel words impacted her, the distaste of his rejection sitting low in her belly, like a coiled viper ready to strike. Only the fear of his retribution kept her stunned into silent inaction.

"You are dismissed. Return to your sickbed and to your future groom. And next time?" She whimpered, knowing there wouldn't be a next time. She'd already been replaced. "You'll know to keep to your fucking place."

11

Better to argue than to lust. Lusting after the woman was exactly what he was doing, driving him insane for his weakness over her.

Sebastian growled lightly, the aggravation and distaste over his inner, deviant inclination doing nothing to placate him. He knew Mato was the only woman he should have eyes for, the woman that he gave his word and his allegiance to. One day she would be the one he'd give the seed of his loins and all hard-earned fortune to. She was the reason for his whole being. Looking at the stranger with desire would ruin him and ruin any future happiness for a family and normal life of his own.

That cruel sensation pitting at the base of his spine and spreading outward didn't stop him from contemplating how he might go after his latest prey. How he might beat her down to nothing, taking her with the darkness he kept hidden, to convince with the cruelest verve, to consume all of her with a harsh and wicked whim. Hopefully, the win over her would annihilate the frantic madness creeping up inside of him. He grew dangerously close to eradicating his morals and a conscience that scarcely worked anymore. All of it, because of her. Damn her for doing this to him, whoever she might be. A demon. A huntress. His enemy. His latest conquest and ploy. Whatever she was, she already owned him by that faint subjection, and for Sebastian, that meant he had to try harder to break free.

Baz gripped the battalion of weapons strapped across his hips and chest in readiness. That pitiless sensation also didn't stop him from circumspectly following her through the hallowed darkness. He could

see the brightness of her hair from ahead, a beacon.

He pushed away the inclination to turn back towards the stone, the monstrous thing guarding and shielding over him with dark and crude pity. Baz huffed. Attributing sentience to a damned rock? Maybe he'd lost the canny intellect he was known for during transit to this forsaken, unknown territory, as well as most recollection of how he got there. None of that boded well for him. He told himself that the rabid feeling sticking in his craw and creating havoc in his gut was for the greater good, that he'd find out answers, and he'd find out the reason most memories from past years were now purged from his brain.

Worse, an unfamiliar longing filled him. He gazed at the red-haired woman. Who was she?

He *wanted* to despise the female striding in front of him. He knew better, damn him, for giving a strange woman, any woman but Mato, control. Control spelled disaster, and weakness of such a caliber wasn't for soldiers, but for those commoners who hadn't the need for war. It definitely wasn't for a man like him, trained and conditioned and expecting the kill. Weakness damaged. It lied and stole. They spelled ruin for him, *the Assassin*, the greatest soldier Yurra ever knew.

"Who are you?"

She paused, turning. "Who do you think I am?"

He leveled his gaze. "You're my enemy."

She laughed, softly mocking. "You should know better than to assume anything. Most of the time, they're lies." Her voice slid over him like thick syrup. "You already have your answers, soldier, don't you? But I warn you. Things aren't what they seem. And you should avoid putting blame on things you don't understand."

"My memories." Desperation made his throat catch. His hand eased along the familiar hilt of his blade while he contemplated her, hating the weakness coming from doubt. "They're gone."

She chuckled again, false compassion in the sound. "I know. And like a lamb to the slaughter, you've come to me."

"We're enemies, then." Hating her was the last thing he wanted, but duty ingrained in his soul. He was a soldier, a cold-blooded warrior, a *man*, through and through. Bringing down his target came to him as easily as breathing. His fingers tightened on the hilt.

He couldn't make himself pull out the blade, to make it hurl through the air, gaping skin apart with its serrated wound. He just couldn't—but he should.

"Do it."

He let his hand drop. His jaw tightened.

"You know I won't."

Laughter spurred in the air, a knowing violence in the seductively sweet trill. "You think we're enemies? Wait, because we soon will be." She paused, examining him as closely. "As soon as you recall who you are." She whispered. "That time is soon."

Baz heard the cryptical response, yet he didn't say anything, his breathing sharp and stagnant. She continued, her voice scarcely audible. "Would you follow me, soldier, if I asked? Wherever I go?"

"Yes."

There was no error in the reply. He couldn't know whether he served her or not, but as she looked at him with predatory eyes, he knew how much he wished he were hers. Now, in this moment of insecurity, he was the prey, the victim. It was a position Baz had rarely been in before. It didn't suit him, and his eyes narrowed and focused on her. Sebastian's voice ground out. He'd been possessed. Never in his life had he conceded to anyone. Then he saw him, the man behind her. A man already on her side. A man in a coveted position of trust. Sebastian growled, the utterances low, dark, and angry.

"Who the hell is he?"

The fiery-haired woman didn't respond immediately. Her arm lifted, palm outstretched, a beckoning for the beast of a man to come join her. The man did.

"This is Taig. My companion." She paused, still looking at Baz expectantly. "Will you continue to attack? Or will you follow, like the good and obedient soldier you've trained to be?"

The man, her guard, hovered too near her side. Too familiarly. Smothering the woman with a terrible adoration. Yes, Sebastian wanted to attack. He wanted to be the man at her side. His head shook slowly from side to side, his thoughts incredulous and defying. What sorcery compelled him?

He mocked her, his mouth dry. "If I follow, what happens to him?"

"He is mine, as he was always meant to be."

Baz frowned. The woman shook her head slightly.

"You would be afraid, brave warrior, if you knew who I really am."

"He stays by your side. Your guard doesn't fear you."

"He's always been by my side." Her face turned towards Sebastian once more, watching him quietly even while she dismissed his words. "I see potential in you. After all, you are still alive. The others? They were useless. Those men died upon entry."

Sebastian glowered. "My appearance next to that stone has an explanation, one I plan to discover, but I don't see what it is to you."

"Don't you wonder why you are so compelled by me, drawn to me despite your objections?" Her sigh frustrated him. It egged him on.

"What are you? Some damn witch?"

"I have been called that," she said.

"Your kind should rot in the Shadowlands," he said, his hand going to his blade. Faster than he could pull it, Baz felt an arm go around his neck, Taig easily removing the knife and holding it to his fiery pulse.

"I've been there, soldier," she said, her voice catching. "And I'll never return to that hellish place."

Baz stared her down. Silence stagnated.

"I've invited you once." The guard grunted at her beckoning. She searched him, just as he searched her. "Will you be obedient to me, warrior? Will you stay by my side as you've promised?"

She was taunting him, testing him for the ability to govern himself. Damn if he'd let her get away with it. Sebastian gathered his strength and might about him like a protective shield. A growl built deep within his throat, lupine and sharp. The woman's gentle seduction immediately halted, and she blinked, uneasiness crossing over her expressive face. As she faltered, Baz took back control.

Memories flooded in. Baz knew exactly who he was. He was a man that others feared, exulted, a man given distinction, power, and callous mightiness. The Queen gifted him that. No one—*no one*—gained his obedience except one, and the Regent had stolen that from him before his manhood. He was bidden, and it wasn't to the woman standing in front of him, silently expectant. Mato would be his bride. The Queen ruled over him. Nothing, not *anyone*, would eradicate those vows.

"I see," she murmured. "She's gotten hold of you, too."

"If you mean my Queen, then you're goddamn correct," Baz said, reaching up and knocking her fingers away from him. "I don't serve

the Shadows.”

“You will,” the woman said. While Sebastian fought her appeal, her guard caught him by surprise and overpowered him, tying his wrists with a cuff of metal, then he blindfolded him so that the world went softly black. She spoke to Taig. “Bind him tightly, but be easy. He might prove valuable to us, yet.”

The hand on his elbow was Taig's, marching him forward. They walked an indeterminate amount of time. Baz remained silent, fuming. Finally, the dam of his indignation broke, and ire spilled out.

“If you think—”

“I know you're warring with yourself, soldier,” she said. “But don't worry. I don't have to wonder if I will win. Because I assure you, if anyone wins... it will be me.”

Despite his wrestling and the frantic tugs on the cuffs, her guard's trussing held solid. Baz felt the sweat of exertion, and while foul curses spilled from his lips, he refused to cease fighting. His inhaled brought the bloom of her fragrance in like poison, seeping into his skin.

“Do you give up, soldier?” she asked. “Are you ready to admit defeat?”

“It's your tragedy,” he said. “Because I never lose, and I don't plan on it today, either.”

The metal around his wrists clanked as he tested them, making more noise than he prepared for. Damn. Now they'd know he hadn't stopped his attempts to break free.

With a jerk, they halted. The blindfold ripped from his eyes. It wasn't the woman's beauty he saw first. Her guard tossed the fabric to the ground while a dark smile broke over his face, a smile both wicked and cruel.

“They won't break,” Taig said in a gravelly drawl, the smile growing when Baz puffed out a breath of hate. Then his massively sized hand whipped out, and he yanked on the attached chain in the center of them. Sebastian stumbled, and he might have fallen if he weren't strong. He'd been ready for the bastard to pull a stunt like that, his stance braced and prepared for a fight. Damn if they'd catch him not prepared for war.

“Just a little warning,” Baz said, prodding his captors, a sneer on his lips. “If you plan on my company...” The woman said nothing, though

a satisfactory hint of confusion passed over the guard's face. "...make sure my hands are still tied."

He moved quickly, reaching to his boot and pulling out his hidden knife, lunging towards Taig. He struck, hitting flesh and drawing blood, moments before the blade knocked from his hand.

"You found the key."

Taig's blunt growl sent chills down Sebastian's spine. The man scared him, more than he'd like to admit.

"I found the key," he acknowledged, the scuffle drawing out the air in his lungs. He shouldn't be winded. Yet he was, and he blamed the damnable place for his physical shortfall.

The woman stayed silently watchful until then, witnessing his triumph—and his shame. Her droll remark gnashed his teeth and sliced him to the bone, her eyes deep and ageless, her voice curtailed and dim. She terrified Sebastian more than her guard did.

"See, Taig," she said, releasing him from bondage. "I told you we should keep him, to see how worthy he might be."

Sebastian refused to bow. "Damn. You."

Her head tossed back in the exercise of mirth, the soft curve of her throat taunting him. Maybe Baz should have drawn a ribbon across it. She'd wear blood, death, and destruction exceedingly well. Especially her blood. And particularly destruction caused by Baz's own hand.

Bringing about Taig's death would suit his morale, as well. He grinned, and for a moment, there was an interchange of good-intent. It ended instantaneously the moment the murky light deepened, extending into darkness so deep that it was difficult to see through.

"What—" Baz looked from left to right, and up to the obsidian sky, his voice the faintest whisper. "What is this place? Am I in the Shadowlands? Am I dead?"

"You've never seen the night?" Taig asked, his head tipped to the side with cold curiosity.

Sebastian felt the man's powerful hands bracing him. He would have fallen, shocked and horrified, upon the loamy ground. It was a dream. A nightmare. Maybe he was dead, and he'd traveled the long road to the home of the gods. Maybe he'd failed his queen and Mato both, and he'd never return to the mines or the poverty deep in the Vesturin lands. Maybe he'd never have the family he longed for. His

eyes hurt. Tears flooded his gaze, and he cast his vision away from the terrible gloom.

“This is like nothing as I imagined...”

His words broke and his throat bobbed tightly as his eyes drew again to the shadows along the horizon. He couldn't speak. How could he? In Yrurra, there was morning, a glazing of light in the skies from dawn into the tangent of night. Even the midnight shined and glistened with the crispness of day. But this? He'd seen nothing like it. His suspicion grew. The witch must have done it, drawing shadows from their medley of color, vanishing within moments of time.

“Where is the lining over the sky?”

“There is no lining.” The woman offered her hand. He hissed at her, wanting answers. Wanting home.

“Is he stupid? Doesn't he get it yet?”

“Hush, Taig,” she said, still holding out her palm. “He's got every right not to understand.”

Baz shook his head and stood on his own, his eyes going back to the shifting shades of darkening night. “What have you done to me?” Your spell, woman, turn it back!”

“There is no spell, soldier.”

Taig huffed, folding his arms over his muscular chest. His gaze mocked Sebastian's terror. The guard accepted the witch's lies. Baz stood at full height, back straight, hand ready near his weapon belt.

“I don't believe you.” That was a lie, too. He believed them too much.

“The problem is,” Taig said. “You do believe her. And now you're wondering, as is your duty, with which queen you should align.”

12

He was asleep, and likely would be for some time. He wasn't weak, not like the others. The soldier wouldn't have made it this far, or like the others, the exertion of passing through reality and time would have finished in death.

Alore tipped her head in the direction of the man laying on the ground near them, his fingers curled near the weapons along his belt. Even in a nearly comatose state, he knew how much danger he was in. She smiled, nudging Taig.

"He's ready for war." Her guard grunted, his steady observation, unlike hers, dispassionate and uninterested.

"He'll fail."

Her smile broadened. "I don't think so. I'm certain about this one."

He went back to cleaning his nails with the blade of his knife. "You're always certain. They always fail."

Her grin faltered. "Taig... I don't have the time left for him to do that."

The cleaning ceased. "I know."

The seconds passed like water through a sieve, rapidly gone, just as her life blurred together as though she'd not lived it. Feeling her morbidity came naturally and too often anymore. Time never stopped ticking, and the consequence of her actions would soon barter against death. Shortly, they would both be dampened out, gone to the Shadowlands, forgotten by anyone that mattered. She was only given so much time to fail.

"Giving the benefit of attention to a soldier, a commoner," he said,

glaring at the stranger, then scowling at her. "That only makes things worse for you when they eventually die." He grunted with the disillusionment she refused to feel, his blade going back to work. "They don't finish what needs to be accomplished, Alore. Men like him never make it back, and he won't make it back through, either. I warn you. Don't get attached to this one just because he's still alive."

Her voice trembled and softened. "I need him, Taig. I can't keep doing this. My sister..." She stopped, swallowed, as her eyes drifted to the sleeping man. "I can't have her win."

He stood abruptly, shifting her to the side where she caught her balance upon the stone with the palm of her hand. Alore hissed as the warmth of the rock stung and throbbed, a lifeline that didn't want her any more than she wanted it.

"She's already won, don't you think?" he said. "We're here. We're staying here in this goddamn forsaken place. Nothing, Alore, is going to change. Not with this man. Not ever."

"I won't believe that."

He shot her a fathomless gaze, but instead of letting her bask in the expression, Taig huffed. She couldn't see what wasn't there to read. Her hand reached out to him, alarm in her voice when he turned and stalked away.

"Don't leave. Please, Taig. I can't do this alone. Please... Don't leave me."

Her words made him stop. He turned, a snarl on his face. "You're a bitch, you know that, Alore?" She said nothing. He continued, his voice grim. "Always manipulating. Always ready to make another disastrous play for power."

Shrugging, she answered softly. "Not disastrous if it works."

"I know you too well."

His giant body came towards her, blocking any residual haze of light from touching down upon her. That was the issue: they both were immune to each other's foibles and brand of hurt by now. Time had a way of doing that. Taig looked at the stranger. He might want to hurt him, but the man was hers. Alore refused to let him go.

"Let me kill him," Taig said, his eyes narrowing and his gaze hyper-focused. "It'll be a mercy."

"Since when have you given anyone mercy?"

He didn't answer immediately, instead dipping to join her on the

ground once again. He reached into his satchel, the one that carried all their provisions. Handing her a chunk of jerky, he took a drink from their shared canteen. His throat bobbed, and she knew it didn't have all to do with the large amount of water he drank. Taig was afraid, a fact that both delighted and terrorized her. It meant he didn't believe all he told her.

"He won't survive another trip through the portal," he said, the silence stretching for many minutes before he continued. "We're here. That's the end of that."

She shook her head, a low whisper leaving her mouth. "I can't believe that, and I won't accept it, either."

Growling, he knocked the dried meat from her fingers, making her gasp at his audacity. "Listen. How long do you have to pretend things are going to change? We're banished. The portal won't open for either of us. And those lame-brained men your sister sends through don't have a damned clue what you expect or need from them. So," he finished bluntly. "Drop it."

Alore smiled despite the insubordination. "I'm your queen, Taig. If I say we do it, we do."

He nodded, staying quiet. The scowl remained on his face. "Yeah," he said, not looking at her. "You're my queen. It's a fact that makes my life more difficult every day."

Her gaze drifted to the man from the other kingdom. Reaching out, she smoothed his dark hair away from his forehead. Such a beautiful man, a soldier she'd like to keep. He flinched and moaned, deep in his sleep. Shame he belonged to her sister. If he had a wife, children, it didn't matter; she wanted him. He was in her territory now. Alore stood also, nudging the sleeping man in his side with the toe of her boot, waking him.

He jerked and rolled to his knees, a glower on his face, his hand already gripping a weapon. Seeing it was her, he lowered his fingers, but the scowl remained.

"What the hell do you want?" he said, rising to his feet, his voice gravelly and unevenly toned. Despite his unflagging bravery, he was just a man. He towered over her, strong and powerful. Her diminutive size was deceptive, just like the rest of her was meant to fool and implore. With her abilities, she'd easily overshadow anything the warrior might attempt. Taig was right. This soldier? He didn't have a

single chance to succeed, not if the winds of the past dictated her future.

Alore hid a satisfied smile. The winds were changing, and it was time she changed along with it.

"What makes you think I want anything?" she asked.

"I'm still here," he said, his dark eyes flashing brilliantly, madly, with a vicious coldness that made her shiver with anticipation and delight. "I wouldn't be here if you didn't have a hand in it."

His hand shot out, biting into her arm, not liking her silence. Taig stepped forward, ready to finish the man off, but imperceptibly, Alore shook her head, letting the stranger speak. His growl was needy perfection. She wanted more, and she'd do what she could to fuel that anger. She never claimed, unlike her guard, of extending mercy to anyone. Not anyone at all.

"I'll ask again," the soldier said. "Who are you, and what do you want?"

His grip pinched the skin above her elbow, but she didn't care about the pain or the bruising that would follow. Pain made her remember her current predicament, and why she'd not allow anyone, or anything, to stand in her path towards redemption.

"I am your queen," she said, yanking free.

He hissed. "I have no queen."

"Ah," she said, drawing back just far enough to examine him. "Good answer."

Taig hovered. "Let me kill him," he said, his hand already on his weapon. "Let me give you the honor you deserve."

Again, she halted her guard. His huff filled the midnight air, but as always, he obeyed. It was more than she could say about the soldier glaring at her with death in his eyes. His compliance would mean something, because he clearly didn't want to give it.

"Why do you think you're here?" she said. "You have no memory. Don't you think it strange to end up in a land foreign to your own? No reason? Not a single entity or landmark familiar to you?"

"When I discover how I ended up here, whoever is responsible will pay." Lies filled his eyes. He remembered; Alore was sure of it. Whether he gave into the reckless need to tell her was another matter altogether.

Softly, she continued. "I hope that's true, soldier."

“Until then,” he said, using his palm to push her away. “Back up.”

Taig moved forward, bracketing the soldier and making their circle complete. “If you value life,” he warned, “Your disrespect ends now.” His weapon drawn, both men stared the other down. “Apologize, stranger. Or kiss your days goodbye.”

“Don’t you want to know why you’re here?” Alore said, breaking into their silent battle. Slyly, she added, “To be able to trust, when those who you’ve always trusted have broken their sacred vow to you?”

The man gritted his teeth, then he nodded, both terse and defiant. “I won’t leave without finding out everything I need to know.”

“Then,” she said, “Be my follower. Your answers will come. Be assured of it.”

13

Her words were intoxicating, that somehow he could know who in his life deceived him. Somehow, the spell she had him under was gone. Baz saw her clearly, a woman who manipulated and controlled to get what she wanted. He might admire that trait, except it got in his way, and he allowed no one to best him. What she didn't know was that he was the Assassin. He knew how to get others to talk, and if they didn't, the reprisal was on them.

"What is your name, soldier? If we are to be friends, I think we should introduce ourselves."

Taig snorted. The woman sent a scathing glare in his direction.

"Sebastian of Zelal."

Excitement filled her voice. "Are you from the family of Zelal, made up of the great seers?"

"I wouldn't know."

If he did, he wouldn't have had to rely on Mato's father, Jin, to be a surrogate for the parents he didn't have. He wouldn't have had to choose Mato as his wife. Year after year, he refuted invitations to marry. Beautiful women. Wealthy women. Women he could love. He wanted a family, rather than not at all, and because of Jin and the promise made to him, he would.

Her interest waned. Taig's, however, remained sharply upon him.

"And what is your name?" Baz questioned in return. "I should know to whom I pledge allegiance."

"I am Alore."

"And your surname?"

The smile faded. "That is my name, and it's all you need to know."

"He's lying," Taig said. "Don't believe him, my queen. He holds no loyalty to you."

"Ah," she said softly. "But he will."

She held out her hand, palm up. "Take my hand, Sebastian of Zelal. Come, and I will show you the land."

In the distance, Baz heard strange howls and yipping and the bay of an animal he'd never heard before. Alore's attention snapped to the sound.

Taig nodded, and their silent communication was not lost on him. Alore grabbed Sebastian's hand, pulling him forward with surprising strength.

"Come," she said. "Hurry."

He let her because he wanted to know why she ran. The dogs came closer, barking loudly.

Baz expected them to run opposite the direction of the howling. Instead, they headed that way.

"I thought you were running from the hounds."

She shot him a quick, satisfied look. "They are mine, soldier. Let's see what my beasts have conquered now."

They jerked to a halt, right before massive, slathering animals. The canines snarled, standing still. Too still. Their eyes were on him, bright, humanly aware eyes.

"What are they?" He wanted to back up, but didn't. "I've never seen animals like them before."

"They are unusual," Alore said, reaching down to caress one of them. It immediately soothed, viciousness disappearing. Silent communication stretched between her and the animal, and by her tiny smile, she was satisfied by whatever she'd discovered. "What do you think they are?"

He didn't know. "They look similar to wolfhounds," he answered cautiously. "But their eyes..."

"Yes. Their eyes are so mortal, aren't they?"

Her insinuation made his bowels roll. "They're *human*?"

"Once. They are prisoners. Exiles. Traitors sent to their fate. They deserved no mercy, and they will get none." Her gaze fixated on him, brutal and cruel, not the sweetly soft woman he first encountered. "Now they are mine. Forever mine."

"Is that what you plan to do to me?" Baz took an involuntary step back. "To turn me into one of them?"

She laughed as though the idea excited her. "That would depend on you, Sebastian of Zelal." Her eyes grew canny. "Are you a traitor?"

Gritting his teeth, he answered. "What would it matter who I'm aligned to? This isn't my home."

She patted his hand. He wanted to strangle her. Only the realization that she may be just as powerful as she insinuated stopped him.

"This is your home now."

"I won't be turned into a goddamn beast," he snapped, and he ripped his hand away. Alore laughed, though her eyes grew icy cold.

"Then do what I say." She turned back to her pack, saying softly, "And there'll be no need."

Could she do it, all that she claimed? Uncertainty made him grapple with decision. He should be doing all that he could to get away, not standing and listening to a surplus of stories. Best that he didn't believe. The truth was too terrible to contemplate.

"See how he struggles?" Taig said to Alore. "Do as you will to him. He's not worthy."

Baz felt the rumble of stark indecision begin. Taig was right; Baz struggled intensely. The guard's voice plowed over him, while Sebastian's hearing dimmed. Control made him push the feeling of weakness back.

"He's not capable of doing what you need him to," Taig continued. "Why show mercy?"

Alore gave Baz an examining look, though she didn't act. She spoke to her guard. "Oh, I love how ruthless you are." To Taig, she added, "But let's give him a chance. He is an assassin, after all."

He never told her anything, so how would she know? Sebastian's eyes narrowed, hating her smile, and hating how she saw through him when he wanted his secrets for himself.

"Let's go," she ordered them. "No time to waste. The gate might open now that he's here."

"What gate?" Baz asked. He wasn't going anywhere until he knew something.

"The original one, of course. Nebuchadnezzar's Gate. The majesty of the Ancients."

"That's a story," Sebastian said, his knees locking as his heart

started tripping. "A fairy tale for children. Is that the foolish reason you want me here? If so, you've been deceived. I don't know anything about opening a gate," he said, his jaw tightening, along with every muscle in his body. "It's a waste of time."

"You're alive, aren't you?" Taig said, his silent reign over. "You know something."

"I know I woke in this forsaken place. How I got here is uncertain."

Baz pressed his lips together. He would explode if he didn't get answers soon. He'd never been a man of inaction. Knowing all routes to an outcome was how he did things. Being slave to a woman that was crazy—or a witch—had him shifting nervously.

"This forsaken place," Alore explained, "is the mirror to your kingdom. It's what might have been if your Regent and queen hadn't assumed control and ruled *your* land."

Looking around, Baz took in his surroundings like a man ready for war. Filth lay on the streets, streets of pavement that looked like tar, unfamiliar enough to have him on edge. It wasn't just the streets. As night encapsulated, his vision adjusted, and he saw buildings in the distance. They reached towering heights. They reached the skies and disappeared into them. No, he wasn't home. But, he wanted to be.

"What is this place?"

"New York City," Taig answered. By his glare, the man hated and mistrusted him as much as Baz did with them. "Or what it used to be."

"I've never heard of such a city."

"You aren't home anymore, Sebastian," Alore said. "Look around you. Does this look like Yrurra?"

She knew too many things. His discomfort grew.

"I was on a mission." Frustrated, the answer lay with her. Alore, a woman he wouldn't trust for anything.

"I know. You're here to find me."

"Yes."

Now the task seemed insurmountable. Maybe the Regent didn't believe that he pled his loyalty to her, and this was her devious recant. Looking around, Baz knew his mission was doomed. He failed nothing, but he might just fail in this.

The dogs howled. Taig snapped to attention.

"My queen," the guard warned. "Time to go."

Baz didn't budge. "If you are so powerful, why run? Why hide?"

Taig hissed. "Now, Alore."

He heard shouts. Men, not animals. Or perhaps the yelling only sounded mortal. After all, he stood by beasts that were claimed to hold mortal souls. Jin would be giddy with fascination. But Baz? This land wasn't his own. Anything was possible, even humans turned into something unnatural and darkly wanting.

The woman—the witch—didn't move. She smiled, disarming him. Did she want to die? Maybe his mission would be an easy one. Maybe he'd been set up. He didn't know, and not knowing angered him.

Taig's hands moved to his weapons. "Now," he repeated, urgent.

Alore took Sebastian's hand, her grip too tight to shake off. "Now, soldier, you'll get to see this humble land, the home of my exile. Be careful," she said, her eyes dark with malcontent. "Because nothing here is what it seems."

The decision was quick, but vital. Baz followed them in the shrouded twilight, flares of color smoothing over and flooding the horizon. He wanted to stare at the magnificence of light in this world of darkness. How could something that should have been familiar be absent and ugly and *gone*? With realization, he let them lead the way.

Yrurra had the morning. This place, this New York... it had the elusive, fabled night. And night was a terrible place to be.

##

Those things they heard weren't human. Baz doubted his companions were, either. It wasn't only the pace they kept, ruthless and quick. The things he saw, those unnatural beasts, a city thundering to the sky but shelled out in emptiness, made him know how much he wasn't home. Home is where he wanted, what his mind wandered off to. Mato. Even Ru. Anything was better than the unknown, that uncertainty he plowed into.

“What happened to this place?” he asked.

They were approaching one of the buildings, the windows and door barricaded by boards, the windows left visible cracked and busted in. Alore slowed her pace, frustration making her voice an eager bite.

“My home? The home that is now yours?” She stopped completely, her jaw tightly set. “As you see, soldier, it’s been destroyed.”

“By what?”

Taig gave him a cold look, answering for her. “The Sundering. What else do you think could have happened?”

Baz looked around, on guard and warily alert while Taig led them down a dark, rat-infested alley. If there were people that lived anywhere in this abandonment, they hid. There was evidence of past habitation by shoes laying haphazardly on the ground, an article of torn clothing. A pacifier for a child. Vermin and filth were everywhere, while raptors soared overhead waiting to feast on whatever lay behind.

He cringed. It looked like a war zone.

The only sounds were the creaking of torn, blasted metal screeching as it rubbed against another shelled out piece. Of the wind, hissing through the skeletal buildings and wailing like a banshee, looking for her lost home and family. Of silence, an unnatural, eerie hush that pervaded and eclipsed those other sounds. He wouldn’t say it, but his companions probably already knew. This place was hell.

“I’ve heard of the Sundering. I didn’t know it was real.”

Alore turned. “It’s real. Look all around you. Does this look like a mistake?”

No. It looked like the gods pointed their mighty hand to the inhabited earth, destroying all habitation and being. It looked as though they let go of their own to allow something else to rule over what was left. He gave the woman another look. A punishment from the Ancients? Alore was one of those? A child of Light and Shadow, of Life and of Death? No wonder everything had gone to shit. The Ancients were reputed dead. If she were one of them, more than the Sundering was at stake. Baz’s life was as well.

She claimed she didn’t belong here. But what of him? Why had he been sent away from his kingdom? To serve a selfish, spoiled offspring from the gods? Sebastian was nobody, just an ordinary soldier. And he wanted to go home.

"I don't understand what you want of me," he admitted.

They ignored him. "We'll venture out when it's fully dark again," Taig said, heaving another board to the side and opening a passageway to the musty rooms inside. He gestured to the woman, offering her admittance once he'd scoured the room for danger. "My queen. After you."

The strange, beastly dogs finally departed, leaving Baz to comply or to be left out in the open. Tingles of awareness clustered along his spine. Something watched him. He ducked his head under the board, quickly going inside. It was better than finding out what else lurked in this strange city. And being left to handle what he discovered on his own wasn't appealing at all.

Taig calmly barricaded the door, shoving an old dresser against the opening. Shifting, he slid to the ground, resting on his haunches. Weapon ready. Eyes alert.

"I'll take first watch," he said. "The soldier will take second."

By his sneer, he didn't believe Baz capable. Even his role as Assassin didn't give him any favor with the other man. So be it. Sebastian didn't want to be here anyhow, and he cared jack-shit about the other man's opinion.

"Rest, Alore." Taig's voice softened.

She took a blanket from the bag Taig set beside her and wrapped herself in it, then eased beside her guard, resting her head against the side of the dresser. "I'm willing to share the watch, Taig," she said, then yawned. "But not tonight. I'm exhausted. You know how it drains me..."

She fell asleep mid-word. Taig continued to glare.

"You don't get her."

"I don't want her," Baz lied.

"Every man wants her. But if you're going to be of any use, leave her alone. She'll suck you dry."

Baz examined her. The sleeping woman looked defenseless, but from experience, he knew that sometimes the most innocent looking were the most treacherous and ready to kill.

"That's right," Taig said. "Your estimation is correct. You should be afraid."

"Are you?"

The guard's eyes wandered over his queen's resting body before he

responded quietly. Taig's eyes met his as he stroked the woman's hair from her forehead with surprising gentleness.

"Every day of my damn life. If you were smart, warrior, so should you."

14

Baz woke to an unearthly sound. Yips that resembled coyotes or wolves filled the air.

"What is that?" he asked Taig, who woke Alore without answering. She smiled sleepily. The howls continued and the ease on her face disappeared.

"They found us?" she asked.

Taig nodded. He pointed to Baz, then to the weapons they'd allowed him to keep. "Use them. You'll have to."

"Is it more of those damn dogs?" Baz said, pulling a blade from its sheath.

"No," Alore whispered. She rubbed at her heart.

"Beautiful danger, that's what it is," Taig said, a sick grin on his face. "Follow her direction. Let's get the hell out of here."

Baz moved towards the door, then choked back a wheezing cough. "Shit," he said, his lungs tight. "Something's burning."

Smoke puffed under the door. A line of fire met their exit. Whoever set fire planned cannily, catching them while at rest. Baz and his companions? They weren't supposed to leave the building alive.

"Damn it," Taig growled, shoving the dresser to the side while stating the obvious. "They're trapping us in."

"You know another escape?" Alore said, standing just beside the giant man.

Taig nodded. "We'll go up to the roof."

She shook her head. "It's too unsteady."

He barked back at her. "Can you think of another way?"

Nonplussed, she grabbed her outer shirt, ripping it to shreds. "We'll meet fire with fire," she instructed. "Light this. When they do enter, we burn them right back."

"It's not a time to dick around," Taig hissed. "Has escaping ever worked before?" He met Baz's gaze. "We fight. We have him. He's got to count for something."

Baz's head turned at the growls outside the door. "I'm not fighting anything until you tell me what's going on. Who—or *what*—are those things?"

"They are what's left behind," Alore said quietly. She exchanged a glance with her guard. "Taig's right. We'll fight."

Humanlike fingers, tipped with nails that resembled claws, tore at the door. Those things outside were burning themselves alive to get inside. Uncaring of death. Undeserving of nature. With a swipe, Baz struck out with his serrated knife. Fingers notched with gnarled knuckles fell to the floor. Taig smiled his approval. Sebastian chilled as one of them looked through a crack in the door. He met eyes like his own. Aware. Sentient. Ready for death.

Shrieks lit the air. Peering out, he saw them grouping through the slats in the window. Each carried torches. Weapons of metal. They snarled with voiceless anticipation as another charged at the door.

Taig shoved his knife through the boards. The thing wailed and retreated. Mutters came from just beyond the exit.

"Taig," Alore said. "We must run. Your life--"

"Is worthless if yours is destroyed," he interjected. "Are you ready?" She nodded.

"Then, stand behind. We're headed out there."

Taig kicked the door apart with booted feet. Squeals came from the opposite side, excited screams that promised retribution. Baz drew his sword from his back. Adrenaline and blood and sweat made the air musky-rich. Tarred and metallic, it mixed with the smell of smoke. It was a familiar stench, a glorious one.

He followed Taig past the burning arches, into the light. He sputtered to a stop. These weren't monsters. They were men, *humans*. The squeals came to an abrupt halt. They eyed Baz, gazing at him with absent conscience and no residual morals. Nothing that gave the impression there was anything left inside that made them like him.

Oh, hell. What kind of damnation had he gone into?

The grunts began again, and they started closing in. His first impression completely vanished. They weren't human, not at all. Lips licked with anticipation as the remnants of this strange world looked at Sebastian as if he were their next feast.

"Don't just stand there," Taig yelled. "Fight!"

The command didn't matter. Instinct made Baz swing his sword, cleaving a man's neck and disemboweling another. It came back to him, the memory of death. The high of war.

Taig grunted his approval. Not that he cared. This was what Baz was meant to do, what he'd trained and lived for. He was the Assassin. Screw these otherworldly fuckers for daring to go against him.

One by one, the attackers fell to the ground, slaughtered, running away with yelping fear. Taig laughed, his face covered with splatters of blood. Baz's fingers were covered in guts and gore. He loved every bit of the fight.

"They're gone," Sebastian said, wiping his weapon clean, and then sheathing it again. The battle-high already retreated. He was back to the hum of deprivation, to the longing for home.

"They'll return." Taig gestured to the building. Alore hovered in the doorway, a tender smile on her face.

"My warriors," she said. "I'm so proud of you."

"They won't be long in gathering another army," Taig warned. "We need to find another hideout."

"Why?" she asked, giving Baz a warm look. "We have him."

Taig's mouth pruned. "If he's so important, why wait? Send him through the other door."

"I plan to, soldier," she answered. "Lead us. We'll head there now."

Baz ignored both of their instruction. "I'm going nowhere until I get some answers."

"You'll have them," Alore stated. "Just as soon as we get to the other side."

"I don't know who you think I am--"

"You're my savior," she said, halting him in his tracks. Her fingers reached out and stroked his face, coming away smeared with red. "You're the one who can open the gateway and send me back home."

Did he want to? Or care? When she looked at him like that, then yes, he did.

Taig stepped between them. "Hurry." His eyes shot daggers at Baz. "If you choose to let him try, we'd better head out." He smacked one of the barreled weapons in Sebastian's palm. The cold metal stung. "Here. Take this. You might need it."

"Grateful." Baz nodded. It took everything in his power to give thanks without knocking the other man out.

"It won't matter if you don't know how to use the damned thing." Taig snorted, walking away. "Let's go."

"He hates you." Alore's eyes gleamed. "That's okay. You'll make him realize what's worth fighting for."

"You?"

"Of course. And my vindication. Nothing else in these two worlds matter but that I win."

Sebastian cautiously took a step back. His eyes narrowed. "What is it, exactly, that you do?"

She smiled wider. "You'll see, my dear Assassin. You'll surely see." Alore linked her fingers in his own. "Come on. Let's join my guard. I promised answers. You'll have them."

They walked for hours, leaving the slime of greenery that substituted as a park, for the filth of the innermost city. The landscape was ravaged, torn, gutted, and forlorn. Each building was decayed, vines twining themselves into the exposed beams. Anything remaining was boarded up.

"Be careful," Taig said, holding his weapons close. "They hide in those."

They skirted down the alleys, zigzagging and weaving through the detritus and muck. They set a trail, one of confusion and indecision, even though Taig clearly knew exactly where he was going and how he'd accomplish it.

Occasionally, Baz caught the sound of mumbling. Those things watched them. They knew they were there. Sebastian gripped the weapon he was given. A gun. If it saved his life, he wouldn't care not knowing just how to operate it. Aim and shoot. Yeah, he would manage.

His eyes wandered over Alore. She was lovely, and that was a problem. *Mato*. He must remember who he did all this for. Not the woman sashaying in front of him, but his future bride, the woman who would bear his children. The woman who would, at last, give

him a family.

Taig turned. "Are you coming? Move it."

"Think hard before you tell me what to do," Sebastian said, fingering the hilt of his knife. "The last man who tried is now wandering in the land of the dead."

Alore laughed. "I told you he was worthy."

Taig huffed, glowering at Baz. "He's trying my patience. Let me kill him."

She held up her palm. "Ask me again, Taig, and you'll join that man in the Shadowlands."

Her guard's jaw tightened. "Let's go," he said, throwing up a rude finger at Baz. "I hear more of them."

They came upon a decrepit stone building with wide, deep steps. They all paused at the foot of the stairs.

"What is this place?" Baz asked.

Alore reverently looked at the large doorways. "This is it, our destination. It used to be a museum, a coveted one. The Met, they called it."

"It looks like a war zone."

She sighed, throwing him an unfathomable look. "It's all a war zone. I have my sister to blame." Looking up at the sky, she heaved another deep breath. "I don't know what I'll do if this doesn't work. I don't think I have much left."

Immediately, her guard went to her side. Jealousy, raw and discomfiting, hit Baz's chest. He shouldn't have any attraction towards her. It was wrong, disloyal. The gods only knew how he fought it. It didn't mean that it went away.

She gave him a sad look. Baz wasn't a consoling kind of man, but he reached out to her, laying his hand on her shoulder. He heard Taig's hiss, ignoring it.

"I'll do what I can." The oath came from him, compelled, unbidden. He yanked back his hand, horrified.

"You'll fail," Taig said. Most likely that was the truth, for nothing in this forsaken place gave Baz any bit of security, or the sense of stability that made him a true warrior, deadly; that made him the Assassin. To prove it to himself, Sebastian offered, and led the way.

Room after room, they traveled. Inside each one, Alore shook her head at Sebastian's silent query. They weren't there, not yet. Entering

a hall of mirrors, large and gilt and tarnished, she held out her hand, unobtrusively giving command to scout the area before entering. Baz halted, his eyes scanning the room. There was nothing left intact, just twisted, broken carnage. Even destroyed, the place was beautiful. Thankfully, there were none of the monsters they ran from.

"Come. I have something to show you," she said, after he nodded that all was clear.

Baz followed her. They walked into the inner room, laden with the strange world's history. Woven rugs and porcelain figurines, art hung floor to ceiling, busks of marble and others of gold. Such wealth. Such wasted riches, when all around nothing else survived that cataclysmic Sundering.

The decision from the Ancients to evacuate two of their own had forever destroyed the terrain. It destroyed mankind. He saw just how selfish the Ancients had been as he looked around at the decay and ruin.

Alore halted before an arch made of stone. Once, it seemed, the artifact had been threaded with color. Now the beasts, carved of rock, missed limbs, heads, majesty. The robed and loincloth-clad figures of men were blank of vibrancy. It had been utterly destroyed.

Baz walked closer, staring at the residual detailing. He frowned, tipping his head to the side for a better look. Strange. There was writing of a language he didn't know carved into the stone. He'd been taught all languages spoken, in Yurra, anyhow. His curiosity sparked.

"This is why you're here," Alore said.

His gaze shot to hers. "This crumbling rock?"

She nodded, her eyes threading with tears. "Do you feel it, calling to you, calling you home?"

Baz shook his head. "I feel nothing."

"Stand closer," she insisted.

Nothing.

Sebastian shook his head. Her answering frown impulsively made him reach out and touch the artifact. Baz jolted as his body hummed with awareness. Growling, he glared at her.

"What the hell is that?"

She gasped, her eyes brightening. "You feel it?"

He nodded slowly. "Yes. I feel something." He shifted his fingers to

his blade. "Let's go. That thing isn't natural." He took another step back, eyeing it warily. "It's dangerous. I don't have a death wish."

Taig snarled. "You'll stay. Why the hell do you think you're here?"

Baz snapped right back. "Not to die. If you want to try it, be my guest. But I'm leaving. I have a bride to find my way home to."

"Don't you see?" Alore questioned. "If you can't open this gate, you won't get home at all. None of us will."

Taig, reaching out with a beefy hand, wrapped it swiftly around Baz's throat. "Do it, fucker. Open the damned portal. I have a home, too."

Baz ripped the other man's hands away from his skin. "Touch me again, and you'll end up nowhere but the Shadowlands."

He caught Alore's gaze. She stayed quiet, reproach in her eyes.

Sebastian sighed. He was in a shit-show, with him as the prominent lead.

"I'll try."

She smiled, then pointed overhead to the lettering on the arch. "This is Nebuchadnezzar's Gate. Many centuries ago, when these kingdoms were younger, it allowed entry to the most powerful land in the world." She cocked her head to the side. "Can you read it?"

"No."

A small frown skirted over her face, disappearing quickly. Taking his hand, she led him forward again. "This is the portal that takes us home." Eyes bright, she looked up at the faded lettering. "Now, Sebastian of Zelal. Open the gate."

He stared. The buzzing ran through him like lightning, hot and painful. Again, nothing happened, just the intense feeling he shouldn't be attempting something so foolhardy.

"Try again." Desperation filled her voice.

Minutes passed. Behind him, Taig snorted in disbelief.

"He's worthless. Knew it."

"Let him try longer. These things can take time." Her eyes pleaded.

"I don't know what I'm doing. Better that you find the entry by some other man."

"It must be you. You are the key to unlocking the portal."

He wasn't. Baz knew it. He also knew that as the minutes ticked by, his life was in greater danger, not only from whatever power lurked beyond the gate, but from Taig, who watched avidly. The man wanted

his failure. Taig wanted his death.

Sebastian lied. "Give me time. I'll figure the damned thing out."

Alore nodded, her eyes sharp. "Very well." She gestured to her guard. "Taig, in three days, if he doesn't succeed, you have my blessing to kill him."

With those damning words, she turned her back to Sebastian. He loved a challenge. Shame he wouldn't be around when they decided his time was up, for he planned on leaving them the first chance he got. He didn't have long to plan; he heard the grumbling and moans signifying those strange beasts were somewhere nearby. He may not see them yet, but seeing the enemy wasn't as important as killing them.

The grunts sounded again. He wasn't wrong. The man-monsters were there, inside the museum. Quickly, Baz drew his sword from his back, taking a steady, fighting stance.

"Let me," he said. Fighting was better than waiting and dying, even if he didn't know what kind of creature he attacked.

Alore chuckled: dark, inappropriately timed mirth. "Do you think a sword will kill them for long, soldier?"

"Why wouldn't it?"

He didn't look at her, gritting out the perplexed reply. His hand held at the level of his waist as the sounds grew nearer. He was ready to fight, to kill. She was wrong. He'd already done damage to those hellish things, and he planned on it again.

Taig answered. "Those creatures stopped being natural years ago. Your sword may slow them, but that's all. The gun will only slow them slightly more."

The guard removed another weapon from his body, an intimidating one that Sebastian already had his eye on. The multiple barrels were heavy-looking and thick, while the clip on the bottom was the length of a man's arm. Taig held it easily in his clasp.

"A blade won't kill them?" Skepticism filled Baz's voice. "Nor that?"

Taig shook his head, his eyes focused on the grunting coming from behind the far wall. His voice was dangerously soft.

"No. Nothing kills them anymore. Just her."

Baz shot Alore a dark look. "Well? Kill them, then. Why put us in danger?"

"You like danger. I'm doing you a favor."

"I don't plan on dying. So, use whatever unnatural powers that you have, witch. Destroy them."

"I can't."

"You are both full of shit," he told her, snapping. "Riddles. It's all that comes from your damn lips. I don't have time--"

"Make the time," Alore snapped back. "They're coming. And despite what you think, you can destroy them, too."

He didn't understand it. He wasn't from their world. He was just a soldier from Yrurra. A nobody in this forsaken land.

Taig shot her an exasperated glance. "He's not, Alore. He won't ever be."

The sounds were in the next room. The monsters were there.

Taig yelled to him, disbelief making the scowl on his face sharper, and his body tight. "Your gun, soldier. Use the damned thing and shoot to take down. If she says you're capable, don't dick around."

Used to orders, Baz did what he did best. He lifted his hand, aimed the weapon. Fired... and annihilated.

##

His face was covered in gore. Some of those beasts got close—way too close for comfort. Their bodies littered the marble floor, punctured with metal, bleeding out. That the creatures would somehow become sentient again, horrified and confused him. Warily, Baz crouched, making sure the nearest one didn't move. Able to breathe easier when it didn't, he sighed, wiping his face. His fingers came away crimson. Despite how good he was at causing death, Sebastian hated taking a life. Especially when he didn't understand just how he was to be used in this unusual and deadly game.

To make matters worse, Alore hunkered down in front of him and skimmed her fingers over his face. Baz didn't look at her. His jaw remained tight.

"You did it, soldier. You did it." Her praise was meaningless.

With repulsion, he stared at her. He'd killed before, of course, many times, but something felt off about slaughtering these creatures. Their growls made them sound inhuman, but their eyes. Damn it all. Their

eyes were as mortal and cognizant as his.

"I didn't do it for you."

Taig stared down at the bodies, then used his booted foot to nudge one of them. "It's still moving." He nudged the body again, his eyes cold. "The damn thing is pregnant."

Sebastian's eyes darted to the female on the floor clutching her belly, her gaze opening and weakly focusing on him. His horror and discomfort grew.

"I didn't know they bred."

"Of course they do," Alore said, amused. "How do you think there are so many of them?"

The dying creature's taloned fingers caressed her swollen womb. "Mercy." She whispered in a rough sounding voice. "Mercy..."

They *talked*. Baz swallowed with difficulty. He never expected them to speak. Extending mercy to her now wouldn't matter. The female's eyes shut, a corpse—for the time being. Sebastian didn't plan on being around when she awakened.

"Good riddance," Taig said, then shot the female several times more, using his booted foot to swiftly kick the creature's swollen belly. "I always like when we get one of these, where we know the nit will die."

Alore sighed restlessly. "Taig. Are you finished? Stop playing."

The sickening sight was enough to make Baz curl his fingers into a fist. The killing of those things wasn't enough to give him peace, nor was seeing it suffer.

Baz wanted to hurt everything that kept him in this strange, repellant world. One thing was foremost. He wanted to kill her; the woman standing so trustingly near. Maybe if she were dead, he'd return home.

Alore's pretty eyes turned to him, blinking slowly. He met her gaze with challenge.

"Do it, Sebastian. Do it and see what becomes of you."

Uncertainty made him falter. He loosened his fist, reluctantly and with a chill in his heart.

"That's better." She turned her back to him, as if knowing the harm he intended but also knowing he wouldn't follow through. "Remember, soldier, who keeps you alive. It's me."

Holding out her hand to Taig, the guard guided Alore over the bodies. Delicately, she stepped over them, ruthless. Insensitive to their

imminent decay.

Baz realized he hated her. Hated *them*.

Dropping the gun on the floor next to the cluster of bodies, he turned his back to the queen and her guard, his voice quiet and low. "I'm done," he said. "Do the rest of this slaughter yourself."

Taig sneered, his hold on Alore secure and possessive. "You're an assassin. Never killed a female before?"

He couldn't answer the man, because he had. Damn it, but he had. Baz's jaw tightened.

"When the babe was born, you'd wish you'd been the one who fired that gun." Alore analyzed him with an uncanny stare. She stared into his soul, and unconsciously he shivered. "They are the enemy, Sebastian. Not us."

Baz wasn't sure anymore. With desperate longing, he wished for home. For Mato. For the security of understanding his role in the world. He shook his head, scarcely able to breathe. He was so tired, muscles aching, and mind unsettled.

"Come." Her hand outreached to him. "We will try again tomorrow. Soon, I promise, you'll comprehend all that you need to know."

He would take his chances of not knowing. His gaze passed over and lingered on the pregnant woman. Alore repeated her command. His eyes lifted to hers, and he smiled, callous. Unrepentant. Just as a warrior should be.

"You want a soldier?" I'll be one. You want a killer? I am. But I won't harm what's pregnant. Save that for him."

"I want obedience."

"You have it."

Baz lied, but while meeting the guard's eyes over her head, in a moment, he understood one thing: Taig knew he was false. And he found out something else. The man would not say one damn word. It seemed Sebastian wasn't the only one keeping secrets from the beautiful woman who held them both kept hostage.

15

She knew he stood outside. Ru, who lurked about until the family were at the mines. Waiting for his turn. Waiting for *her*.

Garth bundled Grace into clothes, their youngest sister mumbling and squirming, eager to get outside despite facing the red-soot air. Mato discreetly coughed into a rag. The blood soaked it immediately, viscous and tainted by filth.

Her brother's concerned hand landed on her shoulder, startling her. "Why is Ru outside instead of working?" he asked, lifting his palm and heading to the window. "He's always around, anymore."

Mato brushed off the comment, even as the thrill of desire filled her. "You know how Baz is," she said quietly. Yes, they did. That was part of the problem. Her family loved and accepted Sebastian the way they wouldn't for her lover. "He wanted to make sure I was looked after."

Garth inhaled the stagnant air, letting it go with a heavy puff. Her brother's eyes narrowed on Ru. His words, however, were of her fiancé.

"He's not returning, is he?"

It was a horrible thought, even though she wanted him gone. If Baz didn't return, he was dead, and it wasn't something she wanted on her conscience. Mato rose to her feet, shaky as a newborn lamb. Except there wasn't anything pure or virtuous about her. She was already tainted, used. Unacceptable.

Holding onto Garth's outstretched, guiding hand, she let him pull her forward until she met him at the window. "I believe," she said slowly, "Baz wanted him here. To look after us."

Garth snorted. "Not likely. Ru looks out for Ru."

"He's not as bad as all that."

Her brother turned to her, incredulous. "Surely you don't fall for his act, sister? I don't think he's a good man," he said slowly. "Or certainly, he's not what he's putting on to be. If Baz returned to find that Ru's taken his place..." He gave her a long look, too wise for his years. "Don't fall for his words, Mato. Loving him will only hurt you."

Grace piped up, her tiny nose wrinkled as she made a face at Ru. "I don't like him. He's a dirty monster."

Mato gasped. "Grace! Don't say such things. It isn't nice."

"He is!"

Garth sighed lightly, taking Grace's hand and pulling her away from the window. "Forgive her, sister. It's just that she misses Baz, and honestly, so do I."

Her whole family did. Baz was one of their own. But what about Ru? Why didn't he meet their rigid criteria for love? She tried convincing herself that she questioned it because she cared, but that wouldn't have been true. She hated and mistrusted Ru just as the rest of them. And also like the rest of them, sadly enough, she wanted Sebastian's return, even if it wasn't in her best interest.

"He'll return," she said. "It's only a matter of time now."

"Supposedly, the queen sent him on a death-mission," Garth said. "The Great Door of the Obelisk. Sister, if that's true—"

He choked up. Mato shook her head, denying the truth again as the lie repeatedly stained her lips.

"He'll return, I promise."

Her brother turned to her with a vicious glare, pointing to where Ru stood against the shadows. "You don't believe that, not anymore. Not with him here!"

His hatred wasn't uncalled for. But that fear? It just wasn't like him. Garth sneered at Ru through the dusty window panes.

"Do you think I don't see what he's up to? Do you think I don't see what you allow?"

"Hush, Brother," she answered quickly. "You don't know what you're talking about."

"I'm not a child anymore," he said, anger on his overly thin face. "I know what's going on."

"What's goin' on?" The tiny voice piped up from out of the corner. "I

wanna know--"

"Nothing," Garth said. "It's not anything for you to worry about, Gracie."

His words were a warning. Mato nodded once. Message gained, loud and clear. Only it didn't scare her off and wouldn't as long as he kept coming around. Ru was hers. He was hers when no one else was.

Garth gave Mato another examining look, tugging on his overcoat and shoving his work-gloves into his pocket. "Lock up, sis, when we're gone." He kissed her gently. "We'll be back for supper."

Then her scraggly, too-wise younger brother lifted Grace into his arms. Grace snuggled into him as they exited through the rickety door. Grace and Garth had each other. It wasn't fair. Who was Mato supposed to have, if not the man waiting for her outside?

Her siblings were gone. Ru opened the door, winking at her without remorse. He entered the ramshackle home, shut the door, and stalked over to her. Examining her like a spider before the feast, he grabbed her chin and kissed her, bruising her lips, and her ego. Mato shivered.

"Ru." She whispered as he silently, deliberately, backed her to the cot. Lifting her shift, he tossed it to the side. He ignored her, not that she expected him to care. Mato scolded him uselessly. "You shouldn't provoke him."

"He's a brat." Ru turned her around so that she wouldn't face him. "Ass up in the air. My girl needs a reminder who she belongs to."

She heard him unfastening his pants. There was a pause, too long of one to mean anything good. Ru yanked her dress back down, the silence burning between them.

"You're bleeding."

Mato scooted to the wall, facing him, knees drawn up to her chest. "I'm sorry."

His snarl made her go quiet, her eyes wary. "It means you fucked up. How much longer do you think you can keep up the farce of loving him?"

Longer, much longer than Ru realized. Mato kept silent, letting Ru's words roll over her. What he didn't know... well. It served only her.

Disgusted, he shoved her away. "When do you see him next?"

Never. Tiran made it clear she wasn't wanted in his bed until she proved herself better suited as his lover. She should have known Ru would decipher her silence as truth. They'd known each other too

many years to hide from each other.

With a low growl, Ru grabbed her arm, his motion so harsh that it nearly dislocated from her shoulder. Mato knew better than to cry, but her eyes appealed for Ru's mercy. He hadn't any.

It was her fault that she'd failed.

"Cover yourself." He paused, gazing at her with eyes fathomless and indiscernible, while he sat down beside her on the bed. "I'll wrap your arm. You're hurt."

His mellow mood wasn't real. It was the eye of the storm, unstable. Ready to knock down and destroy. If she were hurt, it had only to do with him.

Mato gave him a reedy smile. "I can do it. It's not a good idea for you to stay much longer, anyway."

"Why?" Just like that, normalcy came back. "What have you said?"

"I've said nothing. But others know. I don't want them to take their rage out onto you. It would ruin everything."

"Do you think I don't know you, Mouse? Do you think I don't see that mind machinating against me?"

She shook her head, clinging to his upper arms. Her eyes widened, exuding trust.

"Never. I would never do such a thing. We're in this together."

Moments passed. Ru kept his steel-cold gaze on her. Then he kissed her lightly and rose to his feet.

"Remember that," he said, opening the door. "Remember, or you'll be the one who hangs from the castle walls." Blanching, Mato nodded. "And, Mouse? If you bleed again next month?"

Mato waited for his verdict. His smile was lupine.

"I'll turn you into the guards myself. Loyalty isn't for people like us. Hmm?"

Softly, he closed the door behind him. Mato let out a shaky breath. Well, shit. Now she had to further her plot to kill her lover. Ru *knew*, damn him. He knew her aspiration and disapproved. With that knowledge, she would not sail easily into her coveted role as queen. He'd use anything against her he could. Ru was that way; devious. Destructive. And jealous as hell.

Ru's mistake in leaving her just now, however, was her victory. It was time to enact part two of her plan. No regrets. Holding her sore, bruised arm to her side, she slid from the cot and headed to the door.

Slipping from the confines of the village, she entered Velle in stealthy solitude. So far, the guards lining the palace walls hadn't seen her. No matter. Mato wasn't planning on entering that way.

Pulling aside the vine tangling the entrance to the underground tunnels that led to one destination only, she looked around again. When she was queen, the negligent guards would have to go, but for now, their ineptitude served her purpose. Entering the castle through the musty, algae covered, seldom used path, she skirted more guards until she reached the blue-painted door. Mato didn't knock. Friends never did.

Weaving through the piles of books laying on the floor and across every surface, Mato found an empty seat and took it. She heard his whispery, childish voice coming from the farthest of his rooms. After a few moments, Majid stepped forward, two cups of tea in his hand. Mato gasped.

"What the hell happened to you?"

His hands trembled. Quickly, Mato reached up and grabbed the cups from his hands before he dropped them, sitting them on a set of books on the table beside her. Majid didn't scold. That's how she knew something was terribly wrong, that, and how he wore two patches covering his eyes, with bruises sweeping from brow to chin. Usually he kept the obscenely ugly scars underneath visible.

He didn't respond. Heavily, her friend took the seat beside her, the silence stretching into weighted minutes.

"I heard from the Beyond. And They spoke to me."

"Who?" Her heartbeat like bird's wings as she waited for Majid to continue.

He sighed with resignation. "The ones we've been searching for."

Mato sat forward, unable to keep the excitement from her voice. "We must act," she said, already plotting.

"No." The word was sharp and final. It drove a knife through her.

Hardening her voice, Mato reminded him of who she was. "You don't get to tell me no. What happened that you are so afraid?"

Ignoring her, Majid continued, reaching out and taking a cup, sipping before he added, "The king was here. He wanted answers. Kindness wasn't in the answers they gave."

"What is so wrong?" Mato snapped. "You've had visions before. What the hell did they say?"

“Not like these. Never like these.” Majid said, his fingers and voice shaking. He stood. “You should go. You don’t want to be here should they speak again.”

Mato stood also. “I repeat, and I won’t do it again. What did they say?”

He hesitated, lumbering and large, a man of vision and dream. Her friend; her sometimes foe. Majid gave another heaving sigh, then lifted his patches. Mato gasped, stepping back, her hand going over her rapidly beating heart. Normally, he had scars meshed in with the leather laces. Now, staring back at her were two gaping holes, empty where the eyes should have been. They glowed with an eerie light.

“I’ve seen the other side,” he said quietly. “And I never want to go back to that place again.”

16

Mato stood at the door with her fingers on the handle, ready to leave Majid's rooms. The tall, ox-sized man cornered her there, stinking of fear and troubled visions. He pressed a vial into her hand, covering her fingers over it.

"Wormwood," he said quietly, as if worried someone would overhear. "The elixir of the goddess."

"What for?" Mato asked, sticking the bottle in the hidden pocket of her dress with little regard to it.

"To keep you safe." He patted her on the shoulder. "Be careful, my friend. There are more things to be afraid of than you dare realize."

"I'll be fine." Mato stepped out without giving him another glance. "It's you that should fear. Danger is all around."

"Believe me, young one," he said, shutting the door. "Of that, I am well aware."

Exiting to the gardens, Mato let the desire to get away give wings to her feet, not paying attention to her surroundings as closely as she normally would. The perfume of the gardens filled her nostrils as she skirted the castle walls and the guards that lined there. Getting caught wasn't in the plan. Mato rounded a corner in the maze, her mind still on Majid's words, when she stopped short. The Regent wandered just ahead, two guardsmen at her side. The woman's head turned, and just like that, Mato was trapped.

"What have we here?"

Mato bowed her head and curtsied, her heart beating drum-like. "I am no one, your Majesty."

"Not no one," the queen said, stepping closer. "An intruder. Why are you in my gardens, little common girl?"

The queen's blatant interest alarmed and appalled. Mato couldn't allow the woman to have her.

"I was passing through on my way back home," she said, her eyes to the ground.

"Passing through?" the queen said. "I think you lie. No one passes through without my knowledge. So, tell me again, what brings you here?"

Mato swallowed, her lungs dying to cough and wheeze. "I'm looking for my fiancé. He's gone."

The queen's eyes narrowed. She stepped closer. "Just who is your intended groom, that you dare upon my goodness?"

"Sebastian of Zelal, your Highness."

Silence crushed. It spun frantic ribbons around Mato's ears. Falling to her knees, she did the only thing she could think of. She begged.

"Please, your Majesty, have mercy. I am missing my future husband, for I don't know where he's at. He's your attendant and rightful slave. Please, do you know where my Sebastian is?"

"Perhaps," the queen said, her voice terrible and icy cold. She gestured to the guards. "Bring her. Take her to my throne room, but gently. I might have need of her after she is questioned."

Mato knew better than to protest. When the guard's greedy hands dug under her arms, she went willingly, even though she was tiny, and their steps were long and quick.

She refused to give up now. Things were ready to climax among the resistance, and she needed to be there to see it all happen.

The guards threw her to the floor in front of the queen's chair. Mato quivered with mock humility, hoping to hell that the woman wouldn't see how false she truly was. Gracefully the queen sat, silent. So very silent.

Finally, she pointed a ringed finger at Mato. "You, girl," she said. "Stand."

Mato did, quietly waiting, pressing her fingers to her barren belly. If she were with child, Tiran would be on her side. He'd want his child and mother to be taken seriously. He'd make Mato his wife.

The queen spoke. "What makes you so brazen, bride of Zelal, as to infiltrate my castle? Speak, but think wisely. Your words may pardon,

or they may bring you death."

"I am alone, your Majesty. My future husband provides for me and my family. With him gone, we are without. I miss him terribly."

"Do you?" the queen mullied. "I somehow think that you lie. Tell me, girl, why should I be merciful?"

"I serve your Majesty. Your decision will be gracious, as always."

"Your tongue is sharp," the queen snapped.

Mato straightened like a whip hit her spine. No one talked to her like that, not even royalty. Purging the indignity like bile, she responded.

"Please forgive my ill manners, your Majesty. What must I do for your mercy?"

Again, the obsidian-haired queen was silent, tapping her ringed fingers on the arm of her throne. "Come forward," she said, her eyes fastened on Mato. Mato obeyed.

"Tell me a secret," the queen said. "I'm bored. Your answer, child, determines everything."

Her mind whirling, Mato strengthened her voice. "I am in the line of Jin, the storyteller," she said. "He said that we are children of the breach, able to pass from realm to realm with no Shadow's Blood."

The queen leaned forward, interest in her viperous gaze. "Is this true?"

"I don't know, your Majesty. I have never tried."

Snapping her fingers, the queen motioned her guard. "Bring my son. Tell him it's vital and he must come immediately. Go. Bring him by force if necessary."

Fidgeting, Mato waited impatiently. Tiran wasn't pleased with her. Who knew what his temper would make him do when he saw her there.

Minutes later, shirt unfastened, along with the top button of his breeches, Tiran entered the room. He didn't give Mato a moment's glance.

Bowing at the waist before straightening, he spoke. "Mother. Why do I have this honor?"

"Because of her," the queen said, gesturing to Mato. "I want you to do something for me."

Tiran's face was blandly cold. He didn't acknowledge Mato at all.

"Anything."

The queen smirked, leaning back in her seat. "I'm glad you see fit. Gather yourself. You are going to the Hell Domain."

"Why?" he snapped, finally looking at Mato. His eyes scorned. They passed through her as if she were nothing.

The queen answered. "To open the gateway, of course. Take her. She'll guide you through."

"She's a commoner."

Mato cringed. She knew he was angry, but to dismiss her as though they hadn't anything together stung and singed like the hottest fire.

The queen mused, also ignoring Mato's flinch. "Yes, but a commoner under the line of Jin. If she's telling the truth of her familial skills, be pleased. You won't die."

"I won't die," Tiran said. "Because I'm not going."

The Regent's eyes burned into him. "You will, if you expect to gain your throne when your minority ends."

Tiran crossed his arms, any hint of false submission fading. "So, we have it. The truth at long last."

"I am queen," she said. "I rule for the people. If you had good cause to refuse me, you could do so, but know this, you won't live to see morning. No one denies the royal throne and keeps their head."

"I am the royal throne."

"Not presently," the queen said triumphantly, a tiny smile on her beautiful face. "Go. Take the woman. If you succeed, you will gain the favor of all in the kingdom. Fail... well, we both know what happens then."

Grabbing her arm, Tiran dragged Mato from the room, his jaw set and cruelty in his grip. He blamed her. He should, perhaps. But, at long last, Mato would have a means to go to the other side, to find the Shadow Queen, to bring the kingdom back to glory. She reminded herself of one thing: whatever she did was to save her people. That was all that mattered. Not Tiran. Not Ru. Not Sebastian, and certainly not the hellish royal queen.

17

He had to find a way out. Sebastian's eyes were closed, but he was aware, every motion from Alore and her guard, and every sound from the outer side permeating his ears. Beyond, the screeches and shrieks continued. The Others mourned their fallen.

He heard Taig shift beside him. The man spoke, his voice a whisper. "That is your future, soldier," he said. "And mine. Sounds like death, doesn't it?"

"I've heard worse," Baz answered. He hadn't, but the lie slipped easily from his lips. He didn't trust the guard any more than he trusted her.

They were underground, the room empty except for two cots and a makeshift kitchen against one wall. Baz slept on the floor, the accommodation mattering little. He planned and planned some more. It had to be a quick, quiet, and solid escape. Nothing else would do.

Here, they were supposed to be safe. Here, Sebastian was trapped and alone with his captors. Worse, he didn't know the location or how to escape without running into those terrible creatures. When the Regent gave him a mission, he expected contingencies to occur. This was the first time he'd ever been caught by two enemies on opposing sides of an ancient battle.

"You want to get out of here, don't you?" Taig asked.

"Does it surprise you?"

"Do it," Taig answered. "But see how far you get. You're better off with her."

The statement both confused and alarmed Baz. "What aren't you

telling me?"

"Some things," Taig said, "you don't want to know."

"I should know everything if it means I'm killing for you both."

"For her. You're killing for *her*."

"Seems to me you enjoyed it, as well."

"I enjoy the fact that I'm not dying. Once you're here a while, you might realize it's worth letting loose, too." Taig's grin was nasty. "Oh. Sorry, man. I forgot. You'll be dead by tonight. You won't get the chance."

"I pegged you for a pussy. She's got you by the balls. Why do you listen to her? It's obvious that you hate her."

"I *worship* her."

Sebastian laughed. "As I said. By the balls."

"Boys," Alore said, yawning. "As much as I enjoy you fighting over me, we have to have a plan. Those foul things are already out there."

His time left was reduced. They gave him three days, and now they meant to kill him. Baz rubbed a hand over his face. If he knew how to appease them, it would be one thing. But what they requested was insanity.

"Send him out first," Taig said, his gaze sharp and mean. "If they kill him, we find another one."

"No," Alore said. "We can't risk him. Taig, you go. Pave the way as you always do."

Surprise and anger lit the man's voice. "Who will watch over you?"

"He will."

Baz halted Taig. "Stop this now. I'm no one's savior. I don't know how I got through that portal, and I sure as hell don't know how to get back. If you think I'm the key, you're wrong."

"You want us to kill you?" Taig asked, incredulous.

"Kill me? Try," Baz said, glaring. "I'm worth more alive. Do you think you can keep those things at bay for much longer by yourselves? Yeah, kill me, and I'll know that you really have a death wish."

Alore held up her pointer finger, stopping Taig's knife from coming down. "He's right," she said. "We do need him. And besides, he might open the portal after all. I'll give him another try."

"Why?" Taig snapped. "I'd have more luck at opening that thing than he would."

"Because I see something in him," she answered cryptically, her eyes

roaming over Baz. He fought against the chill running along his spine. It made him nervous that she could affect him that way. "I want to keep him. So I will."

Taig nodded sharply, sheathing the knife. His other hand held another lethal blade, and by his glare, he wasn't afraid to use it on Baz.

Outside, the creatures stirred. Their hisses and mumbles grew louder. It was Sebastian's chance to prove his merit to them. He'd run, just not now. He'd run, but they'd be dead. Baz left no survivors behind. He never had.

"I'll go," he said, mantling himself with any weapon he could grab, not just his own. He left no room for argument. Taig gestured to the closed bunker door, a sneer on his face, but silently outfitted him with a dangerous-looking gun.

Adjusting his other weaponry, Sebastian nodded. This was his chance. There may not be any others.

The door slammed open, and he ran out. That incentive died the moment he came face to face with the horror outside. Using the gun, Baz downed three upon exit. It wasn't enough. They swarmed, locusts from the hive. Thankfully, the witch hadn't sent him out alone, after all. Taig followed closely behind, shooting the terrible beasts with a look of glee on his face.

Signaling Baz to follow, the guard protected Alore as they ran. The creatures were nipping at their heels, but the pace didn't let up. Rounding a corner, the man used his booted foot to kick a door down and he pushed her inside. Baz was last to enter, as Taig used the broken wood and a metal table to barricade them in.

Sweating, Taig glared at him. "We're not getting anywhere."

Alore was calm, too calm. "Patience," she said, propping her hip on the table and leaning casually, as if those snapping creatures weren't on the other side of the door. "Everything takes time."

She gave Baz a hard look. "I gave you an order."

Wiping the sweat from his brow, he huffed with disinterest. "And I ignored it."

Taig stiffened as she left her perch and sauntered towards Sebastian, cold fury on her face. "When I tell you to do something, you do it. Remember who I am."

Infuriated, Baz rounded on her. "Who are you? I sure as hell don't

know. You seem to enjoy casting commands, but who are you I should obey?"

She stepped close enough that their breaths mingled. Baz wouldn't back down. Why the hell should he? He had a queen, and this woman wasn't it.

Delicately, she laid her palm over his heart. He flinched, but only because her fingers chilled him to the bone. Stroking gently, she shook her head with disappointment.

"You're wrong," she said, her fingers swiping to make a circle. "I am everything."

He scoffed impatiently, ready to knock her hand from his chest. Her smile was glorious. Beautiful lime green eyes narrowed.

Then he felt it, a surge of energy rocking him to the core. He gasped, his knees buckling. His chest was on fire, and he was dying. Her smile killed. Just when he thought he would cry out with the pain, she lifted her hand. Baz struggled to breathe, dizzy and disoriented.

"What was that?" he asked.

She gave him a soft look. "That was several years of your life taken away. It's mine now." Lightly, her lips met his, kissing the hurt away. "Thank you, soldier, for your offering."

"I didn't offer anything," he said. Taig gave him a sharp look but kept silent.

Alore stepped back, satisfaction in her voice. "Oh, but you did. You offered your servitude, and I took it. You're a smart man. You know what happens to those that defy authority."

Ignoring the taunt, Sebastian rubbed at the ache in his chest. His body clenched with sweat and fury, as unease settled in him. "What do you mean, *'you have years?'*"

"Your life, soldier," Taig said. "She owns those years now, and her life extends because of it."

Sebastian's gut rolled as suspicion clouded in him. "You're a witch."

"No. I'm a queen."

Taig went to stand beside her. Baz met the guard's steely gaze. "Queen of what?"

"Queen of Shadow," the other man answered, grit and subjection in his reply.

"That's impossible," Baz said, swallowing back bile.

"There's no need to fight. Do you see now? You stay at my side, or

you die. Simple, hmm?"

Baz was screwed, and he knew it. Slowly, he nodded, while Alore accepted his affirmation. He wasn't going home, and death was imminent, ready to suck him into its insistent, ravenous pull. Mato would have to learn to survive without him. He'd never have a family. He'd have nothing, except what Alore gifted.

He might not have believed her if he hadn't felt his life slip from him. Without his captor's oversight, Baz circled his heart and slashed a quick line through it, warding off the Ancients. Mato's father, Jin, the Storyteller, narrated tales of those who jumped from world to world. If Baz had listened more, perhaps he'd be prepared. Hell, he scarcely trusted those stories before now. But now there was no escaping it. Alore was the Shadow Queen. Jin was right, after all.

Baz fought the bile in his throat. "If you are so powerful, why live here, in this wasted land?"

"Do you think I want to live here? I'll go back when it's time, but I will go in victory." Her voice softened. "I know why you're here, Sebastian of Zelal. Take me home, if you can. Return me to the kingdom that should be mine. Otherwise, you are useless to me. You don't want to be useless, do you?"

His voice tight, Baz answered. "No. I don't."

His chest hurt, and there was pain in every breath. Refusing her threatened his life, but she stole years from him. He had to let her rule him, or she'd surely steal more.

18

Sebastian slept little that night. Every time he drifted off, closing his eyes into slumber, Taig's heavy boot prodded his back or side, waking him again. They wanted him exhausted. Taig wanted him to fail. The man hated him, for reasons unknown. But if he got nudged one more time...

He felt it, the harsh kick rousing him from sleep and igniting his anger. Baz jumped to a crouch, one knee to the ground, his knife in hand. "Do it again, I beg you," he hissed, "I'm dying to cut a tendon in your leg."

Taig laughed, immune to the threat. He leaned forward, his eyes mean. "Try."

Alore rolled over, wiping her eyes from the battle of sleep. "Good," she said. "You're both awake. I have plans in store for you."

By her quick glance, she meant Sebastian, ready and willing to push him directly into the line of death. Baz didn't react. It would just incite her further. Alore smiled, a sickly sweet malice. Gone was her nice-girl act. Her true side emerged, evil and cold and delectably dangerous. Baz shuddered, knowing strength or strategy wouldn't save him here. Nothing would.

She dressed quickly, sizing him up as she did. Whatever she had in mind wouldn't be good.

"I have a quest for you, soldier," she said quietly. Her eyes glittered with cool indifference, ignoring the pulsing need he hoped he hid, the need to leave. Baz said nothing in return. Silently, he waited for the ax to fall.

Taig moved to her side, her devoted *pup*. Damn man. If he were smart, Taig wouldn't put devotion in a woman with so much influence over the world. He'd fight, just as Sebastian planned to. Mato would be the memory he devoured as he readied to die. Hopefully, Ru took good care of her. Alore spoke.

"I want you to go, infiltrate the beasts, and bring one of them back to base. Do it, and I might feel generous."

"They'll kill me before I'm halfway close," Baz said, tight-lipped.

"Then you'll have to work very hard not to be found," she said. Taig grinned, a grin of death and doom. He knew Baz would fail. If they wanted him for other nefarious reasons, sending him into the hive was a mistake.

"What about the gate?" he asked.

She paused. "You'll return. I still have need of you. But prove your worth, Sebastian of Zelal. Or you're useless to me anyhow."

"Give him a gun," she ordered Taig. The man nodded, reaching over his back and handing Baz the massive object.

"You'd better learn quick," Taig said. "Or they'll feast on you by nightfall."

Alore opened the hatch of their shelter. She pointed to the darkness outside. "Go," she ordered. "Return to me with my prize. And Sebastian," she said, eyes pinched. "Hurry. I'll come looking for you."

He nodded stiffly, leaning down to avoid the low ceiling. There was no further instruction. The hatch closed behind him. He was alone in a city of beasts and the deep unknown, the skyline limned with faded light. This command and the danger presented because of it should have scared him. Except Baz feared very little. After all, this was the opportunity he waited for. Alore was right in one thing. He'd better hurry. His escape couldn't take long, or he'd be recaptured, and his punishment would be torment and hell.

Baz gripped the borrowed gun tighter, looking around. Where to start? He looked up at the towering, rotted buildings. What had this place looked like before the Sundering? Vine and bramble overtook the land, death and decay. This was not a land meant to house its survivors. He spied a wolf hunting around the shattered remains. At least some things survived. The mortals, however, were nowhere to be found.

The decrepit buildings scratched in the wind, *crick, crick, crick*, the

metal twisted and burned. Baz placed his hand over his heart. It singed as though with fire, but the throbbing must not slow him. Buckling as he took off in a run, he barely caught himself before he planted on the black paved ground. His head spun in wild waves, his mind confused.

Shaking off the torment, Sebastian stood and looked around. The wolf cast wild eyes towards him, a rabbit caught in its teeth. Then the animal trotted away, hiding within the foggy mist until it disappeared.

Through the shadows, Baz heard the telltale rumble of manic voices. The monsters were awakening. It was imperative to create a base. Lingering would have him killed. When it was safe, he'd go searching for the museum and its portal.

He traveled. Hours, he walked. His heart throbbed, and his body ached. Finally, Baz could go no further without dropping to the ground.

His gaze swept the rubble. There, in the furthest building to the left. It wasn't damaged as badly as the rest. He examined it quickly and efficiently. Baz fixed the door so that nothing could enter, and went into a crouch by the filthy, cracked window. The glass opened at the bottom with just enough space for the head of the gun to point through. Perfect. As long as he wasn't discovered until he was ready to make his move, Baz would be fine.

Uncertain how much time he had until Alore and Taig came for him made him sweat with fury. Did they truly believe a hunt of this magnitude could be rushed? Disgust had him stiffening with fury as he waited, day turning into night and then back into day, growing sleepier, and sleepier. His eyes closed. When he opened them, he was disoriented, and afraid. His chest throbbed. He hurt.

He was tired, too tired, and with clarity he knew he'd better find what the Shadow Queen wanted if he hoped for any chance of escape. Whatever she'd done to him was wearing off, but slowly. He slept more. Another night, then day passed.

Baz woke. Then he was ready.

The hive was near, just a building or two away. He smelled the decay and heard the screeching and moans. They were intimidating, but fear didn't stop him. His dark-eyed gaze swept the beasts over while they roamed.

Baz pushed to his feet, clamping his grip on the weapon Taig handed to him. His own weapons strapped to back and ankle. The time for waiting was over.

Their stench heightened as he drew near their hideout, a ruined building with limbs of tree and vine bracketing it. Backing himself near an outer wall so that he stayed hidden by the shadows, he perused the situation. Entering too soon would make the beasts discover him, for there were too many still inside. Better to wait until more left the area.

Baz didn't mind keeping watch. A true hunter knew when to leave safety and go after their prey. Usually, he hunted men. Today, he hunted demons from hell.

They truly were monstrous. Human-like, their fingers had claw tips and their hair was long and wild. Their faces, god, their terrible faces! Misshapen, and ugly, they resembled creatures as in Jin's stories, beasts that roamed the ancient world and were finally eradicated. Teeth with elongated canines perfect for shredding meat made him shudder. Hunched, they walked as if it didn't come naturally. Strangely enough, it was their eyes that haunted him the most. They were mortal, human.

Baz recalled the pregnant one Taig killed. She'd looked up at Sebastian for mercy, yet he showed her none. Likewise, he was certain that if given the chance, they would extend little mercy to him, either.

Finally, he spotted an opportunity. He took it. Entering their den, he stayed within the shadows, and against the walls, the gun poised in his arms.

Grunting and swaying, his quarry stood on bare feet with the same sort of claws as on their hands, the tips digging into the dirt, ash, and the remaining flooring. Thankfully, there were only a few of them left inside the building, likely to guard whatever food they dragged in. There was no fire, no blankets for comfort. Baz's stomach nearly upturned as he witnessed one of them tearing at some raw meat. They weren't animals; they were too human for that, so watching how they ate made him ill and uneasy.

Suddenly, he heard scuffling, something being dragged into the center of the den, directly in his line of view. Baz gritted his teeth, his surprise making his heart race. A woman, a *human* woman, walked between two monsters. There wasn't any fear on her face. Perhaps she

knew she was doomed.

She was young and pretty, with hair the color of wheat, and light-colored eyes, frail, and looking as if she hadn't eaten in some time. Desperately, Baz racked his mind to figure out a way to save her without exposing himself. He couldn't think of one, and by the time he did, she'd be dead anyhow.

The beasts released her, and the woman dropped to her knees, her head bowed. Waiting, waiting for the final judgment. The center most thing reached out a clawed hand. Sebastian briefly closed his eyes, not wanting to see how it destroyed her.

The sound of jetting blood and torn flesh never came. He opened his eyes. The woman was crying, but not tears of pain. It stroked her hair. The beast grunted and hissed, while tears rolled down alabaster cheeks. The woman caught her breath and smiled.

Baz leaned forward to hear what she whispered. The Shadow Queen would not be happy with this one, for what the woman said was abundantly clear.

Mom.

19

Tiran dragged Mato from the throne room, silent and deadly. He rounded on her once they were alone. She cringed, knowing that he wouldn't let her off easily.

"What have you done?" Though he'd never hurt her before, his fingers dug into her upper arms, and he shook her so hard her teeth snapped upon her tongue, the taste of copper filling her mouth.

Mato sputtered, at a loss of how to extract herself without losing her head. "I'm sorry, your Majesty. I wasn't thinking."

The king jerked on her arm, sweat clustering on his brow. "No, you sure as hell weren't. I should kill you. Do you want that, hmm, little bird? Do you have a death wish?"

Mato dropped to her knees, knowing she looked good at that angle and that her position would remind the king of how useful she could be while in it. "I wanted only to please you," she lied.

He stared her down, not taken by her protestations. "Or my mother connived you into it. Which is it, Mato? Are you mine, or do you serve your queen?"

It was a trick question, and she knew it. Either way, she lost.

Licking her lower lip, Mato answered cautiously. "The Regent came upon me in the gardens, sire. I didn't want to displease you. I was afraid."

He snorted. "You've never been afraid of anything in your life. Do you think I don't know you?"

He didn't, but the fact that he'd gained that much from her told Mato that she'd not been as circumspect as she'd wanted. She frowned,

then pasted on her familiarly false, sweetly serene face.

"What can I do to please your Highness?"

Perhaps she could take him within her mouth, sucking him dry until he forgot any lies she told. His snarl made that fruitless. He'd never allow that now.

His voice raised. "You told her you can go through the portal. Can you? Or are you lying about that, too?"

"My father assured me I could. I've never tried."

"You're trying now. We leave at sunrise. I don't trust you not to leave overseas if I let you out of my sight, so you're under strict watch until then. I tell you, Mato, you'll get yourself through that portal, or I'll be the one making sure you die."

Hesitantly, she answered. "You're not coming through with me?"

Tiran gave her a chilly look. "Absolutely not."

Mato furiously contemplated it. Without him there, or his royal oversight, any mishap or mistake could easily be swept clean away. But without him, there was the greater burden of not making it there in one piece. The queen would make certain of that.

"What about the Regent?"

"My mother thinks she rules me. She's mistaken."

"My king," she said, hesitantly. "I need you."

He scoffed, his eyes softening only when he realized that she wasn't fooling him in the least. Mato did need him there, if only for her own purpose.

He stroked her hair. "I know."

Then, his eyes grew cold, and his hand harsh. Like night to day, his temper changed. Tiran began dragging her again until he reached his bedroom suite, turning the knob and shoving her inside the door.

"Get in there." He followed, then shut the door behind him.

Delicious anticipation lit through her belly. "What are you going to do to me?"

"What you deserve."

Mato watched him as he crossed the room towards his bed, unbuttoning his vest and his shirt as he walked. Her eyes traveled him, his lean body, his dark good looks. She wanted him, more than just because it brought her in line for his favor. She wanted him because his steady maltreatment made her stricken with passion and need. Mato reverently saw his shirt fall, then his trousers. Her mouth

could already taste him.

She stepped forward. Tiran held up a pointer finger, halting her.

"Where do you think you're going, little bird?"

Mato froze, unable to answer for a moment. He took pity, but not of the sort she had in mind.

"You don't think you'll find favor with me after that, do you?"

Again, she was quiet. From the shadows, Tiran beckoned his valet, Santh, forward.

"Bring in a woman. Or two. I'm craving company."

She gasped, horrified. Surely, he wouldn't! Not with her right there, waiting, hoping. Santh bobbed his knees, then darted out the door, coming back within a few minutes with a dark-skinned beauty, and a brunette with enviable curves. Tiran called them forward.

"Come," he said. "Service me."

One of them darted a glance towards Mato. He dismissed the unasked question.

"She's unimportant. Climb into bed. I'm waiting."

The woman with the smooth, warm-tinted skin tossed a triumphant sneer at Mato. She thought she was Mato's replacement? The bitch. No, by nightfall, Tiran would have found another, and Mato would be back in good standing. She only had to wait this out.

"Open your mouth and take my cock like a good girl," he said to the woman. "Just as you last did."

Mato scarcely hid a horrified gasp. Tiran never had any woman visit him a second time, just her. She fought back angry tears, and as she met his gaze, she knew he saw them. He smiled, and watched over the other woman's head as she went between his legs. This tortured Mato, and surely, he knew it. Punishment, indeed; a fitting one.

"Sire," she said. "If I can please beg..."

He motioned the first woman off, having taken his release. His dick, wet and semi-erect, grew to life as she gazed at it. He smiled, her ire hidden from his intense examination.

"Do you want it?" he asked Mato.

He'd forgiven her. She nodded. His chuckle lit the room.

"Good. When she's finished pleasing me, you may be pardoned, but only if your eyes never leave me. Do you understand, little bird?"

Mato sniffled. "Yes. I understand, your Majesty."

Damn him. The bastard, knowing that he troubled her mind and

spirit, but doing it, anyway. If she ever got her way, her body induced into pregnancy and her place by his side, she'd find a way to pay this misdemeanor back. No one insulted the leader of the revolt, even if no one knew she was that leader.

All the while that he fucked, Mato's mind churned with retribution. Not that he'd notice. She kept her face sweet, her body limber and loose. He'd not see how he affected her.

She cried enough over Tiran. No one held that sort of power over her, not even him.

Then, finished, he dismissed the women and beckoned to Mato. "Come here, little bird."

She obeyed, climbing into bed beside him. Silence followed, a peaceful quiet. His arm draped around her, and she was safe. Mato didn't think about the Hell Domain, or the portal, just her king.

"Do you think you'll win?" she asked.

He only stiffened a little. "Win what?"

"Your wage of war against your mother."

Sighing, he turned to her, placing his hand upon her cheek. "I don't know."

"But you have supporters. Troops..."

"Little bird, war isn't a game of chess. Men will die. *I* may die. Do you think it's easy to go against someone that powerful?"

"She would kill you?" Mato said, horrified. "She's your mother."

"I don't know what she's capable of. Surely, she's proven how heartless she can be. Look at the castle walls. Evidence is all around."

She curled into him. "You would be a far greater ruler than she is."

"My followers would say so," he answered wryly. "But without more troops, more allies, my wage of war may fail."

Mato sat up. "Don't say that. You're about to reach your majority. The throne will be yours by right."

"If she gives it up. I doubt the Regent intends to do that."

He kissed her. Mato leaned into it, embracing her plan. It was working. She was headed toward forgiveness. Perhaps soon she would carry his child.

By the time morning came, Tiran was gone. Mato rolled over, sleep still in her eyes. She yelped when she saw Santh standing by the side of the bed.

"What are you doing here?"

He grinned. "Watching."

"Go to hell." The sweet and innocent persona she portrayed instantly dropped.

He ignored her. "You need to dress. The king wanted you to wear these." He handed her a set of clothes: trousers, a jacket and a light-weight blouse. Boots sat on the floor, the leather looking soft enough to stroke.

Mato slid out of bed, the sheet held around her body. She picked up the blouse, weighing it in her hand. It was nearly sheer, though well-made and beautiful. Then again, they headed to the Hell Domain, where few survived, from both the heat and the harsh environment. She needed to keep her mind focused, not on the gift, but on her decisions. They couldn't ease or go anywhere.

"Go. I'll dress and meet you by the door."

She thought he might refuse, but he nodded. "The king is occupied, but he will join you in a half hour. There is food on the table."

After Santh left, Mato quickly dressed and ate. She was ready by the time Tiran returned for her.

The king's face was weary, yet he smiled and took Mato's hand. "Do you understand, little bird, that you may not return from this journey?"

She nodded carefully, not answering. She squeezed his icy fingers, and his smile disappeared. The king dropped his hold.

"I'll join you, but know this: I won't be distracted by anyone or anything, and especially you, little bird."

Mato sucked in a hiss of breath. No, he couldn't stop wanting her. How would her plans come to fruition?

"I can sooth your burden, your Majesty." Her eyes fastened on him, but he gave nothing away.

"Perhaps, but you will ride with the guards. I will be ahead, preparing the way."

She protested when his sharp glance fell on her. She snapped her mouth shut. Tiran took a helmet from under his arm and placed it on his head. "Let's go," he told her. There was nothing she could do. She had to obey.

"Sire. How will we know the way?"

His gaze smoothed, softened. "I have trackers, the best ones. Don't be afraid."

She *was* afraid. They were going to the Hell Domain, a place where death dominated, and few knew how to navigate. That was where Baz ventured. She suspected that was where he also died. He would have come back to her already if he hadn't.

Tiran took her hand, leading her from his quarters. It took time to ready the group before they headed out, but once they were in the countryside of Velle, the fertile land surrounding the castle, Mato relaxed. Better to enjoy her last days of living.

Days and days passed. The green hills of Velle turned to the red dust of the mining lands. Weeks went by. Red dust turned to rugged mountains and rushing river. They continued, Tiran leading the group, with Mato trailing behind. It was only when they reached the desert lands that he slowed, then stopped for a more permanent camp.

While the guards readied the tents, Mato watched Tiran. He stood straight, his gaze fastened on the stretch of impenetrable rock and barren sand. Cautiously, she approached him.

"Is this it?" she asked, although she knew already. He nodded, remaining silent. Mato hesitated, then reached for his hand. He let her. She knew then; he was going through the portal with her. He wouldn't leave her behind.

"We'll die, won't we?"

"Yes."

"Are you afraid?"

He turned his head to examine her. "I'd be a fool not to be."

Softly, she implored him. "I don't want to go, Tiran. Don't make me."

He didn't correct her use of his name. "You have to. I don't have the power of the throne for some time. The Regent's word is law."

Mato nodded, resigned. "I understand. It's just... I don't know if I can make it through."

He didn't look at her. "You can. You will, my little bird."

"Why do you call me that?" she asked, tears clogging her throat.

He didn't answer for a moment, and he sighed. "Because if given the chance, I believe you'd go into flight, across the seas, away from my mother's reign, and away from me."

"I wouldn't leave you."

"You're not mine, Mato. You never will be."

She sucked in a hiss of air, desperate, needy. "I could be. With your

word, you could have me.”

“I’m king. You belong to the Vesturin.”

It stung, more than she thought it would. Gingerly, she answered. “You’ve not let me go. Don’t I mean anything to you?”

He turned from her. “Keep telling yourself that you do, and maybe you’ll have the impetus to survive.”

Mato glared, hating him, but hating herself, more. Again and again, she gave him leeway, and again and again, he took it. It was time to cut the loose ends, namely the king who partially held her heart.

His words damned. But, Mato... she’d curse him further. She *would* survive, but she’d care hell or high water if he did. By a miracle, she already carried his child. She’d make it through the portal. And she’d leave him to rot on the other side.

20

The woman stood there a moment longer before she reached into a satchel at her side and drew out a hunk of partially rotting meat. She laid it on the ground before the monster. Then she backed slowly, reluctantly away from the room and from before them.

Baz had to have her, for he knew the female was the answer to a lot of burning questions. He kept to the wall, inching slowly around the corner to where the woman left. There, she was crouching on the ground next to a fire and bedroll. She was alone.

He didn't wait; he charged her, grabbing her by the waist and covering her mouth with his palm. Her struggles were futile.

With his mouth next to her ear, he questioned her. "Who are you? Why are you safe from those things?"

She kept wiggling, her fingernails tearing into his hand. Baz didn't relent. He couldn't uncover her mouth without her screams. Best to take her back out of the building to his place of hiding. There, if she didn't answer him, he'd kill her. First though, he had to halt her protests. Without compunction, he pinched her slender neck until she went unconscious, her body limp in his arms.

It was easy to lift her to his shoulder. She was frail and had little weight on her bones. The more troublesome part was getting her to the exit of the building without detection. He wasn't sure if those things had heightened sense of smell and motion, like predators on the prowl.

Obviously not, he realized later, as he carried the woman out the exit and through the streets with minor issue. Back in his hideaway,

he examined the resting female. She was prettier than he first thought, delicate, with skin so pale he could see the blue of her veins on the flesh of her inner wrist. No matter how pretty she might be, she would be dead if she proved unworthy.

Baz stared at her, crouched and waiting. She breathed, so he knew she lived, but there was that hint of fear he'd knocked her cold more harshly than he'd intended. She'd been unconscious for too long. Finally, her eyelids fluttered, and she opened her pale eyes. Blue, the color of the stormy sky. They were beautiful. She gasped, then scuttled backwards into the debris left behind from residents of long ago.

"Who are you?" Her voice was husky, feminine, faint.

Barking at her, Baz refused to answer her question. He reiterated his own. "Woman, why don't those beasts destroy you?"

She remained mutinously silent. Baz shook her slightly. "Tell me."

"Where have you taken me?" Her voice trembled, and her eyes were wide.

"Answer the question." He didn't raise his voice. He didn't need to. She was frightened enough.

Her chin tipped up. "Why would they destroy one of their own?"

His chuckle was cold. "You're not one of them. They are predators, monsters." The statement snapped her out of inertia.

"They aren't monsters. You don't know what you talk about."

His patience ended. Pretty or not, silence or dissembling didn't get him the answers he sought. "Tell me your name."

She stayed quiet. Baz leaned forward and pulling her by the wrist, dragged her forward until she rested at the foot of him. "Your name," he growled.

He thought she'd remain stubborn. Then she growled back, adorably useless against the muscle and might of him. He let her pull her arm away.

"My name is Savannah." She flipped him a crude finger.

Baz smiled ruthlessly. "Watch yourself. You don't want to piss me off, little girl."

"And you don't want to piss off my family."

He snorted without amusement. "Is that what you call them, those beasts?"

"I told you before, they aren't. But believe me, they'll come looking for me. And when they find you, you'll wish you'd not been born."

Gesturing to the dried blood covering the front of his body, Baz smirked. "I don't think I have to worry about that."

"You've killed them."

"I've killed many of them."

"Why would you do that?" she asked, fury mixed with the pain in her voice. "They would never harm you."

He barked out a laugh. "Do you know what nonsense you speak of, woman? Those things are vipers, ready to eat the head of its prey."

Suddenly, and without warning, tears filled her eyes, rolling down her pretty, pale cheeks. "You don't understand. They're hurt. They didn't want to become that way."

Finally, an answer he could work with. "What do you mean?"

Savannah clammed up. He shook her again, this time harder. She refused to budge.

"I'll not relent. Tell me what I seek."

She side-eyed him. "If you expect me to talk after you knock me around, you're surely mistaken."

Great. He'd gotten a fighter. Baz barely hid a groan.

"I met a woman," he said. "I'm a hired man, and she's sent me on a mission. Do you understand what that means?"

"I get it. Believe me, I do." She crossed her arms. "I can guess exactly who you speak of."

He frowned. "How could you possibly?"

"In this place?" She snorted. "It's not like there is a wealth of us around."

"Why not?"

She stared at him as if he were the monster, a strange anomaly in a darkened world. "How can you not know?"

He crossed his arms. "Fill me in. And just so you understand. I'm not a patient man, Savannah. Don't test me."

Hiccupping into silence, her eyes narrowed, and her voice burst with anger. "You want answers? Fine. She did it. She's ruined us all."

"Who?"

"The Shadow Queen! She stole years from them, and with it, she's taking what remains of their souls."

A chill ran up his spine. Alore had touched his chest, claiming he gifted her years of his life. Was it true? It felt like it. His heart still ached and burned. For a moment, he couldn't speak, regrouping

himself until the tremor riding through him wasn't as apparent.

"I think we're talking of two different people."

"If you say so."

He quieted, examining her. She didn't act suspicious, and he knew liars. If she was one, she was certainly good at it.

"I've heard mention of the Shadow Queen. What makes you think it's her?"

Savannah wouldn't meet his gaze. He repeated the question.

"Red hair?" she asked.

He nodded sharply. She sighed.

"Yeah. I figured you'd say that."

Baz knew the only way to get a captive talking was to ask questions—a lot of them. He took her by her thin shoulders and turned her to face him.

"This Shadow Queen. Tell me about her."

Savannah mumbled. "Not much to tell."

He wheedled, ready to knock answers from her. "Anything you offer would help."

"Why?" she snapped. "You're working for her. I don't trust you!"

"Trust me or not, you're my prisoner. Don't fuck with me, Savannah. I'm a very impatient man."

She bit on her lower lip, perusing him. "She's powerful, very powerful. But I think you know that already."

If it made her talk, he'd agree with anything she said. "Go on."

"Don't make me do this," she whispered. The tears that blurred her eyes fell. Baz felt like a total bastard. He knew that, though, so it didn't stop him from questioning her further.

"Tell me about why you think this Shadow Queen is a threat. How do those things figure in?"

She paused. "You really don't know?"

"I'm asking, aren't I?"

"I'm not sure of the details, how it started. But I do know that now there's no reversing it. Once changed, they're changed for good."

"What do you mean... changed?"

She widened her arms, frustrated, her eyes flashing. "Changed. You know."

"Savannah." Baz pinched his nose between his forefinger and thumb. "I need information. I'm giving you a chance to save yourself. I

suggest you take it."

"Fine." She gave him another baleful look. "They turn into them. What you call *monsters*."

"How long does this take to happen?"

She bit her lower lip. "Sometimes years. Or sooner, if she feasts on them longer and more often."

He quieted for a moment, perusing her over. "How is it that were you spared?"

She paled, her brow furrowing. "I wasn't. But I don't think it'll harm me much. She feasted on my mother several times, and now she's... not the same. But she's still my mom, and she's kept me safe."

He hedged, wanting more information. "This Shadow Queen sounds dangerous."

Savannah nodded. "Yes. We've heard she's a demon, or some alien being, maybe a witch. Whatever she is, she's stronger than we are."

"You don't know what she is?" His voice was curious, despite himself.

She retorted quickly. "Do you? You have a lot of questions."

He hummed noncommittally. "If she is what you insinuate, she should be destroyed."

"You try." She shot him a snide look. "Many have. Though, to be told, many have died because of it."

"I haven't. Trust me, Savannah. I only want information."

"If I believed that..." She hushed, glaring at him. "No matter. You'll do what you want. And then you'll kill me."

"If you give me the information I need, I'll set you free."

"Do you swear it?"

He nodded, inwardly wondering at a woman that would be so innocent as to believe a stranger's word. The zipper of her mouth unlocked and she spoke openly.

"She came on the wave of the Sundering," she said. "The Ancients cast her from their world to ours. It's an old story, and I'm sure you've heard it repeated. The world hasn't been the same since."

"You think it's related?"

"Of course."

He scoffed. "I'm not so certain. Stories like that are often embellished."

"These aren't."

“My father—”

Baz halted. Jin wasn't his father, no matter how much he regarded him to be. Out of respect for the Storyteller, Sebastian kept his skepticism to himself. For this woman, he wouldn't.

Savannah raised an eyebrow. “Your father...”

Her question bothered him. The pest. She had no business in his.

“He spoke of her. He spoke of the Sundering,” Baz admitted. “I never thought it was true.”

“Then you're a fool.”

“Watch it.”

She shirked at his harsh tone. Maybe he was too rough-sounding, but she exasperated him. What right did she have to question him? He fumed, and as he sat forward, he grabbed her shoulders in his meaty fists. She winced.

“Whether I've met the Shadow Queen or not,” he said, mocking her, “I refuse to think that infantile fables are the truth. I'm a soldier, not a wet-eared boy.”

“The Sundering is the truth, and so is the Shadow Queen. Hope that you never meet her. Pray that you never meet her.”

Baz wasn't about to give anything away, but his voice harshened. “I know I want to get out of this hellish place. Enough talk. I've heard all I need to know. Hold out your wrists, little girl. I've waited long enough with this foolish talk, and just as I suspected, you're the collateral I need.”

She scooted back, hitting the wall, ignoring his instruction. “You mean you're not letting me go?”

“Why would I?”

“I told you everything you wanted to know!”

“I never said I would set you free. Now, best get comfortable, princess. We'll be here a long while.”

She lowered her chin, muttering indistinctly, giving him baleful looks as she stalled in obeying. But after minutes passed, and he showed her no signs of relenting, she listened, which was more than he reckoned on.

Obstinately, she ignored him. As time passed, he saw her rubbing her wrists with the opposite fingers. Baz didn't give a shit if they were sore. She defied him, and if she'd been smart, she might have been free already. But, no. She had a sharp tongue on her, which, despite

himself, he liked. Damn him for it, too.

As she slept, he took her in. She was younger than he first thought, maybe even younger than Mato. Though her hair was long, tied back low on her neck, it was jagged cut, as if by a knife, then hurriedly pulled back as if with little thought to detail. Freckles adorned her cheeks and lay across her tiny nose. All of her was tiny, from wrist, to limb, to fragile body. He could easily break her, and he would, if she opposed him.

There was something in that fragility that called to him, that roused a protective surge. He'd have to tamp that down. She was the enemy, and she consorted with the beasts. No one could convince Baz those things weren't dangerous. He'd seen the evidence for himself.

It stayed quiet, no action on the outside, so Sebastian rested his eyes. He woke to a knife being held out in front of him. Immediately, he flipped to a fighting crouch, taking the weapon with little force or energy. The woman he contained, his knee upon her heaving abdomen.

A deathly grin fastened on his face. He loved the fight. It was in his blood.

She fought him, and god, he liked it. She sat up, and spit, missing. Her eyes burned fire. Suddenly, he wanted her, intensely and furiously. Baz dropped his grip, horrified at the thought. Mato was his bride-to-be; this woman, a stranger, the enemy.

"You bastard. I'll fight you until I die!"

"That may be sooner than you think, if you don't calm yourself. Stop. You're pissing me off."

Again, she cried, but it was tears of fury, not pain. "Let me go. I swear, my mother will come looking for you."

"Let her," Baz said. "I'll welcome the challenge."

That wasn't true. He cared little for killing those things, however much they deserved it. Their mortality struck at his conscience, inducing mercy, not the punishment of pain.

"You don't understand, believe me. I must go home," she said. "My baby needs me."

"I don't care." That wasn't true. He did care, and worried it might be a fact, though he knew his prisoners said just about anything to be free of the Assassin.

"Stop complaining," Baz said. "I'll meet your needs, but only when I

accomplish what I've set out to do."

His promise made the tears pause. She looked at him with incredulous doubt. "You'll let me go?"

"Did I say I would?"

She bit her lower lip, scowling. Baz amended his statement.

"I need to figure out some things first. You're going to help me."

Doubt covered her face. "I can't help you."

"Do you want to see your kid again?"

She quieted. "Are you that evil, that you would keep a mother from her child?"

"Yes."

"Who *are* you?"

Baz steadily looked at her. "A soldier, nothing more."

She inhaled sharply. "You're hers, aren't you? The Shadow Queen's?"

"No. I thought I made that abundantly clear. I belong to another."

Savannah's brow furrowed. "There is no other."

"There is," he said, leveling a glance at her. "Where I'm from. Where I plan to return."

"And you need my help, because..."

He laughed mirthlessly. "I don't want to get killed by those damned beasts before I make it home to my bride. That's why."

Crossing her arms, she narrowed her gaze. "You call them beasts. I've told you it's not their fault."

"They kill, princess, in case you didn't notice. You see the blood on my clothes?"

She blanched. "Yes. I see. You've made it clear how you feel. Well, I know one thing. My daughter needs to eat. If you want help, take me to her. I'll do what you want."

Baz circled her neck with his fingers, cutting off her words. "You're going to do it, anyway."

Without a pause, she grabbed his wrists and pushed him away. He laughed, amused.

"I'm going to clue you in on who you're killing when you keep me hostage. It's not me. It's my baby girl."

"I'm listening." He chuckled at how tiny she was, how minute and frail. She wouldn't be able to break a twig, let alone him.

"I'll make you understand who you're really hurting here. It's my

daughter. She's three. Her name is Zora."

He didn't answer. She glared, daring him, her eyes fiery.

"I'll tell you one thing. If her father were here, things would be different."

"Yeah, how?"

"He would kill you." Baz barked a laugh. She continued. "And he could stop the Shadow Queen. He's military, very strong."

"Military?"

"Yes."

"Where are they, if they're needed to defeat this queen?"

She paused. "I don't know. I heard they were sent west."

"There are some large military bases out there," Baz said, nodding, pulling shit. He hadn't a clue, but he spouted off things he might have said among his own rank of soldiers. "Yeah. I'll bet he was sent there."

Savannah nodded. "There are many of them, especially in the mountains. Hidden bunkers and such. He never could tell me of those things."

"No. Protected info."

"Yes."

Baz felt out his words. "I'm not familiar with this area. Is all the land like this?"

"What do you mean?"

"Destroyed?"

She gaped. "Of course. It's been that way for centuries. How can you not know that?"

Quickly, he covered himself. "My area isn't this bad."

"Oh. I see." She gave him a confused glance.

"Enough talk," he said, not about to entangle himself in more lies. "Get up. Straighten yourself and get back in the corner where I can watch you. And Savannah?"

She quieted. "Yeah?"

"Test me again, I swear to you, and it'll be your last time."

21

Mato stared at the desert, the wave of heat blasting her like a mist of fury. It was her death bower. If only she hadn't told the queen those lies. It was an impulse that would kill her. Tiran, too.

"Now?" she asked, turning to the king. He nodded. Dismay rolled from him like the drops of sweat on his brow. Likely, he'd not forgive her. Not that it mattered if he did or not. Soon, they'd both be dead.

Mato didn't want to enter the deepest part of the desert. She felt safer in the camp at its edge, even though she was a prisoner with no say. Despite that, she was Tiran's, and she loved it. Just last night, he'd proved it to her.

She stood at the gateway to the Hell Domain, knowing her end was near. She'd removed her jacket some time ago, her blouse sticking to her with sweat. Tiran stood next to her, a sword strapped to his back and a blade to his side.

"Aren't you taking the guards?" she asked.

Tiran ignored the fear in her voice. "One is enough. If we get through, he'll be the one left to report back to my mother. Besides, we need a guide to follow the trail the Assassin left behind."

"If he left anything." Tiran didn't respond. Mato needed him to talk. His rectitude made her nerves shot.

"Sebastian won't be pleased to see me on the other side."

"Do you think I care?" he snapped, sighing. "I'll be glad just to see us through. Now, let's get moving."

The guard nodded at Tiran's command. Then, they stepped foot deeper on the rocky sand of the vast divide between life and death.

The Hell Domain called to them. It forced them to answer.

They'd only just crossed the border into the divide before Mato was ready to stop. Her body felt depleted of all moisture. She couldn't think because of the heat pounding down. Tiran also looked ready to crash. The guard pointed at another sign from Baz. They followed, the signs becoming staggered and almost obsolete the further they entered the desert. Every once in a while, the guard paused, touched the ground, nodded, and then they continued onward.

Mato sidled next to Tiran. "Are we lost?"

The guard answered. "No, Miss. The trail loops around. Apparently, the Assassin went up north before coming back around. There's no sign of his horse."

"What happened to it?"

Tiran looked ready to drop. He snapped a reply. "Likely it died. As we will if we don't find shelter soon. Your questions will have to wait."

They came upon the grave of the horse the next morning. Baz must be devastated. Mato sometimes figured he cared for that horse more than he ever cared for her, and she wasn't happy that Tiran was correct with his guess. Maybe she wouldn't see Sebastian again, but she wouldn't survive the queen's demand, either. It was sobering. Worse, she would die a horrible, suffocating death, buried in the deep like that faithful beast of burden under its rocky hallow. In both cases, she was doomed.

Even though her father's bedtime stories were likely just that, and the chance of her getting through a portal she wasn't sure existed, was nil, she hoped for the best. Mato wasn't a seer or someone who jumped the edges of time and space. She was a poverty-stricken woman trying to make good of her life for herself and for family. One thing she knew: her goals would kill her—if the Regent didn't first.

Mato couldn't stay silent. She tugged on the king's arm. "My king. I can't go on. We are dying. *You* are dying on this fruitless journey. Please, let's go home."

"It's a journey we'll continue to make," he said, quieter than he'd been in the days past. He was wilting before her, the heat and the oppression of his goal fading him away. "There's nothing to be done. If I want my kingship returned to me, I must do this. And you'll be by my side until the end, or Mato, I swear I will kill you myself."

Mato cried under the illusion of wiping her face free from the never-ending dust breezing through the air. If Tiran saw tears, he'd berate her for her weakness. This was the reason she needed him, so that she could have power, and not to be alone.

Straightening her spine, she remembered who she was: a woman heading a secret nation, heading an uprising, and causing dissension among the greatest of the land. She was anything but weak. Time to act like she was worthy.

"I am with you, Majesty." He gazed at her with cool eyes. He didn't believe her, and he wasn't far off in not doing so. She was a liar, through and through. "My father isn't wrong about our family. Have faith; I will see us through the portal. I swear it to you."

"You better." His eyes glazed from the weariness of the days. "I mean to have everything, and not you or anyone else will keep me from my way."

Just then, the guard paused and kneeled on the ground. His dust-covered face looked up, triumph in his gaze. "This is it, my king. What we've been looking for. The trail has ended."

"What does that mean for me?" Tiran said. He came to life. His eyes flickered with hope. Fool. There wasn't anything out there. "The Assassin could have died and his body become scrap for scavengers. I want proof. Find it."

"Your proof is here," the guard insisted. "I will scout the area, but I am certain of it. The portal is near."

Wandering close, Mato spied an unusual bird, white, with yellow striped wings. She pointed. "What kind of bird was this?"

The guard warded himself. "Don't touch!"

"I won't," she said, her nose curling up. "It's dead."

"Not just dead, but also not from here." The guard's face blanched, his body stiff. He warded himself twice more.

"What do you mean?" Tiran asked.

"In this entire land, no such bird exists. That bird is from the Shadow Queen."

Mato burst out laughing. "My father would approve of that fear, but remember. They're fables. This is a dead bird, nothing more."

"Believe that if you wish," the guard said. "The Shadow Queen sent that bird. The portal is near. And I would guess your Sebastian of Zelal followed through."

"Well..." Mato chuckled. "Let's just see."

Throwing rock after rock determinedly in the air, she stared the guard down. Then, she heard it, rocks hitting something solid, not ground, not limb. Something was out there, and her body shivered at the implication. Her eyes popped wide.

Tiran heard it, too. He came close, excitement in his voice. "Do it again, little bird. Throw it again. Find my portal."

The guard chucked down his money pouch. His face was pale, but determined. "I rescind my pay. I'm done. My family needs me, and no way in hell would you catch me dealing with the evil on the other side."

Tiran shot him a fiery look. "You can't leave."

"I can. I am. You're on your own, your Highness. Mercies, miss. I hope you find forgiveness on the other side."

He backed up, another ward crossing his heart. Then he ran, leaving them behind.

Alone.

Instead of panicking, Tiran came closer to her. Getting his hands dirty for the first time during the trip, Tiran kneeled and grabbed rock after rock, throwing it. He found nothing, but at Mato's first throw, she heard it again—the rock hitting a buzzing, humming solidity.

The sound wasn't apparent right away, but as the rock hit, it intensified as though the wall of nothingness were angry. Mato jumped up, cautiously heading in the sound's direction. Her hands outstretched; then she felt it. The portal was real. She blinked, unconvinced.

Tiran didn't allow her victory. Shoving her to the side, he took his stance in front of her, reaching out for the wall. His hands jerked back as though singed.

"The damned thing *burned* me."

Mato stared at him in disbelief. A wall wasn't alive.

Except, it was. For her, it was. The anger realized the moment she threw another rock, buzzing and whining incessantly in the still air.

Tiran tried. Nothing.

He gave her a cool look, warning her that if she were tricking him, she'd pay. Mato shook her head. This wasn't a trick. She was as surprised as he.

She threw another damning rock. It hit. The wall buzzed, angrier

then before. She stepped back, uncertain.

Pushing her aside, her lover tossed rock after rock into the realm of the invisible nothing. He didn't hit a thing.

The king turned to her, frustration in the lines of his face and in the tone of his voice. "You do it. I won't have that thing test me again."

He acted as if the invisible thing were cognizant. It was impossible, yet Mato had to see for herself. Cautiously, she reached out her hands, bracing herself as she slowly walked forward. She felt the hum as she came upon it. It was real. The portal was here. Evidence lay under her fingertips.

"It's not hurting you."

No, it wasn't. There was something inhuman about the feel of the buzz under her fingers. Obviously, the portal couldn't be sentient, yet the idea crossed through her mind. It felt so solid, impossibly resilient, a thrumming *thing* that somehow appeared to be pleased with her touch.

The king reached beyond her to touch it again, flinging backwards as the wall zapped him. Mato felt the energy force move under her hands, unable to stop the portal's furious reply to his intrusion.

Dusting himself off, he stood, furiously glaring at her as if it were her fault about the portal's response. Mato swallowed uneasily.

"I didn't know it was like this. I didn't even truly believe my father's stories."

"Yet you brought us here. Fix it. Do it now."

The look he gave her was threatening, impenetrable. She knew him enough to understand she was in danger. He may kill her, after all. Touching her barren stomach, with the womb that remained empty, Mato prayed for the first time in her life, begging to the Ancients that there was a world beyond.

She wasn't ready to die. Sitting back with inaction wasn't her way of doing things, so she did the next best thing. She fought back.

"Why did you bring me here?" She couldn't keep her lower lip from trembling. Mato didn't intend to feel dismay, yet she did. "Out here, in this nothingness where I'm destined to die?"

"I didn't send you. The Regent did."

"You obeyed," she said, contradicting, but hardly accepting. "You didn't tell her no."

"You lied to the queen. It's an act punishable by death, but I saved

you. You should thank me.”

She gasped. “*Thank* you? Any sane person would save themselves from her. Even you do.”

“She’s my mother. What I do is of no interest to you.”

She ignored his snide statement, knowing he wanted to vex her. How easily he accomplished it, lover to lover, fighting to the end. His stare didn’t relent, but neither did hers.

“You forced me here. Why, Tiran? Why?”

The tears scalded. Anger burned. Mato was so furious, she shook. But she couldn’t show the pain he induced, only the hurt. Hurt was something he excelled in, thrived under. He’d never apologize—never.

“Remember one thing, Mato,” he said, his voice chilled. “I don’t answer to you, or to anyone. Think hard when you question me.”

Mato’s infuriation spread through her body, a wildfire that singed. No way would she back down now.

“You’re a coward, Tiran,” she said, backing until her fingers securely touched the invisible wall. This portal has been here for who knows how long. If you wanted to end the reign with your mother, all you had to do was go after it. Instead, you use me as your pawn.”

Her hand remained on the reassurance of the wall. She would die, but at least she would die without regret in her heart that she left words unsaid. After all, she was a warrior. She would end her life as one, too.

Tiran came at her, danger in his gaze. She closed her eyes, the security of the portal under her fingertips. Leaning on it for support, Mato again worded a prayer to a god she didn’t believe in.

One minute the king was a step away from harming her, the next she felt the brush of cool wind against her skin. Opening her eyes, she fell to her knees beside a tall, black stone.

Where the hell was she? This wasn’t Yrurra. This wasn’t anywhere she knew at all. Understanding hit her. She made it through the portal. She was on the other side, in the mirror world, alone and confused, with no provisions, and no one to see her through.

The Ancients mocked her. They answered her prayer, but at a cost. Mato, despite everything, would die.

22

Baz's prisoner was humming off-tune, annoying the hell out of him, occasionally increasing the volume until the song was so high-pitched, she squeaked. She did it on purpose, her small chuckle doing nothing but making him want to wring her tiny, little neck. Occasionally, Savannah shot him a curious look, as if she measured him but couldn't figure him out. He wouldn't give her the satisfaction of letting her know she got to him.

"I have to pee," she said. Her gaze stayed neutral, but he knew what she planned. No one ever got the best of him.

"Fine," he said, standing as well. "I'll take you."

"You can't watch," she said, uncomfortably squirming. Her blush stained her pale cheeks a flagrant shade of pink. Let her squirm. Let her be uncomfortable. If she were afraid of him and what he could do, she'd be less likely to run.

Going to the abutting room, he opened the door and gestured inside. He'd already scoped it out for entry and exit, and for anything inside that could be used against him. There wasn't anything, so her using it for practical matters didn't bother him. Plus, he could still monitor her if she bolted.

Sweeping his arm wide in an encouraging gesture, his lip curled with a smirk. "There." She hissed under her breath. He chuckled softly. "Squat, princess."

She moved past him. "Bastard."

"I am," he agreed. "Remember that."

He'd seen prisoners in all levels of duress, and he'd made them

uncomfortable in every way. Savannah's shyness didn't faze him.

She took care of business, her hands occasionally touching her breasts, a look of pain on her face. She kept pulling at her blouse, a wet stain growing across the front of it.

"What the hell is the matter? Stop fooling around."

She dropped her hands, scowling. "I'm not. My milk...it's time to feed my baby."

"Why are you still nursing a three-year-old?"

Incredulously, she stared at him. "What else am I going to feed her? Food is scarce, and I won't see her starve."

"Isn't there anyone else to hunt or forage?"

"Who? The *monsters*?"

"They know how to hunt. Let them feed the kid."

Savannah shifted, restless. "She can't eat what they do."

"Raw, rotten meat?"

Baz knew he was being snide, but he didn't care. Savannah defended creatures with no warrant for redemption. He saw no sense in it, and he wouldn't go along with it any longer.

"You know as well as I do that she'll go hungry."

His teeth gritted at the truth. "I don't hurt children."

"You are if you don't let me go."

His silence answered the question. She scowled, tears rolling down her cheeks. She furiously brushed them away.

"I have to get rid of my milk."

He felt a stain of discomfort cover his cheeks, though embarrassment wasn't something he easily experienced. Her statement felt personal, intimate. Mato, with his child against her body; that's all he should envision, not the woman before him. Savannah, and this strange world, was tearing him apart.

"Hurry, then. I have to keep watch, and you're risking us both with your strange requests."

"Not strange," she said. "Imperative."

She turned her back, a sigh hushing into the still air. His stance tightened. This wasn't what he wanted or expected when he took the woman prisoner, not that he'd never kept women hostage before. Except his former captives died soon after capture. Not her. Savannah would be used as leverage, and he meant to keep her as long as possible.

Rather than let his prisoner take over his thoughts and his actions, Sebastian barked out one of the pervading questions on his mind. She'd answer, or she'd pay. As she finished, and after she covered up, he questioned her.

"What do you know about Nebuchadnezzar's Gate?"

She paled, and she circled herself over her chest in a ward to keep monsters away. He wasn't superstitious, but he understood the sentiment. "We don't go there. No one does."

"Why?" He had to have answers, even if it came from the enemy.

"Because those that do, never come back."

Baz crouched with his elbows resting on his knees, perusing her for honesty. "You sound like you talk from personal experience."

"I do," she said. "My brother. He thought the Gate was a joke. He went there with some friends, and he never returned."

Baz questioned her softer than before, although the tragedy in her eyes was old. After all, he wanted her to talk, not to refuse him any access to information. "How old was he?"

"Fourteen. Our mother mourned for years. I was young. I don't remember him."

Baz didn't tell her that if the boy made it through alive, he still had to combat the desert and its heat. Likely, the boy died long ago, and by the look on Savannah's face, she knew it.

"You're from there, aren't you? The other side?" she asked.

"I am."

"How did you survive?"

Baz gave her a long look. "I don't know."

She nodded, absorbing his statement in silence. "We've heard of it, the other kingdoms. Is it as beautiful as they say?"

He considered that. "Yes. It is."

"But..." She left the question hanging.

"But, like here, in this place, there is a queen. And she's powerful enough to make what is beautiful seem ugly."

"She's unkind?"

"Very."

"And you're her servant."

"I am."

"Why would you choose to serve a queen that hurts others? If you are a soldier, as I imagine you are, why not fight back?"

"I want to live. If I am faithful, I'll be rewarded in the end."

Savannah grunted. "Seems like it's not worth it, to me."

"I have a bride waiting for me on the other side. Her family needs me. I can't leave them alone."

"You left them for this," she muttered. "I'd never willingly leave my baby girl."

"I value my head. I'm better off listening, then disobeying and ruining my bride and her whole family by my dismissal."

She crossed her arms. "Let me get this straight. You have an evil queen. *We* have an evil queen. Don't you know the stories?"

He paused. "I don't believe them."

"You should. Because they're true. The Sundering killed this world. It ripped it apart. And when the Ancients return--"

Baz laughed. "They can't return. They don't exist."

"Do you think that any of this was normal?" She spanned her arms wide. "No. Once upon a time, this world was beautiful, too. Yeah, we should have listened to those who told of this downfall. But we didn't. So now, look at us. We are destroyed."

"And the Gate?"

"It's the pathway, yes. But you have to go through the Shadow Queen to get there, and believe me, she's someone to be avoided at all cost."

What she said resonated. He couldn't let himself believe, for if he did, Jin's fables were real. Ru, who listened, was correct in following Jin's words. And Baz, who always did the opposite of Ru, was the fool. But more so, if it were real, and the Ancients could return, the two worlds weren't just going to be ruled by evil queens. They would be annihilated by demons of the highest power. And life, any life, would cease to exist.

Those were the stories. They only made sense if Nyssa, the Dark Queen, was an exiled Ancient. It only made sense if Alore were the same. Savannah was wrong. She was wrong about everything. It took all of his willpower not to untie her and throw her back outside, exposed and ready for the creatures to take out. No mercy should be shown to liars or fools.

Savannah slept. Outside, the creatures roamed. Baz expected his hideout to be discovered, but even after time, it hadn't been. Thankfully, because of the provisions left behind by whoever lived

previously, they had enough to survive on for a while.

Hour by hour, Savannah hummed that obnoxious tune. Finally, Baz halted her.

"What the hell are you singing?"

"My daughter's lullaby." She paused, swallowing back tears. "I hope she's not dead."

He couldn't answer. His throat tightened. It would be his fault, of course, and that would stay forever on his conscience. More time passed. He couldn't stop thinking of the song, the one Savannah stopped singing. Maybe she believed her child was already gone.

Midnight came and went, then the hours following. After a while, he realized that he'd gain nothing unless he went forward into battle for himself.

"Get up. We're leaving." She didn't move, despondent. She'd given up, and he hated that. "I'll say it again, just to give mercy, but don't make me angry, Savannah. Get your ass moving."

"Where are we going?"

"To get your damn kid," he said, already heading towards the exit. She would follow, because he was giving her exactly what she wanted. Little did she understand his motivation.

Baz eased out of the building, both keeping guard on his prisoner and making sure all was clear. Savannah followed complacently.

Above and beyond him, the empty buildings rocked, torn and disembodied in the wind. According to Savannah, the Sundering did more than release evil into the worlds. It disrupted and decayed everything around them. This world was destroyed, a vacancy of what must have once been vibrant life.

Sebastian didn't know why his world had been spared when this one clearly hadn't. Nyssa, the Dark Queen and Queen Regent of the lands, didn't care about her subjects. Why Yrurra didn't meet the same fate as this land confused him. But he was at the point he didn't give a shit. He wanted to survive, and right now that meant taking Savannah, retrieving her little girl, and getting the hell away, back into the safety of his shelter.

Glancing sharply at her, he said, "Scream, or alert anyone or anything, and I'll kill your child right in front of you. Don't pull a stupid stunt."

She nodded, and he grabbed her by the arm, pulling her from the

shadows of the building, the gun in his other hand. Quickly, he moved down the abandoned street to the housing of the beasts, Savannah in tow. She complied, so she knew what was at stake. Good, because Baz wouldn't hesitate to shoot any of those monsters she called family if his life was in peril.

They reached the building, and he cautiously entered. Nothing was in sight. Strange, but he didn't think about it too much. Perhaps the creatures weren't smart. Baz would always have left a guardsman behind.

"Where is she?"

Savannah pointed. "Just in the next room."

The girl was sleeping, a threadbare blanket clutched to her chest. Baz released her, and Savannah rushed over to her child, gently waking her.

"Come on, sweetie," she said, choking back sobs. "Mommy's here. Be super quiet, Zora. Okay, honey? Mommy's got you."

The child cried, and Savannah immediately hushed her, wrapping her in her arms. "Let's go, baby."

"Where, Mommy?" Zora said, squirming a little. The girl looked at Baz and stilled. She stuck her thumb in her mouth, watching him, the blanket clutched in her small fingers.

The girl had a riot of blond curls, messy around an elfin face. Sebastian felt a tug in his heart. Children had been denied him the moment the Regent gave her command, and more so when he entered the portal into this land. Everything he'd ever wanted, he'd been denied. Maybe it was punishment. If so, he deserved it, and by witnessing Savannah and Zora, he knew just how much.

"Get a move on." Savannah listened, heading his way.

Baz heard a stir outside. They had to hurry.

"Is there a back exit?"

She gestured. He took her arm, warning her silently not to try anything. Savannah nodded, following him, Zora in her hold.

They would have to go around the block. Dangerous, but not impossible. It was nearly dawn, where in this world the sun turned brilliant, and the skies opened with morning light after the decay of the obsidian night.

"There's a guard on the East end," Savannah said.

Baz already knew that. He'd scoped the area more than once when

finding the right retreat.

He felt a tug on his arm. His instinct was to turn and fight, but he quickly realized that it was the little girl. Her voice was hushed and in awe.

"You have long hair," she said. "Boys aren't s'posed to have long hair."

He ignored the innocent remark, directing a question towards Savannah. "Any others?"

She warily nodded. "There's Otter. He's eleven, but he doesn't—"

Sebastian didn't have time for explanations. "Give me the kid. Go grab him and don't mess around. I'm getting impatient."

Without complaint, she handed him Zora and scooted off. He liked that; she was learning.

The little girl stared at him. Then, she reached out and petted his hair, picking up one of his braids and flopping it back down, doing it again and again. Baz froze. Children feared him, but not her. She giggled and stroked it some more. "Your hair is pretty," she said.

He took her hand away, grumbling, not in irritation, but because he envied Savannah for having her. Thankfully, Savannah came back shortly, the boy in tow. The eleven-year-old was scrawny, with overly long, shaggy brown hair. He said nothing.

"Come on, let's go. And keep him quiet, too."

"He doesn't talk."

"Good, I don't want to hear him, anyway."

Savannah tried to reach around him. She ignored him, as she was prone to. "I want my baby girl."

"She's collateral. Follow me, and if you behave, you'll get her back."

Keeping close to the walls of the dilapidated buildings, they made it back to his shelter. Baz barricaded the door once they all were inside, still not feeling safe. It was odd, but fortuitous that nothing noticed them, and not once did he see any of the raging beasts.

Savannah immediately settled on the floor and fed Zora. Baz averted his gaze. Taking a strip of jerky from his provision pouch, he threw it at the boy, who caught it, hungrily gnawing it. "How often do you eat?"

Savannah shrugged. "Food is scarce. I don't know how to hunt, and the animals out there scare me."

"Yet look at the animals you shelter with," he mocked.

"It's not the same thing. I know them."

Baz was too exhausted to argue further. "I'm resting my eyes. Keep them quiet. And Savannah... you know what I'll do if you scream."

She nodded, pulling her daughter closer to her. Otter hung at her side, his dark eyes watchful. Sebastian had more than them to worry about. Somewhere out there, Alore waited. She wanted her prize, and Baz knew what would happen if he failed getting it for her. But for now, he closed his eyes, then drifted into restless sleep.

23

Mato lay there an indefinite time, woozy and afraid. This land was nothing as her father described, but then again, she wasn't sure if he knew the truth, either. Her soul hurt, her mind stung, and her body ached in places they'd never ached before. Still, she was alive, and on the other side.

Things weren't as simple as leaving the past behind. Mato was convinced her life was void after the words she said to the king. She wasn't dead, thank the gods, so she needed to brace up and figure out what the hell she did to make it through the portal, and what the hell she needed to do to survive.

Just as she was about to rise, she heard a man's voice from behind her. "Well, what have we got here?" He drew closer, and she saw he was both large and terrifying.

Mato froze. She'd never been attacked; having Sebastian as her guardian and fiancé guaranteed that, but now she was alone with her own power to save or destroy. She rose to her feet. Her sensuality repeatedly saved her. Willingly, she'd use it again.

Standing tall, she showcased her body. No man ever turned her down.

She turned further, inspecting him and hoping her fear was completely hidden. He was a wolf, and she the tender lamb, useless in a world foreign to her. Perhaps she'd been hasty in thinking she could control anything about this man.

"Are you the master of this land?"

He chuckled. He was indeed as large as she imagined him to be,

perhaps larger, with broad shoulders and muscles under his military uniform. Strange weapons hung at his side, but it was the shape and obvious sharpness of the blade in his hand that had her shivering with absolute fright. She knew that this was a man that wouldn't halt in harming her.

"Do you think I am?" Her spell wasn't working on him; either he had a distaste for women, or he had fortitude beyond the ordinary. It may not be magic, but her body always enticed.

Mato gave him an examining head-to-toe glance, trying to find flaw. She couldn't read him, making it impossible to determine her next step.

"If you are not, will you take me to the man that is?"

The hand with the knife didn't lower, and though his voice was steady, she guessed he mocked her attempts at teasing him. "Why are you so certain it's a man?"

He said it as if he knew there was a queen in Yrurra, yet by his tone, it was a queen that he hated. It shouldn't be possible for him to have such knowledge about her world, but then again, her father knew of this place. How, she'd never understood.

"Who is it, then?"

He laughed, a dangerous sound. "My *leader* is my queen."

He gave no leeway, and with a flush going through her body, she stammered another useless question. "When will she be back?"

The man chuckled, baiting her. His eyes gleamed; he wanted her discomfort, her raging fear. "She's hunting."

"Can I meet—"

His face darkened, done with her. His hand dropped, and swiftly he put the knife away. Mato's breathing eased.

"Come with me."

"I'm no trouble. Just take me—"

The man ignored her. Grabbing her arm, he tugged her to him, binding her with a metal clasp around her shaking wrists. She couldn't break free, no matter how she tried. Mato knew one thing: if she couldn't find some way to break free, whether to persuade or to beg, things would soon go sour.

"What's your name?"

He grunted, testing whether she'd break free. She wouldn't. He'd bound her with no regard to gender or frailty. The grumble of his

answer could scarcely be heard.

“Taig.”

“I’m Mato.”

This time, his laugh scared her. He released her, pushing her aside. Mato stumbled, and damn, he let her.

“I don’t care who the hell you are. Quiet.”

Mato clammed her mouth shut. She needed to fight her way loose, but she also needed to know the truth. She could only do that by obedience.

Questions spun through her head. Where was Sebastian, and was he dead? What kind of world was this, anyway? Squirming around as if she didn’t willingly want to go wouldn’t work. She needed to appear helpless. Unfortunately, the truth stung. She was more helpless than she ever wanted to be.

As she was pulled along, Mato stared with amazement at the dark, barren land she’d come to. She’d never seen a night like this: all-encompassing, with no hint of glazed light.

Carefully, she moved closer to the man that had taken her. In the bleak, naked light, in the crevices of the abandoned city, wild animals lurked, hunting, watching every move they made. At home, animals like that stayed in the forest region, too afraid to come near the villages. Here, they had no fear. Mato feared. She stayed by Taig’s side, even if she should be more afraid of him than the beasts.

“Where is everybody?”

“Hiding. Or dead.” He didn’t look at her, instead dragging her further down broken streets and by the sky-tall buildings that looked half-rotten and ready to topple over.

“How long has it been like this?”

He paused, his voice hushed. “About two hundred years. The Sundering took it all away. Aren’t you aware of what happened?”

She shuddered. “No. I don’t know anything about this place.” A violent cough overtook her, and as she cupped her bound hands to her mouth, blood covered them.

“Are you sick?” Any headway she’d made with him crumbled as he questioned what was an obvious answer. Mato couldn’t make up stories when her illness stared him in the face. She hacked into her hands again, sucking in a deep breath of cool air after. She was worn, and all she wanted was to lie down and rest.

"The mines. My lungs can't handle it anymore."

He looked her over. "You're a frail thing. Probably not worth the effort. Are you worth the effort?"

"Once I'm away from the red dust, I'll be better."

He grunted, clearly not believing her, but somehow letting her lie pass. His body covered in weapons and his skin flaked with dried blood. He was damn scary, but if he didn't hurt her now, maybe there was a reason he wanted her alive. Mato hoped it was a good one.

"Come on. You're slow, and I wait for no one."

She kept up as best as she could, not wanting to give him any reason to find fault. He found it anyway, the moment he gave her to rest, questioning her.

"How did you get through the portal?" His eyes roamed her from tip to toe, and he frowned. She puzzled him. Hell, she found no answer in the question for herself.

"I don't know."

"No one makes it through alive."

Maybe Sebastian *hadn't* lived. A part of Mato mourned. He had been a friend in her youth, but her father's obsession with binding them together in matrimony brought resentment. She could never love him, and now, she guessed, she didn't have to.

Her belly fluttered with unease, as the hair on her forearm lifted, and an icy chill ran along her spine. Then she heard a strange huffing sound, close to them in the darkness. Taig immediately went on alert.

"Don't move," he said, then he pulled out a weapon.

Mato followed his line of sight, then froze, scarcely able to breathe. A being stood watching them, almost human, mostly a beast.

"What is that?"

"That is us looking Death in the face." He analyzed her. "Can you handle a weapon?"

She nodded. He exhaled a puff of doubt, then he hauled her to him and took out the key to the cuffs, freeing her without another word. Mato rubbed her wrists with discomfort, all the while hoping that thing stayed far away. Taig acted unconcerned, although he'd let her go, so he was wary as well. Mato kept her gaze on the monster. It didn't come closer, as if it examined them just as they examined it.

"Here, take it," Taig said, handing her a weapon from the collection upon his back. "And don't think I won't kill you too, if you try to get

away.”

“I won’t run,” she said. Running might encourage the beast to come after her. If anyone was to die, it wouldn’t voluntarily be her.

It happened so fast; one minute Taig instructed her of what she had to do, the next instant he was down on the ground, held by a snarling monster. Mato couldn’t move. She couldn’t breathe, the weapon in her hand useless.

“Shoot, damn it,” he yelled, struggling under the weight of the beast. It didn’t harm him, instead it played with its prize.

Her hand trembled. This kind of thing would never have happened in Yrurra. Things that went bump in the night didn’t come to life and haunt its prey. There were other things to worry about than surreal-looking monsters.

“Shoot!”

In fear, she dropped the weapon. The beast came closer, clicking and grunting against her ear. Saliva dripped to the ground, its scent permeating her nostrils—stale earth and loamy sea. Mato closed her eyes. She didn’t want to see her death coming.

Its breath mingled with her own. Then, as she peeked through her eyelashes, it lifted its head, silently communicating to another beast. The creature that held Taig down retreated, and both beings returned to the shadows.

Taig rolled to the side, heaving. Mato didn’t keep her weapon; he yanked it from her hands before she could use it. Taig shot her a killing glance, as if she were to blame for his incapacitation.

“What the hell was that?”

“Do you think I know?”

“It pardoned you. Why?”

“I told you. I don’t know.”

“You’re hiding something.” He examined her with narrowed eyes. “Until I find out what it is, you’re chained to my side. Give me your hands.”

Mato slowly backed up, shaking her head. “I told you, I don’t—”

“Did I ask? Give me your fucking hands.”

She obeyed. Better to be a prisoner than dead. Taig had a crazed look in his eyes, and he was a stranger. If she had to keep her wrists bound, so be it. She’d find her way loose; she always did.

He dragged her behind him, walking at a fast clip, Mato struggling

to keep up. "What are those things?"

Taig grumbled, but said nothing. She added another soft query, not expecting an answer, but hoping for any bit of information he'd give.

"They're horrible. How can such beings exist?"

"I take it that you've never seen those things before?"

She stammered. "No. Of course not."

"Be glad of it. Come on."

"Are they everywhere?" Mato shot a quick look around. Taig caught her, scoffing arrogantly.

"You'll want to keep your eye out."

He hooked his fingers in the metal clasp that connected her wrists together, pulling. Mato scrambled to keep step alongside him.

"So they are?"

"There's enough around to scare you," he said, slowing his pace slightly when she fell into him once again.

Mato swallowed her pride. "Please. I don't want difficulty. Free me and I'll go my way. I won't bother you again."

Taig jerked to a halt, throwing his head back in a hearty chuckle. "I value my head, little one. If I were to take you prisoner and not show my queen, my life is forfeit. No one is worth that."

"But I'm worthless! I don't know how I ended up here," she said, a sob catching in her throat. "Please..."

"No."

It was simple. The case was closed. Taig said it, and Mato knew it to be true.

24

Taig didn't lie. He took her to an underground bunker, and there Mato was locked up, held hostage by the soldier's side, unable to move more than a few inches to the side, or to gain access to any privacy.

The days blurred, while the nights hid her from the rest of the world. Day after day, week after week passed, Taig keeping watch on her constantly. She tried seduction; though for once, her body wasn't for auction.

"What day is this?"

"Does it matter? You're fed, you piss, you sleep. Everything else is irrelevant."

Mato clenched her jaw. One thing she'd learned in the past days: her guard talked very little unless it was an order.

"Something's different," she admitted, hesitant to approach him. "I feel different, and I... I don't know what to do."

He set aside his tattered book, his face impenetrable. "What do you mean?"

"I haven't had my monthly cycle."

"So?"

"So, I'm pregnant."

"I assumed so. Question is, why should I care?"

"It's the king's."

"The king of the other side?" Taig smiled dangerously. The book thumped to the table beside him. She knew she'd finally caught his attention. He beckoned. "Come here."

She slid closer. Mato learned from experience that to disobey meant

her privileges were denied. Eventually, she would learn how the man worked, but for now she must comply when he told her something.

He pulled her in tight, his mouth whispering against her earlobe. "Let me tell you something. I don't give a royal fuck who the father is. Now sit back down and don't bother me again."

"You're an ass." If Mato were reprimanded for the disrespect, it was worth it.

"Yep. You're going to be of use to me. The beasts are interested in you, and if I have to trade, or use you as a sacrifice, I'll sure as hell do it. Do you understand?"

"Perfectly."

Taig buried himself into reading while Mato glared at him. Fury built up inside her like a volcano. "When are you taking me out of here?"

He didn't look up, slowly turning another page. "When I feel like it."

"It's been weeks."

More like a month or more. But, with time skewed, she couldn't tell. One thing she knew: she was going to beat him over the head with the book he casually held in his hands. The idea was so appealing, she smiled, attitude popping out of her mouth.

"You're a coward. You're afraid of those things."

"Anyone with sense would be afraid. Being a coward has nothing to do with it."

Clearly, he would not be provoked. Mato sighed. "I want to go outside."

Taig put down the book. "All right."

She blinked. "Really?"

"Yep."

He pulled her up and yanked her to his side. "All you had to do was ask."

Muttering, she said, "You're infuriating..."

"And I can feed you to the beasts. Watch yourself."

Mato wasn't sure if he teased. She still hadn't figured Taig out yet.

"I'll go first. Don't try anything. I only warn once."

She nodded compliantly. Inside, ideas and direct misbehavior churned. The last thing Mato did was listen.

Taig looked outside and then jerked his attention back to her. "Follow me. It's safe."

Mato mumbled, "Safe for you, maybe. Those things are out there somewhere. I don't need a repeat of earlier. They breathed me in, not you."

He didn't answer, so she questioned further. "Where do they come from?"

"They began showing up after the Sundering."

"I don't understand. Why?"

His jaw tightened. "That's not for me to say."

"You mean, you know, but you won't tell me."

He hesitated slightly. "Yeah."

"Why all the secrecy?"

"It's not about secrecy. I know my place."

She chuckled softly. "Who do you plead allegiance to? Who owns *you*?"

"If you're alive long enough, you'll find out."

He yanked on the chain. Mato pushed against the wall of his chest, trying to gain an inch or two between them.

"Don't manhandle me."

He chuckled harshly. "You're suspicious, and I'd treat you that way whether you are with child, or not. Don't expect anything better." He pushed her out the door. "No more talking, not unless you want to draw their attention. Let's go."

"I want a weapon." Taig grunted, not paying her words any attention. "Please. What if they come near again?"

"Then I throw you their way."

"But—"

"Quiet. I want to get there in one piece."

Mato stumbled to keep up. "Where are we going?"

"The second bunker. It's just ahead. If you shut up, we might make it before attracting attention."

Logical enough, except they had to bypass whatever foul things lurked in the shadows to get there. Mato wasn't convinced, and if she didn't do something soon, he'd lock her up again. This time, he might not let her go.

Mato brushed against him, so slightly he wouldn't dream it to be purposeful. She needed access to a weapon. He turned before she could pull one away from him.

Taig settled her, his hand heavy on her shoulder. "I know what

you're doing," he said. "You're resourceful, I'll grant you, but leaving my side with any kind of weapon is impossible."

Mato slyly replied, "Nothing is impossible. Surely your commander taught you that."

He didn't respond, so she continued baiting him. "Who is this paragon, that she believes in you so steadily? Don't you know anyone can be bought?"

His voice was thick and crisp. "That's where you're wrong. No one gets past her."

"Why have you been left behind? Didn't she find you worthy to have by her side?"

"I run things for the queen while she hunts. It's best that I've found you, instead of her. If she had, you'd already be dead."

Mato nodded with false sympathy. She couldn't continue faking it, at least when his queen returned. There was one thing Mato understood about royalty: they had no mercy. Not even she would allow dishonesty or lack of motivation. Mato knew about ruling, for she was a queen of the rebel masses.

"What does she hunt?"

Taig shot her a quick look. "You don't want to find out. Come on. We don't want to be here when the light fades."

He pulled her, her toes scarcely touching the ground as he took her scant weight. That was a thing about dying. Life caved as well as meat on the bones.

For what seemed like hours, Taig dragged her along. He was impossibly strong. Mato watched him as his muscles shifted with movement, hardly flagging, never stopping. She was the one who needed respite, not him.

"Stop."

He paused, but his voice was sharp. "What do you want?"

Mato hated to admit it. "I must rest."

He grumbled, nodding sharply, understanding exactly what she meant. "For a short while. But I'll be damned before I release you from these chains. Piss, and do it fast, because I'm moving again in two minutes."

She agreed before he could change his mind, scanning the area as though to find the ideal spot for relieving herself. She found what she was looking for—finally. The weeds looked harmless enough, but

Mato knew better; she'd gained knowledge from the perfect master. Thank the fuck for Majid.

Bending to the ground, pretending modesty, she grabbed at the silvery-gray leaves on the low-lying plant. Wormwood, and an abundance of it. When she added it to Taig's late-night tea, that's when she'd leave. Let him command her then. His queen be damned. Taig be damned too. He'd hallucinate, which was the plant's purpose. Mato contemplating on killing the warrior but settled on letting him live. The knowledge that he'd failed his duty would deal the striking blow.

Rising from her crouch, she tucked the leaves in the tiny pocket in her dress. Mato frowned, then she recalled Majid gifting her another potent herb the last time she visited him. Mato hadn't paid attention as he handed it to her, but if she gained the opportunity, she'd check out the vial he'd given. For now, she must exercise patience and wait until her guard stopped for the night.

"You finished?"

She sighed. "A few more minutes would have been nice."

"I don't trust you. Take what's given and be appreciative. Next time I might not be so lax."

He straightened her, tucking her into his side. Mato scarcely pocketed the herb before being jerked away.

Hours and hours passed. Her feet hurt, although he'd barely let them skim the ground.

The one thing she could gain was open observance of the area. Gods, what a dire and dirty land it was. They walked past empty buildings and boarded-up windows, scores, and scores of them. Mato hated to admit her queen kept Yrurra in beautiful disarray, a portrayed Utopia. This land was filthy. Mato would escape it as soon as she was able, returning to bask in her own royal rule.

Dusk fell. Taig's walk grew impatiently quick.

Then she heard it: a distinct growl. A clicking mumble. The monsters were nearby.

Mato tried walking on her own. Taig didn't let her. Instead, he lifted her, loosening the chain until he could shift her to his shoulder. Hanging on for dear life, her ass hung in the air and her face bumped against his wide back. He jostled her for a paused moment, then he ran.

“Hurry.”

Her captor didn't waste breath to reply. The ground they covered blurred and bumped on by. For once, Mato was glad about Taig's strength. If they made it to the second bunker, he would be exhausted. And Mato would be safe.

She pled for him to hurry again. A hiss passed his lips.

“If you don't shut the hell up, I'll drop you right here. Let's see how well you get along by yourself.”

Mato wasn't about to protest. The man was good at guarding her. He wouldn't shirk protecting her, at least as long as he found her worthy. If a man as capable as him were afraid of disobedience, his queen must be a real bitch. Maybe Mato could steal him away. Wouldn't that piss off whoever ruled this forsaken land? The idea kept her from fright, as he hurried them along in the semi-darkness to the second hideout.

Just as obligated, Mato didn't say another word. She may have been a liar, but she wasn't a damned fool.

25

Baz woke cranky. Predators were around, and he'd slept. Damn him for human flaw. It was up to him to stop them from infiltrating his sorry excuse of shelter, and to keep them alive. He had no time to rest.

Before he could reach for his weapons, Savannah spoke. "They won't come in here."

"How the hell do you know?"

She lifted her chin, her eyes weary. Had she even slept at all?

"Because my family is near."

Yes, he sensed it now, the size of monster, the amount of effort he'd have to expel to push them away from his sanctuary. So far, they stayed outside. But for how long? He was tired, so tired, and he only wanted to go home. This place was just as monstrous as the beasts within. None of that mattered. He had a job to do.

"Get your ass in the back room. Take the boy with you."

She moved to take her daughter. Baz interceded. "No. The girl stays with me."

She paled. "Please, no. I can't be separated—"

"Test me," he said complacently, while inwardly he boiled. "And I'll put her outside with the ravenous wolves. Try it, Savannah. See what I might do when crossed."

As if he hadn't threatened her life, the toddler crawled into his lap. By instinct, Baz pulled his arms around her, protecting the very object of his collateral. Let her test him. He would do precisely as promised if it meant they spared his life. No one else mattered. He told himself this, scarcely believing it.

The beasts wanted in. As he took stock of his pitiful hideaway, they circled, growing in number and in rage. Hisses, mumbles, sharp eyes, and sharper claws, they conversed.

Their bodies hit against the side of the building. Baz steadied his finger on the trigger of the weapon Taig gave him. "Come on. I'm ready, you hell-beasts."

They hit, hit, hit until the mumbles frenzied. The shelter was satisfactory, but he doubted it'd last through direct assault. Somehow, they hadn't found the way in. Just as Baz celebrated finding the perfect hideout, the building began rumbling. The hitting along the perimeter escalated into mania. Sebastian's face shined with sweat, and his gaze dropped to Zora. She slept, nestled in his left arm, childlike and unafraid.

Then—*damn it*—the rumbling sounded inside. The walls were coming down. Another rumble. Another hissing bang against the outer wall.

Shit!

Things were going south quick, quicker than he could react. The banging continued without letup, waking Zora. Her eyes widened, but she didn't call out. Then, in the next second, the entrance of the second room spewed dust and rock, and before he could do anything, it blocked by falling debris, Otter and Savannah hidden inside. All that was left was Sebastian and a frightened, quiet girl. Baz quickly holstered the gun and clasped her tight. In a split instant, Baz realized his mortality. He wasn't ready to die.

Zora took his face in her tiny fingers, whispering. "They want to come in."

He chilled. "Who?"

"The bad people."

Her words were enough to send jelly down his spine. "Sit tight, little girl," he said, a sorry attempt at consoling her.

Zora scrunched her face. Then she pointed, up, up towards the sky. She didn't speak, but her lower lip quivered. "They want in," she repeated. Then she scrunched into his body and, with a small, cracking voice, she whimpered. "I want Mommy."

"I know," Baz said, pulling her into him as if he could save her. He wasn't sure he could save himself. Somehow, he'd have to break through the debris to find out if Savannah and Otter were still alive.

Otherwise, he'd have an unexpected dilemma on his hands. He'd have a child to care for.

This world was shit. From strange beasts to the darkness that consumed, Baz was wholly unprepared. If his queen knew this, she sent him into hell. Maybe she was punishing him. He decided at that moment: if he ever returned to Yrurra, he'd kill that bitch. No hesitation; no qualm.

The hissing, after a frightening crescendo, moved away. The banging halted. There was complete silence.

Holding the child in his grasp, he rose to his feet. "Come on, little one. Let's go find her."

Baz removed a knife from his side, gripping it, even while his other arm held the girl. He never felt secure without some sort of weapon out or on his person. Now, with the unknown creeping all around him, it was necessity.

Going to the edge of the fallen rock, he heard Savannah calling at the top of her lungs. In part, he was glad of it. On the other, he feared it might call the beasts near.

"Stop yelling. I'll get you out."

"Hurry, please hurry! The walls are crumbling in."

She was frantic, appealing to him when she had no reason to trust him. He knew she worried about her daughter, and why wouldn't she? He was just as much a monster as those that roamed outside. The difference between them and him, however, was that he had moral conscience. He doubted the beasts did.

Zora set up a wail at the sound of her mother's voice. Instead of dumping the girl on the ground, hoping she didn't scurry off, Baz held her closer. Instinctual, perhaps, but it quieted her.

The walls trembled and shook, one domino falling after the other. He swore he could feel the appeal in Savannah's voice, her intention not just for herself, but for the boy and her daughter. She was scared. Why she thought him her savior surprised him. After all, she was his captive, and he meant to make good on her presence in order to surprise and take hostage one of her family.

He still had to reach her. "Get me out!" He heard the pounding behind the rubble. She screamed as more fell. "Please, get us out."

If she didn't stop screaming, the beasts would find the doorway that led into the hideout. So far, broken boards and tangled vine

camouflaged its entry, and he didn't want to contemplate what might happen to them all if the creatures got in. They'd be doomed. Zora squirmed in his grasp, reaching for her mother, though he couldn't make heads or tails of whether he'd found her.

He sat her down. "Stay."

Tears ran down her cheeks. She said nothing, her eyes darting from the door with the barricade, towards the fallen shaft of a room where Otter and her mother were trapped. Savannah called out again.

"Hurry. I think Otter's hurt."

Baz dug through the fallen debris, pinpointing the direction he needed to go by the frantic calls of his prisoner on the other side. Zora stuck to his side, out of the way of rock and mortar. She silently cried, tugging at her ear in distress.

Rock by rock, stone by heavy stone, he pulled away at the barricade. The cries grew softer, then they disappeared altogether. Had Savannah found another way out somehow, or had she succumbed to the dust and debris? Baz dug faster. If he recovered a dead body, he would then know how to act.

A tunnel emerged, and then, he made contact. Savannah lay on the floor, her wheaten hair spread out around her. Its braid had long come loose. Otter lay beside her. His ankle bled through a nasty cut, but looked normal otherwise. Her chest rose and fell, but weakly. Otter looked pale, and he had been crying. The boy stiffened upon seeing him, manning up, attempting to hide the pain he clearly felt. For a moment, Baz wasn't the Assassin. He was a man with compassion, a man who once might have been a father to a boy like Otter.

Zora gazed at her mother, tears trickling down her cheeks, her voice broken. "Is Mama turning into them?"

Baz startled. He guessed what she meant, but he asked for explanation, anyway.

Zora stared and stared, finally answering. "Is she like Nona?"

"I don't know." Shit. If Savannah was turning into a monster, he was fucking screwed.

Baz lifted Otter, the first one of them he reached. He was lightweight, starving. The boy cringed but didn't complain. Sebastian gentled his movement, easily cradling him.

Once he pulled Savannah from the wreckage, he examined the boy's ankle. He'd survive. Savannah was another story. He couldn't figure

out why she wasn't cognizant.

Sweeping his hands over her body analytically, he touched the back of her head, and it came away bloody. She'd fallen or taken a hit by a piece of the heavy stone. The wound wasn't dangerous, so in time she would awake. Until then, she was at his mercy. The idea both excited and chilled inside his mind.

Just then, he heard the familiar grunts and groans. They came from nearby, circling, watchful.

The monsters hadn't left after all.

Going to Savannah, he crouched, grabbed her shoulders, and shook until she roused. She stirred, then opened her eyes.

"Did you warn them? Why are they still here?"

"What?" Her voice was groggy.

Baz repeated his question. Savannah didn't answer. Baz had weapons, but not only that, he had Zora. He was safe as long as he had her for collateral.

"Get up." She complied, falling off-balance into him. Her gaze landed on Otter.

"His foot—"

"Will be fine. Go to that wall and brace yourself in the corner behind the cabinet."

He doubted she was a flight risk. For now, he wanted to make sure she didn't run, and having her so near made sure he could keep his eyes on her.

Baz made quick work of wrapping Otter's ankle, then he sent him beside Savannah. The boy didn't flinch or say a word, even though Sebastian was rougher than intended. Zora, he didn't worry about; she was not about to leave her mother. He only hoped the child kept from crying; she was prone to it, and the beasts would certainly hear the girl's tears.

Shuffles sounded outside, then the repeated banging of body against wall and stone. Sebastian didn't have long. They were going to enter, whether he was ready or not.

Savannah turned sharply to him. "My mother just wants to see if I'm okay."

He scoffed, making her flush with anger. "Let us go," she said. "You'll see."

The grunts grew closer, livid with the desire to get inside. "I have to

tell you," he said, slicing at the fingers of a beast. They were breaking through his barricade. "That thing doesn't care who you are. Believe me."

Maybe she was right, that the beasts were concerned about her, but he wasn't about to concede. His knife butchered another set of fingers. The grunts grew louder. Eager for blood. Eager for more. Another rumble, another scrambling outside. Mortar fell, this time around Baz. Fuck those suckers. Did they think he'd surrender?

"Let me help you. I can get them to stop. Please, don't hurt them anymore!"

"Are you seeing them, princess? They aren't coming across as too concerned you're in here."

"They just want to see if I'm okay."

"You think? Because all I'm getting from them is that they want to kill each one of us."

"No. You don't understand—"

"Sit down and be quiet. You talk too much. I told you, let me handle this."

Savannah huffed, but complied. She held her daughter close, and by the set of her lips, wanted to say more. Baz turned his back to her, going after another beast.

The huffing and growling outside continued. They were closer to breaking in, plus Baz heard them around the circumference of the building. Shit. With a prisoner who fought him, and a wounded, sick boy, Sebastian's nerves were shot. But he was a warrior; this fighting was what he was made for.

Sebastian growled back. For a moment, the hissing on the other side of the door stopped. The monsters contemplated him, mumbling between themselves. Baz knew they were discussing strategy. Monstrous things. He wouldn't back down, no matter what obstacle they threw at him.

The clicking came near, nearer. If his pretty prisoner wasn't careful, she'd be the next object they went after. For now, Savannah listened to him; her knees were bent up to her chest, scornfully contemplating him. They couldn't have her, damn it. She was his prisoner, not the female protected—or controlled—by those beastly things. His arm steadied, and with his blade, he thrust a deadly blow. A creature shrieked and fell.

Not even a full minute later, Savannah let out a single scream. Baz turned sharply. They'd gotten in.

Savannah howled, surprise on her face. One beast had broken through the wall of his barricade, its gnarled hand gripping her hair. It tugged; her eyes widened, though she didn't utter another sound. Baz spared nothing in reacting. She was his, and if anyone were to destroy her, it would be him.

She pulled away, or tried, her face a look destroyed by resignation. This was his chance: leave her and let her truly understand what they were up against, or to help the poor woman. Baz chose the latter.

Taking her by the nape, Sebastian used the bloody knife he'd already killed with. Without qualm, he sliced. Savannah was free; she was just missing a great deal of hair.

She didn't start sobbing until her eyes focused on the tawny brown of the braid. Her hand went to her scalp.

"My hair..."

Baz threw the braid to the side. "It'll grow back."

Savannah scooted away from the wall as much as she could. Her horror was more on the loss of it than of those monsters filing in.

"What did you do?"

Baz tossed her a serene, no bullshit smile. "Your damn family isn't so concerned whether they got you into this campaign, or not. Do you understand now?"

She nodded, her fingers running along the back of her neck. Her eyes were wild, her breathing shallow.

"I never thought..." She tossed Baz an injured look. "Why are they fighting with us in here?"

"You tell me, princess. I've been telling you they don't give a shit." Sebastian hacked at another beast, trying to get in. Its screams were horrific. If they had moral conscience, it ended long ago.

She shook her head, disbelieving. "It's you. They would never purposely harm me."

Within seconds of her statement, a cruel hand reached inside, ready to take what she willingly offered. Her life was in Baz's hands, but the beasts saw fit to remove it.

"Being naïve won't save you," Baz said, clearing another monster's hand from its stem. He looked her over, analyzing and weighing each pro, each con until he made that final decision. "Over there. Get in that

corner. It's away from this shit. Take your kid, and him, too."

Savannah complied, eyes gleaming with unsure tears. Her arm went around the waking boy and her daughter's tiny, squirming body.

"If you just give them a chance—"

"Is that what they gave you?" Baz said, sparing nothing towards her opinion, ready to climb in and invade past the muck of her sensitivity. "You're another meal for them. You have nothing for them but the flesh across your bone." She inched forward. Sebastian glared. "Get back or I won't spare you. Do it," he ordered.

"I just don't understand." Her voice was quiet, confused, her face flooded with emotion.

Baz took pity on her, but minutely. "Just get in the corner and stay there. Close your eyes if you need to."

She nodded, drawing her daughter close. Zora piped up. "Mommy doesn't really like them," the girl said. "Not even Nona. She's scared of them, too."

"Don't," Savannah said, her voice small, just as she looked at her daughter. "She's wrong. Nona would never try to hurt us."

Her gaze wandered back to Baz. He didn't give a damn what she assumed. She was his prisoner. Her autonomy was his, and he was in a very pissed mood.

"Can you tell one of them from another?"

She didn't like his question. Her mouth puckered and there was a furrow along her brow. Baz didn't care if she liked what he said or not. She was his to command or to allow, and right now, the only thing he felt like doing was to take.

26

Somehow, Taig got them both to the underground bunker alive. The beasts protested, and throughout the night, Mato heard them. She could not sleep.

Quiet reflection didn't suit her. For hours she lay on her pallet next to her captor, thinking. With her death-inducing illness, she couldn't believe the king impregnated her. It was a hope, a ridiculous one, that it could happen to her.

She coughed into the crook of her arm, tinges of blood dotting the skin. Her chest hurt. She hurt deep inside her wicked, selfish mind, for the one thing she wanted all of her life came to her *now*, when she'd been denied until the very end? Now that she'd crossed over into this abysmal world, the weight she felt in her swollen breasts and curved belly wasn't enough to bring her the royal approval she once sought.

Having blasted Tiran with hatred and disrespect the moment she felt the pull of the portal meant she could never go back to Yrurra. This land was worse than the one she left.

Those beasts were damn scary. None of her wily ways would save her here. It wasn't ideal, but relying on Taig might help to rectify her wrongdoing.

He slept deeply, as though her presence weren't worthy enough to alarm him. Mato tried, but she couldn't escape her chains.

If only Sebastian hadn't left her. His allegiance, as always, had been to the Regent, not to her. Now she'd die, and it was all his fault.

Taig stirred. Mato nudged him awake.

Groggily, he came to sharp attention, a knife ready in his hand.

"What is it?"

Mato rubbed her belly. "I feel something unusual."

"Probably your evil slipping out."

His dry wit might have appeased her in earlier times, but now all she wanted was to get control back. She hid the reluctant smile that nearly surfaced. Her smile slipped, and she looked at the dried blood on her arm. This time, her voice was serious.

"No. It's more. I can't go on without saying anything." Mato gave him a solid look, her words blunt. "I'm dying."

He pulled himself to a crouch, the metal shared between them clanking on her wrist and his. His gaze was canny and sharp.

"I don't believe you."

She repeated it. "I'm dying."

He gave her a once-over. "Why should I keep you, then?"

Mato swallowed hard. "Maybe you shouldn't."

Taig let out a small huff. "It's only a baby."

"I'm not afraid of pregnancy. My lungs are filled with mining dust. I won't last much longer."

He surprised her with the gentle stroke of her hair. "You made it through the portal. You're strong. You'll survive."

"You're only saying that because you need to take me to your queen," Mato whispered.

His hand lifted. "Yes. But I believe it, anyhow."

Mato was ashamed when she felt tears slip down her cheeks. "Thank you."

"I'm not altruistic," Taig grumbled. "You know how the assassin got through. You're part of his secret. Makes me wonder one thing: how did you cross over the portal and live?"

"I don't know. That's the truth. I just don't."

His gravelly voice held a tinge of resignation. "You better find out soon. I'm tired of dealing with those bastard things."

Mato sniffled, expelling her self-pity. "I want to understand why this world is so different from my own. They are reputed to be mirror lands, one reflecting the other. But they aren't. So, what happened?" He didn't answer her right away. "Those tall buildings are in shamble. And the light is different. You said it's a woman. But who is she? Who rules this land?"

Finally, he spoke. "This land was hurt hardest when the Sundering

occurred. That's all you need to know."

"Who rules this land?" she repeated.

Taig's jaw clenched as if he didn't want to explain. "My queen."

He wasn't telling her something. Mato's eyes narrowed, and she stabbed him with another question. "You've met her?"

Taig hesitated. "Yeah. I've met her."

"I don't understand why it's hard to answer. I'm not asking hard questions."

"You're asking what I don't want to answer."

"You evade every time I mention her. She's hunting, you tell me. And you say that I never want to meet her, and yet you're taking me to her. I don't understand. Why won't you explain?"

"Because once you meet her, you're hers," Taig said, his jaw tight. "She won't care that you're having a child. It won't matter that you might have information about the other world. She'll destroy you, and that is fact."

Mato snuffled with disdain. "So that's it, then. I'll die."

He narrowed his gaze at her. "Yes."

"And yet still you're taking me to her?"

"She's my queen. So, yes. I'll obey."

"He did that too, my betrothed. I'm as frustrated with you the same way as I was with him. Anything the Regent said, he jumped to do. I hated it."

"Did you love him?"

"Being engaged suggests it, don't you think? But, no. I bargained for it. No one really feels love anymore."

Taig quieted. Something festered in his gaze, something intangible, cruel. Interesting to a woman with desperation and wickedness in her own jaded heart. Mato stared back, not flinching when he answered unexpectedly.

"That's what people believe."

"I never took you for the romantic type."

"Everyone wants to be with somebody. It's only when they realize the trap, that it changes your heart and takes your soul. I'd never take a wife."

"And you think I'm a trap?" She laughed, liking it.

He chuckled, the sound depraved enough to challenge her. "I know you are."

Just as she slept with the king for privilege, Mato would have to work for her release. This man would not hand it out readily. She doubted manipulation, crying, or flirting would sway in her favor, either. Taig was oppositional in a way she liked. Too bad that she'd have to leave him, maybe kill him in the end. Sad enough, that quality of not being able to push Taig around made her interested. If she were in a different place, in another state of mind, she might want him.

Taig snapped his fingers to gain her attention. The bastard. Mato gave him the courtesy of looking in his direction, but just as he warned her, now she warned him with a chilling, dark look. Whatever peace they had previously, was gone.

"I'm going abroad," he said, adjusting his weapons until they were just as before, a warrior's stance and vicious attitude. "Stay here. Don't try anything, because you've already been warned of the consequence. Do you understand?"

Mato nodded tersely. "I understand."

Taig came close enough to share her body heat and to feel her breath. "Let's not pretend. I have the control here, not you. Mess up, and you'll see."

She barely held back a smirky smile. "So, you've told on many occasion."

Taig reacted immediately. Raising his hand, he cupped it around her neck, back to front, squeezing enough to warn her. His touch was dangerous and mean.

"Remember, little one. No trouble. I'm not afraid to do what has to be done."

Mumbling, Mato frowned. If he knew who she was, he wouldn't be so quick to denigrate her. "So you say. I've yet to see any consequence."

Quicker than she could flinch, his hand went from cupping the back of her neck to slide around the sensitivity of her throat. He pressed, just long enough to remind her. She saw stars and vengeful black. And for a second, she saw nothing at all. She heard his reminder as she came back to consciousness.

"See that. Remember your fate. I think you'll do exactly what I told you to do. Hmm?"

He left, and she fumed. Damn; another man that she couldn't get to do what she wanted. She reminded herself that she was a leader, a warrior in her own right. She couldn't forget who and what she was.

Mato led the rebellion. Even though everyday she died a little sooner, this is what consumed her thoughts, heart, and mind.

Death to the Queen Regent, death to anyone trying to oppose. Willingly, Mato used manipulation and her body to make sure it happened. This travel through the portal was just a setback. Soon she'd be home. Pain and determination got her this far. One thing she knew for sure. She'd not fail. Never.

The dawn broke, and with it the drawing back of the beasts. Savannah curled up into herself, Zora in arm, Otter not far away. Baz watched over them, their guard. Their flaming sword.

Sebastian steadied his stance. He knew he was the bad guy. Time to own up to that now. His voice curdled, and he crossed his muscled arms across his chest. No more shit.

"Do you really think those monstrosities would protect you if you weren't serving some kind of purpose?"

She snapped back, clutching the two young ones to her body. "Isn't that what you're doing? I serve out of love for my mother."

"I guarantee, what you had with her is lost." Savannah shook her head. Baz enlightened her. "You're missing a chunk of your hair, hair that your saviors grabbed onto. They wanted to kill you. Surely you see that."

"I don't see anything at all, and certainly not what you suggest."

He nudged his body forward, drowning her in his shadow. "From now on, you listen to me. Whatever you had with them, forget it. It's gone. That's not a suggestion. That's a rule."

Savannah pursed her lips as though she had plenty to say to his injunction, none of it good. Instead, she pulled the children closer.

Baz pointed to Otter, irritation making him curse. "What the hell is wrong with him. Why won't he talk?"

"There's nothing *wrong* with him. He's scared."

"Let's not be foolish. We both know what scared him. How long?"

He tried not to feel compassion, but sadly, he did. Even he had to

pull on all of his training not to stumble to his knees in fear the moment he first saw the beasts. They weren't normal, and admittedly, they scared the shit out of him.

"Several years," she whispered. "He's seen too much for a boy his age."

"You realize that you're admitting to the horror of those things. So why do you put up with it?"

"They watch over us."

"I know truth and half-truth, Savannah. They scare you, too."

She sniffled, hiding tears. "They are *family*, family to all of us. Where else would I go?"

"You're with me, now. I'll protect you." The words blurted out, then Sebastian knew how right they were. He repeated them, letting the truth soak into his brain. As sudden as his intentions were, they were honest and real—and damned unsettling. "You're mine to watch over."

"You don't want us. You lie if you say that you do."

"Who do you think I am?" Savannah gave him a wary glance. Baz continued, eyeing her for any reciprocal reaction. "I live and breathe to fight. It's what I'm trained for. It's my entire existence. And now, whether I wish it or not, I live and breathe for you."

She shucked up her chin, observing him. She clearly didn't believe him. "Are you saying that you don't have a wife or bride-to-be at home? Because I know that you do."

He stiffened. "You know I have a bride."

"Then think of her when you make that promise. I am not her."

Mato wouldn't give such a statement. His Mato acted afraid of him, and she was delicate where Savannah was strong. He preferred a woman who could be at his side, to not fear him, but Jin snatched his life away the moment the betrothal was accepted and carved in his heart like stone.

From the moment the ring was given to him in acknowledgment of their future marriage, Baz tried not to be an asshole to the woman that didn't suit him. Further, Mato hid from him, in words and in action. The only thing not hidden was that, no matter what she said, Mato disliked the idea of being his.

His hand covered the ring worn over his heart. That was his obligation. If he returned home, he'd submit to it and take Mato as his.

For now, he could live as he chose.

There was one conduit that could take him back to the land he rejected. He turned to Savannah, unable to push it from his mind. If he wanted to stay, he must avoid that damned thing forever. "I'll ask again, and this time, you'll answer. What do you know about Nebuchadnezzar's Gate?"

She sputtered, evading him. "Not anything good."

"I didn't ask if it was any good. I want to know how to get through it."

"No one should pass through. It's evil."

Baz conjured up the history he had with the dark-colored sentient stone upon his entry. Yes, he believed the gate was evil, but that was his way home. Baz needed to destroy it. He must end his obligation and break all ties with the queen Regent. Only then would he be free.

He crouched beside her, barely avoiding skimming his hand over her hair. "That's where we're headed. Follow me, don't give me any lip, and I'll set you free."

Savannah shook her head. "I don't care if you kill me. I won't go there."

"I'm not asking, princess. I'm telling. I'll kill you anyhow for the impudence that you show. Take me there, or I'll show you why I gained my nickname, the Dark Death."

She shook her head. "I don't care what they call you. That whole place is allotted for mortal sacrifice. You'll not get close enough, or if you do, you'll surely not get through alive. The other side warns you. You're not wanted."

He smiled gently. "Where do you think I came from? I will go home."

He didn't care that his hiding spot jammed with fallen debris. He didn't care that he must find a new place to hide, since this place was ruined. Baz only cared that he fulfilled his marriage commitment, that his burden of matrimony was over. Mato was ill. She thought she hid it, but he knew her too well not to notice. When she died, his obligation would end. Better to do it now before he'd have nothing to grasp onto.

Savannah doubted him; he could see it on her face. He leaned in closer, so near that his thigh brushed against her.

"You don't think I can do it?"

She scoffed. "Many others have tried and failed. Why not you, as well?"

"I don't fail."

"Go for it, then. I won't be the one who takes you there." She perused him, eyes dark with disappointment. Then her brow furrowed.

"What is that?" Her eyes focused on his engagement bond.

He knew what she referred to, and he jammed the cord around his neck back under. "Nothing." He made sure she understood; the topic was over.

"What is that stone around your neck?"

Instead of being intrigued, there was fear. Her face turned ashen, her fingers trembling with alert.

"It's a sign of my betrothal."

"Do you understand what that ring is?"

"Tell me, if you know so well." He intended to mock her, instead he got a scathing reply.

"That's Shadow's Blood. No wonder you came through. Somehow it escaped notice, but I assure you, no one keeps a ring like that and lives."

He readied to reach for her, to let her know he was flesh and blood and that no one messed with him. She scooted back, taking the children with her.

"She'll kill you."

"My queen didn't notice. No one else will, either."

"Don't you understand? That opens the portal. Oh gods, let us go. We're better off that way."

"I told you I'd protect you. I brought you here, and I'll surely be the one to let you go."

"In our world, with the Shadow Queen, no one lives and survives the same way, ever again."

Baz leaned forward, taking the space of air between them, and shortening it. "I've met her. She'd just a woman, remember that."

Savannah shook her head, eyes widening. "You don't believe that, do you? If so, she has you blinded. No one messes with her, and even if they don't have dealings, all of them fear the Reaping. You should be afraid, too."

"Humor me. What is this Reaping?"

She chuckled, an edge to the sound. "How do think our families are taken away? She turns them. They are never the same once she feeds on them."

"You mean the beasts?"

Savannah nodded. "They aren't beasts, not for a long while, and not until she comes back for more and more. The more she takes from them, the sooner they change. After a while, they aren't even normal. She's taken all of them and destroyed them."

He began sweating. "No. That's crazy. You don't know what you talk about."

"I told you once. I tried to explain. My mother is one of them. I've seen what the Shadow Queen can do."

"She feeds on them over and over and they become monsters? I don't believe you."

Savannah pushed him away with her feet. Maybe she was done talking, but Baz had much to learn. He made her talk.

"Why aren't you one of them? She fed on you."

"I told you! Mom sacrificed herself. She continued to put herself in harm's way so that the queen's urge would be fulfilled. Now she's one of them, and she'll continue to be so."

"You put *yourself* in harm's way by interacting with them. I've saved you from that."

Savannah quietly sobbed. "You're taking my time with her. Soon she won't recognize me at all."

"I'm sorry if that's true, because now I can't let you go."

Savannah eyes him with weary, regretful eyes. "Then you will pay. In either, you will pay."

28

Mato stared at the door that closed her in. Taig left, but he left her chained. It was up to her to climb towards the facilities, to grub into the bags of food, to escape. When days passed with him gone, Mato knew she had to do something, go somewhere. But where? She was trapped. Every day she heard those things screech, prowling around the door. Wanting in.

So much time went by that her small belly rounded with pregnancy. She felt the baby's gentle kicks begin, felt the small somersaults deep inside. It was enough time that love swelled, just as her belly did.

Was he ever returning?

She refused to leave, or even to try. Reduced to captivity, it likewise kept her safe. The sounds intensified. Every night when she heard the grumbles and the *want*, she knew nothing out there could catch her. Enough time passed that any regret lost its steam. Now she wanted Taig's return. Mato never knew solitude could feel this bad.

It was nearing night when she heard the immense lock click. In an emotional state, tears of relief puddled her eyes.

"Where have you been? You left me," she said, harried and hurt.

Taig looked at her chains. "I wanted to see how'd you react to imprisonment."

She bit her tongue, the urge to fight back nullified. "You were gone forever."

"Are you telling me you couldn't release yourself if you wanted to?"

Relief and anger conjoined. Of course she might have, if she wanted

to.

"I didn't want to hurt the baby."

He chuckled, darkly pensive. "Your insurance for royalty? I'm surprised that you'd risk that."

An unlikely sob escaped her lips. "Please don't tease. I've been scared."

Taig bent down, looked her dead in the face. "You mean that, don't you?"

She nodded, curling up into herself. He curled a lock of hair around his finger, pensive. "I had to check on some things. I didn't mean to be gone so long."

She nodded at his apology, knowing if she said anything to acknowledge it, his mood would likely change. "I don't want to be alone anymore."

He pulled his hand back as though his touch were her bargaining tool. "Maybe next time I should set the beasts after you. Is that what you want, leaving the safety of what is in here, to go into that unknown world?"

His growl made her awaken. "I'd only risk it if I knew you were there. I can't fight your wars."

"You're here, aren't you? There was some reason the portal saw fit to open."

"I can't tell what I don't know."

Taig gave her a once-over. "Your belly has grown."

"You were gone a long time." She bit back another wretched sob. Pregnancy made her weak, but Taig didn't seem to mind her tears.

"I won't be gone that way again."

Mato tried to stand, the leash of her chains clanking and clacking. Taig came near, a key in hand. "No more chains for you, little one. You've proven your mettle."

"Is that what this was, a test?"

"In part. I also had to reroute the beasts on the other side. They caught wind of the bunker, and there was no way we could leave this one and make it to the other. I've managed to hold them off a while."

"Is that what we're going to do? Step out?"

His smile was dangerously dark. "It is. Stay close, or your pleading to stay alive won't faze me."

Mato thought about it, though there was nothing to debate. "I wish

to go.”

“Then take my hand and don’t leave my side. There are other predators out there than just me. Don’t wander off.”

She waylaid a snuffle. “I’m a woman, not a pet.”

He gave her a solid look. “There’s something special about you being here. I haven’t found it yet, but be assured that until I do, you’ll get my undivided attention.”

That would have amused her or put her on guard while she was in Yrurra. This wasn’t the mines, or the bedchamber of a king. Being here was a risk.

“I won’t run. I’m curious about my entry into this place, as well.” Mato allowed his hand on her back, steering her as he walked by his side. They took an erratic route through the abandoned city, so convoluted a path that Mato would never find her way back to the other bunker even if she tried.

Wolves hovered on the outskirts of their getaway, eyes watchful, silent and deadly. Mato kept close to Taig, hating that she didn’t have a weapon. Hating that she wouldn’t know foe from friend in this remarkable and dangerous place.

For a moment, she feared that he was taking her to her grave, not the solitude he promised. She tugged on his sleeve. Taig turned.

“Where are we going?”

He didn’t pause, but he answered right away. “There’s something I have to show you.”

She couldn’t show how discomfited she felt. He’d make her rue it. “Let’s not take long, please. I’m already tiring, and I have to pee.”

Taig quickened his pace, though by the severity on his face, he wouldn’t take any excuse or misbehavior on this mission. “Wait until back in the bunker, if you’re inclined to relax.”

They walked a distance, Mato trying her best to keep up with Taig’s long stride. Her hand pressed against her growing belly, protecting her unborn child from the danger lurking. The buildings they passed were in a state of heavy decay, vines clustered around broken metal, shards of glass on the street, desolation everywhere.

“It looks like a war. When did this happen?”

He didn’t answer, steering past a bog of water, dirty and scantily filled. His body tightened as if impending battle. Maybe the answer wasn’t something she wanted to hear. More time passed, and Mato

tired more.

"Not long now." She stumbled into him. He easily caught her, righting her.

After another long hour, he stopped, gazing at the broken statue in the water, a woman on a pedestal, a sentinel to the surrounding land. It looked ripped in two.

"What's that?" Again, she thought he might not answer her. "I'm sure there are other, more interesting things to bring me to in this deplorable world."

Taig pointed. "That's it. That's where this all happened."

"This? It's crumbling so much that it's barely standing."

"It used to be beautiful," he said in reverence. "This is where the Sundering broke through."

Mato stood there for a moment, unsure. From what she'd learned, the Sundering was a myth. The statue changed that perception. "The Sundering isn't real," she whispered, disbelieving her own words.

Taig turned to her, incredulous and angry. "What do you think those beasts are? They're obviously not human."

"I don't know. This world is so different from mine."

"I've heard of the difference. Your queen made certain of it."

"Wait. This world, the decay, it's too old to have happened while the Regent was alive. You must be talking of another queen."

"No. I talk of your Regent. Doesn't she inform anyone of who she is?"

"I know only that within her circle, she's adored. Beyond that, she's a monster. Best to avoid her at any cost."

"At least in that, you speak the truth." He turned to face her, snapping questions. "What brought you through? Tell me. How did the portal pick you?"

"I told you. I don't know."

Taig chuckled mirthlessly. "The only ones allowed through the portal are a Seer, a descendant of the Ancients, or they use Shadow's Blood. Which one are you?"

She gave him an evil look. Inwardly, she flinched, remembering the ring she hid within the secret pocket of her dress. The engagement ring made of Shadow's Blood, the conduit. She could never reveal it to him, though.

"I told you. I don't know!"

He gave her an examining glance. "Do you know why I brought you here?"

"No."

"This is the original portal, the one that brought the children of the Ancients through. The Ancients cast them to this world for their disobedience, and each of the queens had to pick a side, one of light, the other of darkness."

"I don't believe in the Ancients."

Taig eyed her carefully. "You should. They are the true rulers."

"Even if they were born a ruler doesn't mean they deserve it."

"You are one of those, then. A rebel warrior, a secret pawn." He chuckled, his eyes roaming over her.

Mato lifted her chin, fully admitting what she'd hidden all along. "I know who I am. We are of the New World Order. We serve who best serves the kingdom and their followers, and believe me, it isn't her."

He may have been amused before. He wasn't now. Taig took her by the wrist, squeezing lightly and reminding her he wasn't her peer; he was the enemy. "What is your Regent's motto, little one?"

"*We were, we are, we will be.* Everyone knows that."

He sighed with exasperation, as if she missed some point that so far eluded her. "Didn't you ever question why she's queen?"

"Of course not. She just is. Besides, you're ill informed. We have a king ready to take the throne."

"He won't make it to the throne. I assure you of that." He let that sink into her mind. When she didn't respond, he sighed. "You're tired. We're going back to the bunker."

"You brought me all the way out here for *this*?"

"I brought you here so that you could understand," he said, his temper flaring.

"I think you're insane. Is that what you wanted?"

He didn't falter, nor did he smile. "I have lived a long time under the Shadow Queen's rule. I've seen life come and go, all while I stay the same. Can you claim the same?"

"Are you saying that you're immortal?" A laugh filtered from her mouth.

"I'm not immortal. That kind of power is earned."

Mato side-eyed him. "So, what are you?"

"I was given as a gift to the Shadow Queen. I'm hers, to do as she

wishes.”

Mato couldn't hide the amusement from her mouth. “You really are crazy.”

“I would give it up willingly. I'm captive, just as you are. Believe me, little one. You don't want to see what I've seen over the years.”

“You talk boldly for a prisoner. When your queen returns—”

“I'm under her command,” he said. He looped his fingers over her wrist, urging her to listen. “Don't be stubborn. Deep inside you believe me, otherwise you wouldn't have raised a rebellion against your queen.”

Mato gave him a nasty look, not responding. He hissed, dead set on convincing her.

“Listen! When you are dead and gone, I'll still be alive. Trust me, serving an immortal means losing all that I am. Run, little Mato. Run, while you still have the chance.”

She snatched her wrist away from his grip. “Unchain me, then. If you're warning me, you're disobeying your mistress. You're the one who's rebelling.”

“I would gladly die, believe me,” he hissed.

“Even if I wanted to, it doesn't change the truth. You're rebelling against your queen. You deserve to die for it.”

He stepped near enough so that she could feel the heat pouring from his body. Mato wanted to cork it and save it for later. His lies, she ignored.

“*“You shall not take or use a life as if it belongs to you.”* Have you ever heard that repeated around your communal fires?”

Hesitantly, Mato nodded. He reached out and gently soothed her as he caressed the soft spot just along her wrist.

“I'm glad I'm not forgotten, then. That was my family's motto, and once... it was mine.”

“My father told a lot of stories, most of them untrue.” Mato shook her head, unwilling to believe the man standing next to her.

“Yet you're here, seeing the other side of the portal. Is this what you aspired to when you took your vow of rebellion? Pitiful. Your clan will die out, just as the others did. Your work will be forgotten. Even you will be forgotten, Mato. This I warn you. Maybe you'll be spared if you amuse the queen. But you're still her prisoner, just as I am.”

Mato studied him. “What is your queen's mission? Why are you

keeping it if you're warning me now?"

"I guard those who slip through the worlds, the ones that don't belong, and then I destroy them. That is my queen's command. Even if I rebel her order, I'll eventually be beholden. I am her slave, just as you are. Don't sway me, little one. Eventually you'll die."

"Then I'll die. Take me to your queen. I'm not afraid."

He pulled her close, her rounded belly cushioned by the strength of his body. "You should be afraid. And you should be afraid of me, too. I warned you. Take what I've said and use it. It may elongate your life, and your babe's as well."

"Is that what you do, conspire with the enemy?"

"I conspire with *you*. No one has made it through the portal without their own agenda, and certainly not one readying to bear a child."

"You took me, soldier. It's not like I wanted to stand here with you, captured and chained."

"I'll gladly do it again. You're mine now, and you'll never be free."

"Your queen," Mato said, ignoring his strange, sudden intention for her. "Where is she now?"

"That should have been your first question." He loosened her. "She's still hunting." Mato smiled. He shook his head, smoothing the grin from her face with a caress of finger across her lips. "She hunts the monsters that haunt you at night. They're hers, just as you are."

"Why hunt them, if they belong to her?"

"She's the one that changed them to what they are. She'll hunt them until they have nothing, until their human life disappears. She'll find more, more to hunt, and more to kill. Be afraid. Your life and that of your babe are in her hands, just as it's in mine."

"I thought you hated me," she whispered, torn.

"I pity you, for not understanding, for not running when you had the choice. Come, little one. Even I am not safe when the beasts roam the land."

29

Baz secured his weapons, seeing shadows pass the building. He must be tired. One of those shadows reminded him of Mato. He'd known her since youth, and he'd recognize her anywhere. But here, in this place of ill refuge? It couldn't be.

He peered out through the cracks in the wall. It *was* her. It was impossible. How did she get to this abhorrent world? Had she gone looking for him and gotten pulled into the portal? He didn't know, but it didn't matter. He had to save her, right now.

At first glance, he couldn't tell who was with her, but it was a man, a soldier. Then he saw; it was Taig. Ready to confront them, to pull Mato out of this hell, he paused only because Savannah tugged at his sleeve.

"Don't. It's a trap."

He didn't care. In different circumstance, it might be Mato searching for him.

He chilled. "Get your hand off me, or I'll get it off for you."

"You don't understand. She's with the Commander."

"Is that what he's called? Well, let me tell you. I don't give a damn."

Savannah persisted. "If you value your life, please, don't go after them."

Baz shot her a warning look. Savannah looked down at her hand on his forearm, quickly removing it. She gave her opinion, and he listened. But he refused to let her fears sway him.

Savannah beseeched him. "I'm sorry if you knew her, but she's with him now. That makes her as good as dead."

He ignored her. "Stay put. I'll be back."

Savannah hissed. "If you're determined to go, at least stay in the shadows. You're not exactly a man who blends."

She was right, but he had to go. They'd be gone if he hesitated too long. He'd never forgive himself if something happened to her.

Baz shielded his face with the darkness of the building's deep entrance. For a moment, he stared. His Mato, here? She must have come looking for him, sweet girl.

Then she turned. He got the full picture at once. His Mato was pregnant. He looked again, unwilling to see the truth. Her belly softly rounded, but there was no mistake. She was going to have another man's babe. His Mato lied. She hadn't saved herself for him at all. He looked and looked, but nothing changed. Nothing but his adoration and loyalty to her.

His anger surged into an inferno. There was nothing Baz hated more than a liar. He blamed himself for his stupidity. Mato convinced him thoroughly. She would never be back in his good grace ever again.

One thing was true: he was a master at tying the enemy to him. Sebastian was a damned fool for believing there was more than evil in the world. Mato, his capable bride-to-be, reminded him he should always beware. This what happened when he trusted anyone.

Mato benefited from tricking him. Year after year, day after day, he pampered her. She paid her dues with innocence and unfailing servitude. What luck to have the royal assassin on her side! Baz saved her from hardship. He saved her from the mines. He kept her precious to him. He realized now. Trusting in someone always failed. Caring for anyone else was a weakness. He knew that now.

Lightly, Savannah touched his back. He turned to her with a low hiss. She wanted something from him. No doubt she was a master manipulator as well. His prisoner did not differ from the horde of females bound to him before their death. Every one of them acted helpless, begging for his mercy, forging fire in his heart and lust in his loins, just before they died a felon's death. Baz rued allowing his body to want them, his mind to disagree with killing them. If Savannah was the same... he'd kill her, too.

"Come back in. Come in before they see you."

His heart thudded into the depths of his gut. His fiancée wasn't faithful, and he repeated it in mantra. All the times he'd guarded her

from the outside world, keeping her virginity attached, Mato fucked another behind his back.

He turned to Savannah, beholden and helpless and *his* to correct. Right now, he hated her, as he'd hate any woman who neared him. But touch him again and he'd ruin her, just as he'd ruin any female who crossed his path during his dawning of failure. His complacency would end *now*. If Savannah didn't obey, he'd use the love of her child and the boy against her. Hell, maybe he'd do it just because—even if everything in him pointed to wanting her for keeps.

"Who is she, that you would risk your life for her?"

"She's no one. Get inside. I have plans to make."

She stammered once she realized his foul mood. "Plans about me?"

"Just like a woman to think everything is about her," he snarled. "I'll get to you when I'm ready."

Savannah flushed, then paled to a ghostly white, flinching as though hit. "You're a bastard. I shouldn't have said anything."

"No, you shouldn't have. Now, before I lose my patience, get the hell inside."

Zora stuck her head out from beyond her mother's body. "You said a naughty word. Mama, he said a bad word."

Baz reminded himself why he wasn't a family man. Having heard the same comment for the umpteenth time taxed his nerves. Being the Assassin meant time for no one. He yearned to be a father, and this was the best he might get, because being a father wasn't in the cards for him. The same with marriage, damn him. Only fools bartered with the guise of love. Thank the gods he never loved Mato, or his heart would crush and destroy anyone that crossed his retributive path.

He pointed at Savannah. "Are you listening?"

She frowned. "Yes, I'm listening."

"Then do it. And while you're at it, cage the kid."

She scowled back at him, whispering so Zora didn't overhear. "You truly are an ass."

"You've known that from the beginning. Now, get the fuck inside before I make you."

She backed up, disappearing into depths of the building. Baz hid in the shadows, composing himself. He couldn't fool himself. His discovery burned. Mato was *his*. He made sure of it. How the hell did she get through the portal, and what was her agenda? Until he found

out, he wouldn't rest easy.

Mato looked over her shoulder in his direction. Baz couldn't breathe. He didn't want to be discovered. It benefited him if he were to be recompensed, in his time, in his way. That meant being invisible.

Slowly, he turned, entering the building where he left the others behind. He wasted no more attention on Mato. It was Savannah he must deal with now. His captive was the answer to taking down one of the beastly things and reeling them in. Then, with his bounty, he'd return to Alore and be set free. The gate and the portal be damned.

Anger in his heart, he crossed the room towards Savannah. Good, there was fear in her eyes.

"Name the one you will sacrifice."

She flustered, gazing up at him for pity. Baz didn't pity anyone, especially his enemy.

"I don't know —"

"Your choice. Name it. I want your answer." He stepped closer. "Which beast will you sacrifice?"

"I'm not helping you kill anyone."

Baz sneered, having no patience for her. Perhaps he was soulless, for whatever he had disappeared the moment he saw Mato.

"They are mindless killers. Name it."

Savannah's face harshened at the demand. "*You're* the mindless killer, and I won't help you. They are my family."

"The family that was here just hours ago? They wanted your blood. You don't need to protect them." He touched her hair, shorter than before, making sure she understood his agenda. His voice harshened.

"Tell me, Savannah. Who will it be?"

Any ease he'd created with her previously ended. She twisted until his grip softened.

"I told you. No."

Baz gave her a dark look, then wrapped his arms about her. It wasn't about love. This was about obedience. With his arms trapping her, he dragged her to the chains he'd earlier bound her to.

"Sit."

"I'm not a damned animal!"

Since the beginning, she'd been fairly complacent. It ended now, with Savannah, who twisted and turned and clawed and didn't forget. Instead of punishing her, amusement filled him. Did she think

he couldn't overwhelm her with one move? He let her struggle, then as she was petering, he whispered to her as a lover might.

"Obey me, Savannah. Don't forget. I have your child."

This stopped her wrestling immediately. "Don't hurt her!"

Baz almost swept her tears away. She was a beautiful woman, should he study her enough. But now, with her frustration, he viewed her as a beloved toy he wasn't supposed to touch. She leaned in close, a move unstudied but frantic. Baz loved when they were fraught with fear, and he was the only one who could save them. Didn't that make him a monster, too?

"She's safe for now."

It was the only concession he would make, and thankfully, she took it. Her eyes quickened up to his and her body released tension. How foolish of her to believe he'd save her. With or without word, he'd gain entrance to the beast's den. Then he only had to strike the killing blow.

"Who are you? Who are you to pass over the portal into this world and live? No one survives, and even if they did, the Shadow Queen would take your life for daring."

"I'm just a man."

It should have been reason enough. Savannah bit down on her lush lower lip. He noticed too readily. What witchery did she do to invade his mind and make him careless?

"Get the boy." He released her.

She cautiously nodded. "Otter. Come, sweetie."

The boy gave him an overly wise look. He eased forward, into Baz's reach. Savannah reached over with one partially restrained arm and hugged the boy.

"What are you doing with him?"

Sebastian answered, but with warning. "He's coming with me. Save yourself and your daughter should anyone enter but me. Kill without mercy. Don't be afraid."

"What about her?" Savannah pointed to Mato, who lingered along the outskirts of the shadowy buildings with Taig.

He didn't want to answer. His heart still wounded. "She's nothing. Don't worry about her."

"She's with the Commander. She could find us and who knows what he'd do."

"I just told you. She's not a threat."

Savannah hummed her reply. Baz shot her a wearied glance, testing the chains so she wouldn't get loose. "She'll deal with me, if it comes to it. Stay in the shadows. She won't even notice you."

She lowered her voice. "She's here for a purpose. So is he. We've heard of those who pass through the portal safely."

"Just because the stories are told doesn't make them true."

"You're here, same as she is. What else should I not believe?" He didn't answer and her voice raised in fear. "You don't understand. She's got to be one of them, and the New World Commonwealth doesn't believe in survivors. I'm in as much danger as you are."

He'd heard of the rebels, but thought them exclusive to Yrurra. They were a radical group, gaining support from rich to poor, to support removing the Queen Regent from her throne. They'd fail. He'd never met a stronger woman.

"I arrived without incident," he said. "I'll leave here the same."

"Even I know the laws," she said. "*You shall not betray the Goddess. You shall shelter the innocent, for they are creatures of the Goddess—*"

"Those are laws I protect. They're branded in me, put upon my skin. That doesn't change fact. You and your daughter are safe here inside. Put a barrier on the door when I leave. Do it, and you'll survive."

"How will you get back through?"

He smiled. "I'm the Assassin. That's all you need to know."

30

He stalked Mato like a predator to his prey, every move she made, each difficulty she faced. Every minute she caught a breath, he watched her. Each time Taig placed a hand upon her waist or whispered in her ear, Baz's fingers tightened on the gun that aimed to kill her.

Her guard kept her quarantined, but that didn't mean safe. Once she earned safety through Sebastian, but that reward was long gone. Now, if given the slightest moment alone with his former fiancée, Baz would suffocate the lies and the life right out of her.

He didn't care that she was pregnant. In fact, that made his hatred grow. All he needed was one minute, one moment, and the deed would be done. As if the guard knew Baz's ill-intent, Mato wasn't left alone.

Darkness descended on the land. Another day wasted, but more time to let the savagery grow. Baz pushed every other thought to the side, including his own captives. Right now, all that mattered was revenge.

She must have known he was there, lurking. Sometimes her face paled, and she drew nearer the man at her side, skittishly looking over her shoulder while her small hand rested on her belly.

Baz mirthlessly chuckled, quietly cursing her. "That's correct. Be afraid. Just know that he won't be able to save you on the day you finally fall."

From day to night and night unto day, Baz watched. His eyes never grew tired, and his hands didn't tremble. They ached to see the job done. It wouldn't be long now. There was no way that Taig wouldn't

take a moment to relieve himself from the duty of watching over her. And when he did... Sebastian would enact the killing blow.

On some days, he didn't see her at all, hidden in the refuge Taig set out for her. The bunkers kept her safe from his sword and his vengeful eyes. When several days passed, she crawled out of her abyss like a lifeless, unnatural demon spawn, the guard leading her way into the twilight. No more was she his angel. Mato tainted that the moment she spread her legs for another.

Baz didn't care how Mato found her way through the portal, or care how they had introduced her to Alore and her guard. All he knew was that he wanted her dead.

Years he'd been faithful to her. *Years*. No more. Baz would live a new life, one with Mato unhitched from his side. With ill-intent in his heart, he got his bow ready, reaching into the holster behind his back. The arrows were sharp and deadly; the tips poisoned. Best yet, she hadn't seen him watching her. She'd die in pain, her life extinguished in moments. A bullet killed quickly. This might make her suffer a little. He wanted that. He needed that. Baz nocked the arrow, aimed carefully, his sight on one thing only: the bitch who wanted everything from him and who heartlessly would have taken it.

So absorbed upon Mato, Baz startled by the tug on his leg. Swiftly, he dropped his death-stance, snatching a knife from his arsenal of weapons, turning to see what disturbed him.

Otter hunched low, his eyes frantic, his slight body in flight mode. Baz leaned down, grabbing the boy by the nape of his shirt, and pulling him closer. The boy didn't fight. He leaned into Baz as if comforted by the sight of him.

"What is it?" Baz hissed, low enough for only Otter to hear him.

Otter didn't speak, but he gesticulated wildly. Baz trapped the boy's arms, keeping the child restrained so that his hiding place wasn't discovered.

"Hold on," he said, dropping his guard just enough to reel the boy in. "Why are you here?"

The boy tugged on Baz's arm, again and again. Baz lightly shook the boy, as if the motion would knock words from him. Momentarily, his focus was on the boy. After the minute passed with no further information gained, Baz glanced up, and in a moment knew his mission failed. Mato was hidden from view.

Angrily, he shook Otter again, not as gently this time. "Shit. She's fucking *gone*. This better be good. Now speak, or by god, I'll make you." Otter sobbed, softening Baz's indignation. He let go of Otter's collar but kept him close. "You're here for a reason, boy, so what is it?"

Otter pulled at Baz's arm, urging him. A whimper escaped the boy's lips. He twisted in Baz's grip, but one thing was clear. He wasn't about to talk, but he wanted something. Baz's job was to determine it quickly, because with Otter's floundering motions, it would soon compromise his hiding place.

With Mato's disappearance, no matter where Taig shrouded her, Baz's aim was lost. He focused on the boy.

"What? You want me to follow you?"

The boy nodded, his head like a marionette doll, bobbing in answer. Baz placed his hand on Otter's head, halting the movement.

"This better be damn good," he mumbled, easing back from where he'd hidden, his grip on Otter's neck light but coaxing. The boy kept pulling, urgency in his silence.

Making haste, Baz moved the boy to his side, protectively guarding him from Taig's eyesight as they crawled away. Taig gave no sign he'd seen them, and besides, the soldier was now far away.

Once away from danger, Baz lowered into a crouch in front of Otter, fixing him with a warning look. "Why are you here?"

Otter's eyes misted over with tears, and Baz restrained himself from yelling. The boy would eventually have to talk. By hell or high water, soon he'd make him. Now wasn't the time.

"Let's go, boy."

Baz huffed with annoyance. He took charge of where they stepped and where they hid. Best not to meet with any predators on the way back to where he left his prisoner. Thankfully, Otter kept up the pace beside him, walking endlessly without complaint. They were close to the shelter when Sebastian knew something was off. The air was still. The creatures quiet.

Baz rounded the corner, coming short. There was blood on the street.

"Fuck."

He grabbed the boy around his waist, hoisting him to his side, then he ran. Ducking low into the space he'd set aside as a door, Baz entered the shelter. He'd missed the havoc, but he knew what happened before

he saw her.

Dropping Otter to his feet, Baz went to Savannah's side. Blood was everywhere, on the floor, on the walls, but mostly on her.

"What the hell happened?"

It was a stupid question, because he knew. He took her by the chin, turning her to him. Her pupils dilated and she shallowly breathed. She whimpered, mostly unconscious.

Curses were irrelevant, but he whispered them anyway, a prayer. A mantra. Savannah was tiny, and she'd lost too much blood. "Damn it to hell..."

He turned to Otter. "Boy. Reach in that pouch and pull out the batting and the needle and thread. Hurry for fuck's sake." No one died on Baz's watch.

Savannah's limpid eyes watched him. Damn, she was a fucking mess. The room was in shambles, and it didn't take a genius to know that they had attacked the building. Zora balled up near her mother, sucking her thumb, and crying in jagged, hiccuping sobs.

"Unwrap the cotton, then rip it into squares, a lot of them. Hurry, boy. She's bleeding out."

Baz placed his hands on Savannah's torso, his fingers coming away with blood. His eyes swept the room. How long had she been like this? Beasts with no restraint had attacked, uncaring of who the victims were. Savannah either had been the direct target or she sheltered the children from the brunt of it. Most likely she had, as her wounds were intense while the children were only slightly battered and bruised.

Otter did as instructed, his hands trembling. He handed the batting to Baz, his eyes questioning even as his body shook. Sebastian took pity on him.

"Now the needle and thread."

Otter shoved them into Baz's waiting hands. "Boy, take the girl and do something. For fuck's sake, I can't work with her bawling over me."

He was harsh for a reason. One because it distracted the children and made them silent. Two, because it was his fault. He should have secured the shelter better when leaving, but he'd been so focused on harming Mato, he hadn't bothered with anything else.

The young ones out of the way, Baz turned back to her. "Look at me, Savannah. I need you to keep your eyes on me. Don't fall asleep."

She nodded, but her eyes drooped into the bowels of a death-rest.

Baz shook her awake. "Do it. You're not dying on my account."

He took the needle and thread with bloody hands. Fuck. She was bad. Slashes swept along her torso and rounding along her back. The damned monsters she swore to protect had gotten her good.

"Eyes on me," he instructed again. It may have been useless to force her attention. She was so near death, any movement could be the end of her. He wouldn't give up. He knew how wretchedly he failed her. She was under his watch, yet he left her there, vulnerable, a nursemaid to children too young to fight for her.

His tone softened. "I'll have to do this without painkillers. Be strong, Savannah."

She nodded, looking at him through half-mast eyes, eyes gazing towards the Shadowlands. Hell, she was so near death it surprised him she lasted until Otter and he returned.

Carefully he sewed her, all eyes on him, as if he were her savior. Maybe in this case, he would be, if he could hurry the fuck up and finish the job before she succumbed. She'd lost so much blood. Baz didn't know if she'd fall asleep and never wake, but by god, he would be there working even if she did.

"Hold on, princess. You're doing fine."

She gave him a wan smile. In the background, he heard Zora's hitched breathing. Everyone depended on him. By god, he wouldn't fuck this up.

Meticulously, he stitched. Every time he broke through her skin, Savannah gasped, the sound of a woman dying.

"Almost there. Keep it up. I'm almost done."

Silent tears ran down her cheeks. She looked at him as if he saved her, when in fact he put her directly in the line of punishment. How fucked up he'd been. Thinking of revenge and of Mato made him sloppy. But he could fix this. *If* he finished in time.

Last stitch. Baz took Savannah's chin and tipped it up to see him. "It's done. Don't sleep until I tell you, all right?"

She nodded as she had been, silent as if saying the smallest word would do her in. He watched her while wiping his hands. He knew he just sewed up a woman without regard to cleanliness. Hell, he couldn't have waited a single second more. Even now he wasn't sure he'd done the job right, if she would die on his account. Now that he was done, the intensity of what he faced in front of him shook him to

the core. She'd been fucking mauled. How had she survived this long without help?

Baz took Savannah by the chin once more, turning her face towards him as she fell into a worrisome slumber. "Stay with me, princess, don't rest yet." She didn't even nod this time. Sebastian leveled her with his gaze. "Let me hear you. Tell me you're listening."

Her breath hitched, but her eyes opened and stayed on his. "Savannah, let me hear those words."

With trembling hands, she pulled him down. "You bastard," she said, so faint it was nearly inaudible.

No matter the words, Baz felt jubilation. He'd done it, the near impossible. Grabbing a water pouch, he held it to her lips. She sipped, and even that was probably more than she should have had. Baz wasn't about to stop her. If she wanted the fucking world right now, he'd feel obligated to find and give it to her.

"You bet I am, but hate me later. Stay awake. I'll watch over the kids."

She smiled wanly, a fiery glare in her eyes and the constant spirit that might keep her alive. Baz finished wiping his hands, his gaze darting to the children.

"You did fine." Otter's eyes glazed with tears. "You did good coming to get me." The boy nodded, relief settling on his face.

Sebastian reached for a sobbing Zora, tugging her into his embrace. Her arms went around his neck, and she buried her face in. Awkwardly, Baz patted her back. He didn't know what to say to her, so he kept silent. At least she wasn't bawling anymore.

He knew the monsters would return to finish their job. Baz's gaze wandered over to Savannah. He couldn't move her, or she'd surely die. And the children, damn. What the hell was he supposed to do with them while she recuperated?

Baz leaned back against a piece of broken mortar, scouring the room with a studied look. He'd have to prepare defenses before the night was through. If those things returned, it was up to him, and possibly Otter, to man the weaponry. The boy was slight, but with his wiry build, he might handle it. Or, if not, maybe they were all slated to die.

31

Mato stepped closer to Taig. "There's something out there, something not normal. It doesn't feel right."

"There's always something out there."

"No. I mean something beyond the beasts, beyond the wild animals." He wasn't listening. Mato insisted. "I'm not making this up. I don't feel right, and I haven't since I've been here. I mean it. Something's wrong." He still wasn't listening. "Taig, why did I arrive through the portal?"

He barked a disdainful laugh, as if he'd heard her excuses long enough. "No one enters through without purpose."

"My purpose was not to die in the desert."

"We are aware of your Regent. Ask her why you got through."

"If I get back, you mean."

He gave a solid examination. "You arrived. It also meant you leave."

"How can you know that? Are you a Seer?" she asked bitterly.

"I've lived a long time. After a while, all secrets are exposed. Believe me, from good to bad, I've seen it all."

Mato eyed him cautiously, and the words whispered out. She was afraid to know. "How long have you been alive?"

"I was a young man when the Sundering began."

"No. That's impossible."

"I'm a slave. Not a man able to die and forget. Who are you, is a better question. When the queen arrives, I'll find out. If you aren't removed of life far earlier."

Her life was in his hands, and she wasn't stupid enough not to

realize it. Surly and dismissive, whether she was treated well, or doomed to death, the decision was his own to make.

"Please. I beg you. Be merciful. Do I have to meet the queen?"

He gave her a harsh look, his eyes narrowing as he huffed quietly. "I know my place. If you're still here, I'll take you before her."

She snapped back, her groveling wasted. "Why waste time? Kill me now and wipe your hands clean. I won't stop you."

Mato bet on his conscience and moral ground. Some men kept it, many others did not.

"Your baby's life is vital to you. Don't pretend."

"All care I had of this child disappeared the moment I knew of it. What worth does it serve except to drag me down?"

She lied. She wanted to be a mother beyond saving her own life. But Mato didn't have to tell him that.

"We both know that's untrue." His perceptiveness unsettled her. "Who are you, beyond what your pitiful life gave you? I'm willing to bet that you didn't enjoy being on the other side."

Mato softened her voice, shrugging as if his remark didn't expose her and all she stood for. "It's easy. I'm a slave, just as you."

He chuckled, examining her. "Perhaps that's your facade, just as it is mine. Don't worry, I'll soon find out. Come, little one, let's find you food and get you back to a bunker. I would be fucked if you died before my queen could see you."

Mato put away the unsettled feeling the area gave her. It gave her goosebumps, as if someone watched her, wanting her to die. If they came out of the shadows, she could confront them. It wasn't the beasts. But whoever it was, they were just as dangerous.

Mato followed Taig, keeping to his side. The feeling of being watched didn't leave her.

If she got through the portal again, Taig had supplied her with useful information. It might be enough to soothe the queen Regent. But what about her? Who would save her?

"Are there are residuals of the Sundering here in this world, people who survived, people like you and me?"

Taig paused, his mouth quirked in a knowing smile. How he could display gentleness, all the while being a bastard, made her like him a little. Mato always appreciated the depths of a good lie.

"I showed you where the Sundering landed in this world. Your

world has the same, if it hasn't overshadowed, or been hidden."

"That's not what I asked."

"I know. But I'm not as foolish as you'd wish me to be. What spins in that deviant mind of yours?"

"Are there any humans left behind?"

This gave him pause. He gave her a long, examining look. "There are... but they won't last long. The beasts that hunt them limit their lifespan."

"You're afraid of them, the beasts?"

Taig gave her a callous smile. "I don't have control over their pitiful minds, and as for those taken, I would be foolish not to be afraid."

"If they are sentient, we should help them."

"You ask too many questions, and like most women, you don't know what you talk about. Stop sulking. I've told you enough for now."

"How else am I supposed to learn if you don't teach me?"

"Learning is a privilege. Remember that and you'll stay alive."

Same as her world. Not much changed. In the brief span of time Mato spent in this world, the more she understood how much she failed at what she wanted to accomplish. It wasn't the rebellion. It was her.

What she carried in her womb wasn't just an ordinary child. It was a reminder of how mortal she was, and how much she still had to learn in order to survive. Mato intended to keep her child safe. It meant scoping out the land for the information she'd so far been denied.

She intended to live. Even if it meant silence and total acquiescence. Even if it meant adjusting to lies. Not much different, no matter what land she stayed in.

They'd almost made it back to the shelter when Taig stiffened. "You're a goddamned target. Here, take a blade."

She took it, nervousness making bile enter her throat. "Is it them?"

"Humans." He growled the answer, reaching for a blade that he usually kept tucked away. His stance sharpened, and the blade sat easily, *deadly*, in his palm.

"I don't want to meet them. Can't we go another way?"

"There is no other way. Hide behind me."

Mato checked him with a cool retort. "I don't hide."

"Bold words, and typical for a woman without understanding. Just don't complain about the blood." He turned away from her, a warrior. A man with cause on his side.

She saw them, the humans who survived. Gods, they were pitiful. Most of them were emaciated. Others wore a blank, hungered stare in their eyes. Mato doubted they'd get past Taig to her. But she kept the blade brandished, just in case.

"I don't know if I can do this," she whispered. "They aren't monsters. They are desperate, that's all."

Taig shot her a glance. "You won't say that when they try to rip the flesh from your bones."

She shuddered, breath uneasy. She'd never killed without cause, and this felt like killing an innocent. There were *children* among the stragglers.

"How long have they been like this?"

"All their lives, throughout the decades. It's gotten worse. So little to eat, abandoned buildings, scavengers everywhere. Don't pity them. They aren't worth it."

It felt sinful to harm them. "If you have the ability, why wouldn't you save them?"

"I'm bound to my queen. She gets the say, not me."

"She sounds horrible."

Taig suffocated a cruel laugh, waiting until the small crowd passed to speak to her again. "In your wildest dreams, you can't even imagine just how right you are."

Mato touched her extending belly. It was nearly impossible to hide her trepidation and fear. "What will she say about me?"

"I don't know," he said, serious. "Maybe you'll be worthy, but most likely you'll be a threat."

"How can I be a threat to a queen?" Mato shivered. "I'm a commoner, and pregnant. I mean no harm to anyone."

That you are pregnant is what will be the threat."

"I don't understand."

"She's barren. In probability, she'll hate you."

Mato weighed his logic. "I'll not tell her."

Taig's voice harshened. "It's fairly obvious." He paused, perusing her. "I would tell you to not be afraid, but if you want to live, be terrified. She may pardon you, but be prepared for her wrath."

"You mean, prepare to die."

Taig nodded. "You haven't got the choice to meet her or not. She's queen."

"What happens to the ones that fail her standards?"

His gaze met hers. "She changes them, soul for soul. A life like that isn't worth living at all."

"It's no wonder they're angry," she whispered. Mato crossed her arms about her, shivering. In her world, in her secret society, she was the strong one, the one everyone feared. To cower before another didn't set well with her.

"How can I elude her?" Mato didn't expect an answer, but she gained one anyway.

"Simple. You go through the gate. You might live. You might not."

She wore the face that lied. "I lived before."

He smiled, but it wasn't kind or generous. "You entered through a conduit of this gate, but believe me, it's a dim reflection of the real one."

Mato reluctantly questioned him, her mouth dry, tears hovering on the surface. Damn pregnancy. She couldn't hide emotion, try as she must.

"What will happen with this one?"

He snorted, putting his knife away. Taig's dark look warned her, even as his words struck her heart.

"If you get too close to the gate and it interprets you as unworthy, your life is drawn from you, in much the same way as the queen does with her prisoners."

"So, I'll be one of them, a beast?"

He nodded gravely, his answer succinct. "Yes."

It was enough to anger her. Her words shot out, firing at him without pause. "You're telling me to do this, do that. You should follow your own damned advice. Leave. Be free." His jaw clenched as she spoke, but Mato didn't shut up. "I know what to do. Your queen is apparently powerful, so let her go through the damned thing. Maybe then she'll leave the rest of us alone."

Taig stayed silent, his jaw tight enough to crack teeth. Once again, he didn't answer her.

"The queens have their respective sides, and have, since the Sundering tore them apart. They're forbidden to leave where they

were dropped.”

“Why are you telling me this?”

He contemplated her. “I’m old. Maybe I’m tired.”

He had the face and body of a thirty-year-old. If he was truthful, he’d lived for hundreds of years. Yes, she would be tired, too.

“I won’t help you,” she said. Let him force her. Let him even try.

“Don’t go through, if that’s what you stupidly decide,” he said, as if he’d read her mind again. “You’ll survive for a little while longer, but trust me. Any rebellion is in vain. You should be worried about how you’ll survive when the queen gets back from hunting. The gate might appeal to you, then.”

“You sound like you hate her.”

Taig gave her a dark look. His answer jetted out, tar-thick and venomous. “I hate her with every ounce of my being.”

“Yet you won’t leave.” It wasn’t a question, and she knew the answer before she even asked. Mato watched him for lies, but even if he wanted to hide them, there too much honesty in his words.

“She chose me. I can’t leave, no matter if I wanted to, or not.”

She knew the unspoken rule, a confession for a confession. She blurted it before she could think clearly of the consequence.

“My fiancé is here. The queen sent me to find him.”

Taig leaned in, whispering in her ear. “I know, little one. I’ve seen him.”

Goosebumps led up her spine, icy-cold and full of remembrance. If he’d seen Baz, help was also nearby. Sebastian would rescue her, even at the expense of his life. He’d promised her father, after all.

“Where is he?”

Taig stood straightened once more, reading her easily. “He’s not coming. Don’t think he’ll save you.”

“Why would you say that?”

He pointedly looked at her belly. She flushed, instinctively cradling it with her palm.

“He’ll forgive me.”

“No man would forgive that.”

“Sebastian would.”

Taig chuckled. He didn’t say another word. Mato insisted.

“You don’t know him.”

“You betrayed him, correct?”

Now she was silent. His chuckle made her want to throw a punch at his handsome face.

"Luckily for you, he's taken by greater responsibilities than searching for you."

"He's seen your queen?"

"Yes."

Mato growled, the truth hitting her harshly. "Why is it fortunate? She's made him hers, you mean."

"Yes."

There was more than he told. But Mato wasn't a fool. She knew Sebastian's attractiveness. After all, the Dark Queen kept him in her service, the Regent's cruel gaze always upon him. She kept him whole; she didn't remove his manhood, as she did with others in her service. Perhaps the Regent always had greater plans with Sebastian. Mato always believed so. She also never cared. She cared now, though, about this queen, and with this knowledge.

Mato sucked in the stale air of lies and consequence. "You mean, your queen wanted him."

"Indeed."

"You sound jealous. I thought you feared her."

"I am bound to her. Being jealous is a requirement."

Mato soured. "Why tell me this? I'm not stupid. You have an ulterior plan, don't you?"

There was annihilation in the depths of his eyes. He took her hand, stroking the smoothness of her skin. "It's simple. Go through the gate with my message. If you live, blessings from the goddess. If you fail..."

"I'm dead."

He nodded. Mato rubbed her belly. "What about my child?"

"You are mortal. You can have another."

"I can't do that," Mato said. "No matter what message you want relayed. And no, I can't have more."

Taig searched her face. "Why? You're young, healthy."

Bitterly, she answered. "I'm young, yes, but far from healthy. This child is unexpected, and don't ask again, because I won't risk it."

She rubbed her belly, feeling the movement underneath. Her heart tugged with the unfamiliarity of love. Why? Why now was she blessed with fertility? Now, when she was doomed to die?

Taig grinned, ugly and truth filled. She loved everything about his

hatred.

“Somehow, I suspect you have loved nothing or anyone before,” he said. It didn’t seem to bother him. If anything, admiration was in his voice. “Why start now? You’re doomed anyway that you look at it. With the queen away, you might live, even for just a few years. Take it. Survive.”

She let out a puffed breath. “What is your message?”

His grin was terrifying. “Go to your queen. Give her this: our forces are coming. Be fucking prepared to die.”

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Mato crushed her fear. "Then, I agree. Show me the gate."

He nudged her chin up so that she could watch him while he instructed her. "Don't be afraid. What other choice do you have?"

None. That's what.

"I don't want to harm my child," she whispered, sweat breaking out on her skin. "I'll never get a second chance for another."

"Listen to my words." His voice hardened. "You'll make it. Don't think about the baby."

Mato growled, ripping herself away from his touch. "You don't understand! This child is more than mine. It's collateral."

He laughed admiringly. "I wouldn't expect any less than machination on your part. Come. I'll show you where to begin, and when your terror fades, you can take the jump."

"Why are you in such a hurry?"

"My queen will return soon. She's never taken this much time to hunt before. But when she returns, any opportunity you had to leave is gone."

Reluctantly, she nodded. She knew he was right.

"Okay," she said, taking a deep breath. "Where's the entrance?"

"We're close. We'll shelter as near the building as able until you're ready."

"Why hide instead of just going for it? What's the catch?"

Taig shook his head. His patience was limited. Mato knew the signs. He answered her coldly, as if apathetic whether she comprehended what he told her or not.

"When the Sundering ripped through, those not killed by the rift hid. After the queens settled in their respective lands, the people knew to secure the hiding-holes built long before. There aren't many in this area of land, but if you go West, they stretch along the mountains and beyond. Few know of their existence. Even I don't know most of them. This is one of them, and that's where we'll go."

Stalling, she rubbed the small living slope along her skin. "I don't want to lose my baby. I can't. What can I do? Hide from her as the others do? That's not how I want it to be."

Taig's hand reached out, stroking her belly gently. A softened look appeared on his roughened face. Mato paralyzed, too shocked to speak.

"She can't touch the child. As much as she would want to, your babe is safe, in this land and along your journey. You traveled the worlds before with the child already inside you. Don't be afraid, Mato. Be fearless, as you are in the land beyond."

"You don't know how I was."

"I know you've impressed me. Think of all the people that I've captured. Do you think I tell these secrets to anyone?"

"I think that with your charm, you can say anything that you want and get away with it," Mato said. "No need to charm me. I want away from here regardless of what you tell me."

"But you're hesitant. You fear it, despite what I say. What will change your mind, I wonder. What will make you feel safe enough to trust me?"

"I think that if I catch wind of your royal highness, I'll jump through, regardless of if I'm ready or not."

He chuckled, and she smiled. "We're close, little one. Rest before your journey, if only for a night or two. I'll keep the beasts at bay."

Mato nodded. What did she have to lose? Either way, she was in danger.

"I need supplies," she said analytically. "I'll land in the desert. No point in getting through only to die because of where I end up."

"It's a shame." His gaze smoldered, and she flinched under his unrelenting stare. "I wanted to keep you for a little while. But I know you're safer off leaving, even if you must fight your way home. One thing is certain, Mato. You never want to meet my queen."

The truth stung her. She liked him. Despite herself, she did.

"Get me to your bunker. I'll leave in a few days."

Taig picked her up, as he often did when he wanted to travel fast, appeased by her decision to wait a little while longer. That wasn't the only thing she accepted as truth. For once, she'd met her match in the soldier who held her near. Shame he couldn't come along. Better that way, though. If he followed her, inevitably, the queen Regent would take him as her own. Despite his training and many years of experience, Taig wouldn't refuse.

"When you return to your world," he said, thankfully not knowing the direction of her thoughts. "Hide. Don't let anyone find you. There's a conduit in your land, a Seer. He'll be called for service the moment you return. Find him and stick to his side. He'll keep you safe."

"Why tell me all this? Don't you think your queen will hunt you as she's hunted the others?"

He set her down at the entrance to a ground-level door, not answering for some time. "I'm tired, little one. I've lived too long. Now that I've rescued you, my punishment is worthy. I will die with glory in my heart."

Mato understood valor. It was something she silently yearned for. It was something she'd never have. No one wanted the rebellion without some measure of personal intent. Now, with the king's baby inside of her, Mato would birth a royal child, a child who could, by right, take the throne.

Mato's duty was to keep her baby safe, to tell the child of its upbringing. To make them want to rule as much as she did. Only then, when her obligation was over, would she want to die.

Mato swallowed indignation, fear, helpless regret. "You don't trust me, remember? Why now?"

"It's not about trust. I want to escape the same as you. This is my way. And Mato... you earned my trust honestly."

Her brow furrowed at his half-hearted apology, then anger kicked in. "The bunker? That horrible place? I was tied up for who knows how long!"

His laugh was deep and twisted. "When I left you there, chained, and ready to gullet me, you didn't fight the chains. You didn't bruise yourself trying to get free. That earns trust, and now you have mine."

Mato inhaled his pleasure. It taunted and tantalized. "When do you show me the gate?"

Taig lifted her hand, bending over it as he gently kissed it,

surprising her once again. "Tomorrow. For now, rest. You'll get through, and then the worlds will thank you."

#

Mato didn't sleep that night. Taig woke her early. It was time to prove to him she was worthy.

After securing the bunker's door, he picked her up. Mato didn't refuse.

He walked, carrying her without tire. She didn't broach a word. Just as they had before, they entered the deadened city. Broken glass, broken walls, broken lives surrounded them. The worst hid in the shadows, ready to take them down. Despite having her in his arms, Mato knew she was safe. Without effort or qualm, he would fight to the end. Of that, she was assured.

Taig paused in front of a large building. Its steps were wide and fractured. Carefully, he set her down. Mato wished he weren't the first to drive deeply in her heart and massacre it. Baz did what he could with her, but no man ever treated her as divinely wicked as Taig did right now. Not even the king she butchered with her words and slaughtered with intention.

"This is it?"

He nodded, glancing over at her. "It used to be beautiful."

"Our world also is beautiful... underneath. Sometimes it's hard to see what our queen gilts over, to see what's truly there. That's why I fight. That's why the rebellion must never end."

He said nothing, but his eyes closed as if remembering. "Centuries ago, this city was one of the most influential in the world. Now look at it. Dark. Empty. Scavengers are the only surviving ones out of millions."

"This will change things?"

He opened his eyes and looked at her. "It'll change everything."

Mato swallowed fear. "Show me the gate."

"I have supplies hidden nearby. Let me grab them first."

While he went to grab them, Mato looked around. Once, the museum must have been beautiful. Now there were cracked pictures, turned over furniture, complete chaos.

She impatiently waited for Taig to get back to her. There was something eerie and ghostlike about the abandoned place. Mato touched her belly. Her child inside showed its awareness by a lightning quickness and a small somersault. Then the babe went quiet. Maybe it, too, felt taken advantage of, yearning endlessly for the home left behind.

Taig came up behind her, a backpack sized duffel in his grip. "Try it on for size," he said.

He placed it on her. Mato adjusted the straps. She looked at him, perhaps the last living thing she would see.

"What if I fail?" She knew the answer. She'd turn into one of the ravenous beasts.

He remained silent for many moments, his answer soft, but blunt. "Fail, and you'll die." His eyes perused her. "You won't feel a thing either way. Not until you reach the other side."

Mato took a deep breath. "I'm ready."

He walked her over to a high arch, the paint on the ancient stone blotched with corrosion. Its paint was faded and chipped into nothing. Mato shivered.

"This is it?"

Reverence sounded in his voice. "Nebuchadnezzar's Gate. In the early days of existence, a king made it to show entrance to his land. Slave and noble walked through there. Nothing, in any of the kingdoms, was as beautiful."

"My father spoke of just a thing. I thought he made up the stories."

"It's real. Your entrance through to the other side will be the first in many, many centuries."

She gave him a curious glance. If he lied to her, she'd kill him as she left. "I don't understand. Why are you taking this much interest in me?"

He kept back from the gate. "I believe you'll make it. That's why."

Mato sounded a prayer. "I'll make it. I know I will."

"Whether you live or die, you have a mission. Don't forget it, little one. Find the Seer if he doesn't find you first. Stay away from the

palace until you have a plan. Only then do you strike.”

“So you keep repeating. You have a lot of knowledge for a plan that’s never been executed.”

“You’ll be fine. You *must* be fine. Nothing else will serve.”

Mato ominously warned him, touching the single blade he’d given her. “If you’re lying to me...”

Taig shook his head. “The queen sent others here for a reason. That’s not why you travel through. Remember, sweet Mato. Succeed, and you’ll help all of get out from the Queen’s cage.”

“Others know what’s on this side. It’s not a secret. From father to child, we’re told the story. If they were to attempt it, what then?”

“They won’t make it, no matter how they try. That’s why you’re so special. The chances of breaking ground to make it here aren’t likely. I won’t lie. The chance is slim to make it back to your land, but you made it through once. You’ll make it through again.”

She said nothing for many minutes, contemplating. “What about Sebastian? Did he make it from the other side?”

“If he arrived here, the queen would know.”

That was one less person to worry about. “Okay,” she said, her mind made up. “Show me where to enter.”

Taig pointed to the gate. “I can’t get any closer. As for you, step under it and go through.”

Mato nodded, hoisting the knapsack closer. He gave her a brief, encouraging kiss on the forehead, and then Mato turned to the gate.

“Be in peace, little one. Remember, your actions save the world.”

Mato smirked. “Give my regards to the queen.”

She looked up, eyeing the carved images in the ancient stone. This was her landmark. This was her infamy.

Mato took a deep breath... then she walked through.

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She was gone, that wicked bitch. Mato used him, discarded him, and charged him as unfit for anything. If Mato ever returned to his kingdom, Tiran would show her just what treason cost.

He smiled, a gratuitous grin. His mother could never gain knowledge of his absolute failure. Tell the queen that Mato died, or that he recovered her body after she wandered off for personal needs. Anything but the truth was acceptable. Anything but a lie would get him killed.

He hustled around the corner to where his mother kept private rooms. It was bad enough he dared intrude. Bad enough to have a deadly order on him once he told her the truth.

Sweat clustered on his brow. He didn't knock, didn't announce himself, didn't care if she ordered him out. One more month and he was king. Let's see her try to kill him, then. A sickly grin pasted on his face. Tiran opened the door, shutting it behind him. The evidence of recent loving scented the room. His mother lazed on a chair in front of him, a lacy robe on her body. Being half-naked never fazed her, not even for him.

"Son. To what do I owe the honor?"

Someone else was in there. Tiran knew it. His admission would tell in the courts by mid-morning. Shit. This wasn't how he wanted to confess.

His mother's brow furrowed, and she let out a puff of displeasure when he didn't jump to action. "What are you still doing here?"

Tiran knew the extent of her wrath. He had the same quality, after

all.

"I've returned," he said simply.

The Regent sat forward. "Where is your whore?"

"Dead."

His mother hummed. "Is she now?" She licked her bottom lip, as if she still felt the stain of cum upon her mouth. "How very disappointing."

Tiran's eyes narrowed. "You wanted her gone. Now she is."

"I wanted her to succeed where you would fail. And you failed, didn't you? After all, you're here while she is not."

Tiran gritted his teeth. "There was a complication."

"Is that what it's called now? Shameful, son. I expected more out of you."

Before he could respond, she was out of her seat, her petite body a mighty force, standing just before him. "Do you know what you've done? You've set loose one more commoner to the other world. Think of all I've warned you. I did not mean the slut to get through."

There was no more point in hiding. "I stood right beside her. She got through while I did not."

"Tell me. What are you planning on doing about it?"

Tiran crossed his arms. "Nothing. She's gone, probably dead on the other side."

The Regent clawed his upper arm. He might have jerked away, but he loved the pain she given.

"Is that what you think?" The corner of her lip curled. "She's not dead. She's too worthy."

He couldn't help himself; he laughed. "She's just a slut I picked for the time meaning. Mato is nothing."

"She's a slut carrying your child. What are you going to do now?"

For a moment, he couldn't breathe. She had to be joking.

"It's impossible. We took precautions."

His mother cruelly grinned. "How else do you think she gained the right to pass along to the other side? Your seed allowed it. Now you have a brat to contend with, and now that you've impregnated her, a future bride to avoid. I'd admire her if I didn't want to kill her."

He stammered. "I already have a future wife. You planned it since my childhood. And let's not lie. Mato's child will never be accepted, not by the court, and certainly not by me. As for her, I'll never marry

the bitch.”

The Regent’s tongue clicked thoughtfully. “Somehow, I think you’ll embrace it when your offspring returns.”

“How can you say it even will?”

Mato could burn for all that he cared for her. A child? Perhaps that would incite another line of forgiveness, another chance. His mother didn’t want the babe, yet he did. It was just the mother he had to deal with and kill. No one crossed him—no one.

The Regent gave him another examining glance, waving him away. There was no point in arguing. Better silence than dealing with her observance.

Frustrated, he left his mother’s rooms, and walked the hallways, slipping into his own bedroom suite. Santh waited for him just inside the doors.

“Your Majesty,” the boy said. He saluted, then bowed. “You’re here!”

Tiran didn’t waste any time. “What have you learned?”

His spy’s face fell. “I’m sorry, Sire. It’s a dead end. I haven’t learned a thing worthwhile.”

“About nothing, or from no one?”

“Both. It seems your latest paramour, the whore, kept low with her secrets. She’s executed, but she died without revealing anything.”

“You believe she had them?”

“Absolutely, my king. Don’t we all?”

Tiran headed toward his bed. What Santh revealed gave him a fucking headache. He needed sleep more than anything right now. Sleep, and then searching for more information. Before that, there was one thing he needed to find out from his spy.

“What of the traitors, those of the rebellion? Their numbers are increasing, and I’ve to learn who their master is. Have you found anything?”

“Supposedly, they exist not under a man, but that of a woman. I’ve not found out who.”

Tiran let that ruminate for many seconds, discarding it as he shook his head. “No woman has that kind of power. It’s been that way for years. They are useless unless guided by a man.”

“If so, how have they made their way into your bed? You don’t fuck idiots, Sire.”

A smile crept up. It was true. Tiran liked the manipulative ones, the ones that thought they might excel once he was done with them. But that's not what he needed to ask.

"What of Mato? What have you discovered about her?"

Santh paused, weighing his words. "She's dying. Her lungs won't last much longer."

The retort was sharp. "I would have known."

"There's more, your Majesty. She's been to visit the Seer."

"So? Perhaps she thinks his magic will heal her."

Santh didn't look convinced. "Maybe you will visit him, Sire? He will tell you the truth."

Visiting Majid was the last thing Tiran wanted to do. But, if it meant discovery, he'd bury his trepidation and do so. After all, the Seer judiciously concealed what happened on his last visit. No one needed to know Tiran's weakness and his fear.

Quickly he changed from the garb he wore in his mother's presence and into the ones he favored—simple linen trousers and a matching shirt, the collar unfastened to show his strength. It was a shame so few people saw him that way. Perhaps his favorability among the commoners would change for the better. He needed everyone on his side, regardless of their station in life. Santh, the little snob, would disagree.

"Find out more. I want to know who rules any dissident. Bring them to me. I want to have a word with him. Better to have him on my side than against."

Santh nodded, then left. Tiran took a deep breath and then exited, as well. He didn't sneak down the hallways this time. If Majid crossed him, there wasn't anything Tiran would do to save him.

As Tiran rounded the hallway to Majid's rooms, he stopped cold. The door was open, the room empty of everything but a few books and a dirty tea-set. That bastard. Fuck! Tiran tried to find an explanation, but found none. It was his beneficence that kept the Seer alive. He'd gifted an entire suite to the man; he'd make sure everyone left him alone, including his own mother. Look at how his mercy was repaid. The man left the castle and now Tiran was fucking screwed. The Seer knew too many secrets and held Tiran's life in his hand. Not for the first time, he'd trusted the wrong fucking person.

Angrily, he returned to his rooms. He wanted the Assassin. But

Sebastian of Zelal was gone. The only one he could safely order around was already searching for him. But there wasn't time. If Majid stayed hidden, Tiran would never prevail over the queen.

Without debate, Tiran called for Santh. Once his spy arrived, Tiran gave the one command he'd avoided.

"Retrieve the weapon."

Santh sputtered. "Your Majesty... are you certain?"

"Am I not king? If they aren't trustworthy, I have collateral. Go, Santh. Find me the devil-dog."

Santh bowed, face pale. He left, leaving Tiran to his fury. Whatever happened, Majid left in a hurry. What could cause a man of his size and reputation to escape to safety into a world of hate?

There were whispers that the Seer delved into the rebel factions, feeding them story after story, using manipulation and doubt to connive and cause revolt. If so, the man was more dangerous than he seemed.

Tiran had one choice. He must retrieve Mato and contain her. If she carried his child and survived into the mirror world, she would gain unimaginable power. She could take him down. That would not happen if Tiran gained her back. He must... Or die.

34

Alore stepped out from the shadows, going over to her guard. He watched the gate. They both watched history being made.

"She did it," he said.

"She did." Alore bit down on her lower lip, pleased. "The pretty whore did it. Now we'll see if she survives the Hell Domain."

"It's a gamble," Taig said, looking at his queen. "The babe may not live."

"Life is always a gamble." She placed her hand on Taig's forearm. "You are worthy, my warrior. The mortal didn't suspect a thing."

Taig chuckled. "I thought I may have to sleep with her before she listened."

"I wouldn't have allowed that. Good thing her mind led her to victory, no matter how long it took to convince her. She's probably got visions of ascending the throne, *my* throne, with the applause of many. Serves her right if she succumbs to the desert lands."

"She'll only be useful when she gains the Seer's trust and finds out his prophecies. Otherwise, she won't be of any help to you."

"She has the babe," Alore said, sneering, hostile in her rage. "If she follows through on her command, I might pardon her. As for the child, I want to crush its skull, then eat the marrow of its brain. The whore's obedience is the least of my concerns."

Taig didn't fluster at the violence in her words. "At the very least, damaging her would allow less need for hunting."

"It's a shame that bloodlust isn't what I'm after. I simply want to win."

His eyes were dark pits of emptiness. She owned every part of him, a feat that pleased her very much.

"Soul-hunting takes time," Taig said. "You took longer this time."

"I came back as soon as I could. You did well, soldier, feeding her lies and comforting her until she found a backbone to leave. If she makes it through the desert, she'll be useful. But not as useful as the child when it is born. Imagine, I finally have a hand in my sister's destruction."

"Yet if she miscarries or hides the child..."

Alore waved his concerns away. "I'll still get through. After all, she is the conduit I needed. Your attention towards her was just the entry I needed. The slut thinks she's found a savior. Too bad her savior already belongs to me."

"My queen, she's lucky I didn't snap her neck for the assumption."

"That's what I love about you—your callous and constant loyalty. If she wanted lust, she looked the wrong way."

Taig shrugged the compliment away. His aversion to praise didn't faze her. Eventually, she wouldn't need him, but for now, his obedience led to her sister's downfall.

She was ready to speak again, offer concession to her slave, then paused, her head tipped to the side, listening. Alore's breath hitched. She smiled, a fiendish, awful grin. When she spoke, it was with victory.

"She made it through with the babe alive. She's in the desert deadlands. Now I'll see how well she manages alone, with only her ambition to drive her."

Alore didn't acknowledge Taig's doing. He was her slave, not her equal. "I now have what I need for my throne to compromise Yurra. Wait until I overthrow the mirror-lands. Then the Regent will wish she weren't so lenient with those who she commands."

"Should I continue to monitor her?" Taig asked.

He'd placed a small tracker on her victim while he kept the whore bound by his chains. Mato's carried Alore's mark, just under the surface of her skin. There was nowhere she could go without being found.

"Let's just wait and see. Soon, my kingdom will rule. I feel it in my bones, Taig. You did well."

It was unfortunate that she relied on mortals to keep her lands intact. Soon she wouldn't need anyone or anything. When the Dark-

lands invaded, the day of battle would begin.

"Where is the soldier?"

Taig's composure turned uncomfortable. "He's taken a mortal captive."

"He should have returned to me by now," Alore said irritably. "Who is this captive?"

"She's a survivor. You've already soul-sucked the woman's mother. As for the daughter, she escapes every time. Worse, she hides with two children, also survivors."

"It's a matter that I will soon rectify. Once the warrior learns of his woman's unfaithfulness, he'll return to me, and then I will act. As for now, I'll return to my hunt, and wait in shadow."

"As you wish, your Majesty."

Taig gathered his weapons at her dismissal. He'd return to a bunker, ready for when she'd meet with him later. For now, Alore had souls to hunt.

With her demon-dogs at her side, Alore left the abandoned building and threaded through the empty streets. This smear of atrocity was her kingdom? This shelled out world? She refused to be satisfied with all she stole. Alore was a queen, and she needed both worlds. One was for adding to her army, and the other to bask in platitudes as she governed.

She knew that such a short time was left. Each time she sent someone over through to the other side, her energy and ability to absorb power through mortals weakened. Soul-hunting, while repairing, also drained her. The rebuilding of her strength took too much time.

Being in the mortal worlds punished her and her sibling, especially when they both were blessed with an inborn right to rule. Birthright be damned. She wanted both to rule and to destroy.

Alore looked up, silently cursing. At least when punished and abandoned, the Ancients overlooked the land, land she'd soon control both sides of.

Her demon-dogs stopped, sniffing the air. Vulnerable prey was around. Alore praised her hunters as she scoped the buildings. There, on the far left. She could tell the humans lurking inside weren't too gone to be useful, no matter that she'd turned them already from what they originally were.

Tauntingly, she whistled, and heads turned her way. Just as she hoped, they ran.

The hunt was on.

She followed them, the rush of victory spurring her. She encouraged them even as she dodged the ammunition they assaulted her with. Did they really think a mortal gun could halt her?

“Come, little ones. Submit. You’re dead already, my pretty ones. Dragging out the end won’t help you anyhow.”

Their hisses and grumbles, cries and pleading excited her. Even Taig, if he were near, would ready himself for the fight. There was something about bloodshed that invigorated even the mildest soul.

It was going to be a fine night. She wished she hadn’t ordered him elsewhere. He hunted efficiently, and he saved the juiciest pieces of their souls just for her. She never ate their abhorrent skin or tasted their life-giving blood. No, because soul-sucking required delicacy. Fine-tuned precision. After all, nothing tasted better than righteous decay.

Bit by careful bit, she’d feed on the air surrounding them. She took part of them until they were sentient no more. By then, they were useless. She finally allowed them death.

She gazed around. Time to feed her hunger until satiated. Already the lands depleted her. There were so few humans left. Just as she was ready to dive in, she halted, her mission detained. Her dogs stopped, breathing in the dead air. What had her beauties found? Alore stalked around them quietly, hidden in the threshold of a tall building. Then, a few heartbeats later, she saw what interested them.

It was her latest offering, Sebastian of Yrurra. What was her prisoner up to?

He checked the outside of the building with no hint that she or her dogs were there, and little that he was hunted. His head popped in the dilapidated shell once more. She heard the mumble of his voice, though from the distance no words were distinctive. Alore’s interest piqued.

Looking around, he left the building, still clueless that she watched him. Time passed, and her heart jubilated. Did he think she didn’t suspect all that he did? There were three others he protected back within the walls, but instead of following the warrior, he kept them behind. She could taste the fear in their heartbeats. Alore licked her

lips. Choices, choices. Which mortal would be the next to die? Which would she decide to spare?

Alore kept to the shadows, listening to the quiet chatter. They didn't suspect she was there. Better to make her move on them all when he returned for them. Leaving them, she followed in the direction the soldier took. Maybe then her desire for restitution would be satiated.

35

The desert was just as grueling as the first time. Now, not only did she have her own life to guard over, but she had the babe inside her. Time after time, she caressed her belly, assuring herself that the child still lived.

She knew what—or who—she looked for. There was only one Seer in the kingdom, and despite the awful way she left him last, Majid would answer. He had just as much to earn from their reunion as she did. One question she needed the answer to: why, and how he knew those on the other side of the portal. Did he work for the other queen, or worse, both of them? She wouldn't trust him, not after he refused transparency for all these years about what he knew.

Again, she stopped for water. Carefully, she soaked a cloth, rubbing it along her neck and face. The Hell Domain was a worthy foe, but Mato refused to go down without fighting, no matter how she longed to lose to the oppressive heat.

Suddenly, a flash of life flashed to the side of her, and she tracked the movement from the corner of her eye. It was too fast to be an animal, but unassumingly slow enough to be human. Immediately, she dropped the cloth in the bag at her side and grabbed a knife in her hand. It was quick, hiding before she could settle sight on it.

“Who goes there?” she yelled.

There was no answer. Sweat trickled down her body, along her temple, between her breasts, down her spine. Mato couldn't focus on the heat, and the sweltering need to give into it. Right now, she fought for her life, and that of her unborn child.

She yelled again, and once more, nothing answered. The knife seemed inadequate, and for once she wished she'd taken Sebastian up on his offer to train her. Too late now, he was gone, and perhaps soon, so also would she succumb to the wilderness all around her. The fighting she knew was cursory at best.

"Let down your weapon," the man said, easing up behind her. Mato turned in a flash, but sighed with a hint of tears in her throat when she saw who it was.

"Majid," she said, precious tears falling. "You found me."

"I should have let you go." He lumbered to stand in front of her. "If I didn't know of the babe inside of you, I would've. Come near. I must feel your energy, and then I can be done with you."

She did so. He could kill her. His size enveloped her, his shadow covering over the light. Majid hadn't scared her before, but now, out of the privacy of his rooms, his presence swelled with power. He was formidable, and she didn't dare question him. She wanted to fight; now she cowered before him.

His massive hand reached out, touching the swell of her stomach. He grunted. "It lives."

Mato bent her head, tears streaking her dust-covered face. Relief brought the tears forefront. She wasn't a woman that cried, but she couldn't keep the sobbing at bay.

"Please, just help us. I'll never bother you again, I swear it."

His face appeared, and the shadows eased. Mato would never appreciate darkness ever again. The light of this world, with the Regent ruling, was far better than the place she exited not so long before.

"Your eyes," she sputtered thankfully. "You've covered them."

"It was easier to track you without the clouding of prophecy."

"I was told to find you, that you'd help. Please, Majid. I must save my baby. I'll do anything."

He was silent, perusing her without sight, seeing her with no measure of touch. How had she thought him servile? The man standing before her was monstrous, and he held her life, and that of her child, in his hands.

"You want me to See?"

His gentle, soft voice barreled out. Power seeped. Never had Mato been so terrified, not even while fighting an unknown entity in a

foreign land.

"Yes," she said, trembling. He didn't speak for many, many minutes. Just when she was ready to grovel, he handed her a water-pouch.

"Drink. You'll need it."

Mato grabbed it in a rush. What she had left was scant, and thirst made her parched throat eager. She drank deeply, then handed him the remains. He motioned for her to keep it. Without eyes, without speech, he saw her. Mato quivered in front of him, frightened and raw.

"You'll help me?"

"It's in the prophecy," he answered. He turned quiet once more.

"What do you see?"

Majid reached out and placed his weighty palm across her belly. "This isn't for you," he said. "It's for the child."

"My baby will be all right?"

He nodded, covering his eyes with the other palm. "The Sundering isn't over," he said. "*When the Dark One returns, the day of Salvation follows.*"

"Who's the Dark One?" Mato eagerly whispered. "Is it me?"

He huffed, the sound of a child in a man's body. "You are the conduit. Nothing more."

"But my child..." She frowned. "Is this about my baby?"

"Don't presume," he said, and Mato shrunk into herself. He knew, without looking, what evil lay in her heart. "You'll be dead before this happens."

She refused to allow that to halt her. She hesitated, however. Majid was terrifying, and she hated to beg. "Is there more?"

"A betrayal brings forth a nation. I've seen this many times." She knew he watched her behind sewn shut eyes, though how, she couldn't reckon. "A war is coming. *The day the sisters battle, the shadows will rise.*"

"What does that mean?" she asked, even as he backed away from her. "What should I do?" Panic left her vulnerable. "Is that it? I don't understand. Please, Majid. Don't leave me! I don't understand what you just said."

"You'll manage," he said. "Or die doing so."

The Seer turned, heavy footsteps making huge marks in the rocky sand. She yearned to grab him back, even though he scared her, even though he said she'd not live.

“I thought you were supposed to guide me.”

“You’ll carry the babe a while longer. That is your mission. Fail, and all life is forfeit.”

Mato hung her head, sloppy tears haunting her. *She* wanted to be the savior. She wanted to raise division in the land. The Seer saw everything. She would die, and her babe would rise. If she didn’t love the unborn inside her, Mato could expel it without a single qualm. But that would make her a monster, and prophecy wouldn’t come true. An expulsive wouldn’t save anyone. Her child, with her continuing to host it until birth, would.

Maybe it was penance, or perhaps it was a duty bound. Either way, Mato knew to take the crumbs offered to her. In a terrible, inconsequential way, she might fulfill the mission offered to her. That had to comfort her, when all else failed.

Carefully, she rose to her feet. Majid was gone. She looked around. He’d placed a knapsack on the ground. Eagerly, she took it and peeked inside. Food, and pouches of water were inside. Mato now knew her purpose, and as for the Seer, she never had to see him again. Now she had a desert of land to cross and a king to beg mercy to when she arrived.

Days passed. Weeks of hiding from Yurra’s renegades, and weeks of contemplation. When Mato saw the Regent’s castle in the distance, she sobbed with relief. Maybe she wasn’t a powerful warrior, as she’d always pretended to be, but she did know her merit. Protecting the unborn soul that lived within her, Mato served prophecy. Majid’s words, as usual, were cryptic. But despite that, she knew one thing—she’d not fail the life inside of her.

She knew how to evade the guards, and how to gain entrance without detection. Mato used that knowledge to best serve her. As the time for sleep waxed, then waned, she waited until the glowing night arrived. Only then did she make her move.

She paced with quiet footsteps inside. It wasn’t long before she felt like she was being followed. Mato turned but saw nothing. She hurried once more along the dark corridors, an unnerving fear making her feel brittle and alone. Again, she turned, but saw nothing. No one knew she’d entered the castle, so this shadow trailed her without reason. Mato took a calming breath, but then, from the corner of her eye, she saw it, a spectral presence tailing her. She ran, not caring she

was a coward. Majid spooked her; she wasn't afraid to admit it. The person followed, and then she was caught. Just beyond Majid's rooms, the man spoke.

"You must want to die," Tiran said. She gasped in relief that it was him, a relief that didn't last long. Tiran used the sword in his hand to knock her against the wall. Mato turned, facing him.

"I need to speak with you," she said.

"We have nothing to say."

The tip of the blade pressed into her skin. Mato shivered and cried out to her former lover. "Stop! You don't understand."

"What do you want?"

"Just a few moments. Please."

His eyes hardened. "Beg. I want your fucking tears. I want you down on your knees, asking forgiveness. I may, or may not, give it."

Immediately, she dropped to the cobbled ground, ignoring the pressure on her knees and in her heart. "Your Majesty. I've come looking for you."

"You found me. Speak."

This wasn't time for ego. "Sire, I'm going to bear a child."

He lowered the sword, then his gaze cruelly altered. "So?"

"It's yours."

His eyes flashed black, impenetrable. "You lie."

"I wouldn't."

Tiran grew so quiet she was afraid that her death was imminent. Then he sheathed his weapon, reaching out to yank her from the floor.

"Follow me."

She let him lead her to his suite of rooms while she remained circumspect. He nudged her inside the door, shut it, and then rounded on her.

"You planned this," he spat.

"For once, your Majesty, I am not at fault."

"Are you telling me this pregnancy surprised you?"

Mato shook her head, rubbing the swollen skin. "I'm sorry."

It didn't matter how quietly she spoke or how sincere she was, Tiran looked at her with eyes of hate. "I'm calling the midwife. If you are with child, I'll then determine whether it's mine, or not."

Mato nodded. To speak again would mean her grave, not only of her, but of her child. The man standing before her wasn't her lover. He

was king.

"I'm putting you in containment. You won't see the light of day or the shimmer of night until the healer leaves me with a verdict."

"I understand."

"I'm not doing this for you," he hissed. "I'm doing this for the grace of your unborn child."

"I'm thankful."

"You will be, if I decide to pardon you. As it is, I'm giving you until the birth of the babe. Until then, count your mercies that the child will be mine."

By all calculation, Mato counted her pregnancy to be at least five to six months in, most of it spent in traveling. Despite being held captive, it was a far cry better than being in the place she came from.

"Yes, my king."

He pointed to the antechamber of the rooms. "You'll sleep there, on the floor. Get comfortable in penitence, since you'll soon realize that I offer only weighted absolution or the ready sting of death."

Mato prepared to die, if not now, then later. Everything she planned for, the long hours under the midnight sun, holding illegal meetings of the rebellion, in believing she was worthy to wear the crown of queen; none of it was worth a single thing. Maybe she was fated to die, but not before bringing the king's child to life. After that, nothing mattered. Gratefulness filled her. Mato never knew humility before, and previously any act she gave of it was false. Here she lay, caressing her belly, glad for the life she could impart.

It was more than duty. It was love.

36

The days passed slowly. It would be wrong to say they weren't eventful, for during the first few, Baz kept a hawk's eye on Savannah to make sure she didn't succumb to her injuries.

She was brave, he'd give her that. Even he wouldn't have liked to come across a swarm of beasts on his own. That she faced who she claimed were family, all while protecting the children, made him awe her. Not that he'd tell her such a thing.

Right now, he was at her side, helping her to sit up. Her slight frame leaned into his, her eyes focused on his face.

Baz said, low enough that the children didn't overhear, "When are you going to tell me what happened?"

Savannah's gaze flickered away. "You know what happened."

"I know what you've told me." He lifted her up, carrying her to a private place so she could take care of necessities. Her face flamed fire red, and she gave her thanks. He understood. To be reliant on anyone, especially for this, would frustrate him. Obviously, she felt the same, discomfort and awkwardness in every line of her body.

After several minutes passed, her soft voice called to him. Nursemaid, not warrior? In the past, Baz would've refused to handle this. He couldn't refuse her, not now. Savannah's bravery tugged at him, making him push back at the hardness of his soul.

When he lifted her in his arms again, she tugged at his shirt, drawing his attention to her face. "Please don't do this for me anymore," she said. "I can handle it."

He scoffed, ignoring her. "I can," she reiterated, as if he'd believe or

listen to her.

“Not happening.”

She puffed out her lower lip, examining him. “Why not?”

He hid a chuckle. “Did you forget? You’re my prisoner.”

This time, she laughed. “So I’m told. Even more of a reason to allow me. You don’t want to get sucked down into my wily ways. How do you know I’m not planning on setting us free?”

“Savannah, shut up,” Baz mildly said. “You aren’t going anywhere. I for sure am not letting you handle this on your own. So quiet down. Relax.”

Her body was so slight, she felt like she would break. How did she fare when faced by the killing machines outside? Even Baz put all his force and conviction behind every slice of his sword or blade.

“Was it them, those who you said were family?”

Her eyes squeezed shut. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Savannah, you can’t keep defending them. They wanted you dead.”

Shaking her head, her body trembling, she refused to open her eyes. “There was a mistake. They didn’t know it was me.”

“Believe that bullshit if you want to, but at least tell me the truth. They ripped your body apart, and believe me, that isn’t the least of what they wanted and attempted to do. What if they’d gotten hold of Zora? What then?”

Tears fell to her cheeks. “*Stop*. You don’t understand.”

His jaw tightened. “You’ll tell me. I’m not taking no for an answer.”

“Why make me say it when you already know?” she hissed, quietly enough that their conversation stayed private.

Because he was a stubborn ass. Baz huffed a sigh, lowering her to the ground and covering her with his outer garment. She ran a slight fever, and he didn’t know shit about taking care of her. So when, on the first night after the attack, she curled into his body, trembling, he removed his jacket and let her use it. What the hell did he need it for, anyway. Baz wasn’t about to leave the shelter for any reason other than to bring down the monsters lurking somewhere outside.

He heard them, their low grumbles, their prying fingers on the walls of abandoned buildings. So far, they hadn’t ventured further. Something kept them away. Maybe she was right, that they sensed her and wouldn’t compromise her further. Baz wasn’t so sure. He saw

her damned torso. Hell, he sewed her back together. Despite what she pleaded, they were beasts, without human decency. Eventually, they'd be back. Sebastian sure as hell was going to be ready for them.

They weren't the only predators taken to the shadows. The animals that were relegated to the forests and mountains in Baz's world had gone wild in this one, and each screech, howl, or bark proved that this world was a fucking dangerous one.

Savannah looked soft and vulnerable in her sleep. Baz's protectiveness surged. Then he remembered Mato, and it reiterated that he dared not trust her. She was his enemy, a woman that kept her secrets tucked close to her heart. Even near death, she refused to tell him anything. If he were the man he professed to be, he'd make her tell him. As it was, leniency kept that at bay, even if only until she healed.

He sat near her, cleaning his weapons as she rested. Zora was nearby, Otter playing with her silently. The boy held secrets, dark ones by Baz's guess. Maybe Sebastian went about this the wrong way. Perhaps the boy was the best way to steal information.

"Don't do it," Savannah whispered. Her eyes focused on him. "Don't. He's been through enough."

"I don't doubt it."

"Otter isn't ever going to talk. You've gained his trust, and he idolizes you. Don't break him, please."

Baz leaned down to whisper in her ear. "I won't have to if you tell me the truth."

She huffed, bluntly answering. "You're not a man to be trusted."

"It was them, wasn't it, princess?"

"Don't call me that."

He shouldn't, she was right. How, when he controlled himself without flaw, did the words feel so right? To spite her and to test himself, he leaned further in, his breath teasing the shell of her ear.

"Come on, *Annah*. Tell me. Why protect them after all they've done?"

Her face flushed prettily, and she turned her face away, flustered. "I don't know what happened."

At least she talked. Instead of making her less desirable, it made her more. That was a challenge he hadn't contended for.

Before he knew it, the dark descended. Strapping on the weapons he'd been cleaning earlier, Baz turned to Otter.

"Come here, boy."

Without complaint, Otter listened. Baz held out one of his smaller knives.

"This should be easy enough to handle. Stay close to them. If you need me, yell."

Savannah's eyes widened as panic set in her face and voice. "Where are you going?"

"Outside. I won't be far."

"Why are you going?" Her voice pitched higher.

"I have to figure out which of those monsters hurt you. Then I'm going to take them down."

She sat up. "No! No, please. Don't do that."

"I won't allow any more of them to hurt you. Stay with the boy. He'll call if I'm needed."

"They didn't mean it. Sebastian! Please..."

He turned to her, crouching by her side. Gently, his fingers skimmed over her healing wound. The bandage held, but that's not why he did it. He wanted to touch her, to feel her feminine warmth.

"What if they'd hurt Zora, or Otter? How would you feel?" Her eyes downcast. "Savannah, it's my duty to avenge you. No more words. Sleep for a while. You're tired and still healing. I'll be back. I promise."

She was silent, then she looked up at him. "Only if they try to hurt you," she said. Baz's brow furrowed.

"I'll do what has to be done."

"Don't hurt them first. Please, only if they come after you."

He didn't tell her he was at a disadvantage if he followed her request. Instead, he nodded and then brushed his hand over her clenched fingers.

"I'll be careful," he said. She knew his true intent. There wasn't any point in delay.

He nodded to the boy, impulsively kissed Zora on her sleepy looking face, and then headed to the exit. He was out into the night within moments, the calm replaced by chaos.

The animals were out on the hunt. Baz let his eyes adjust to the darkness, then he paced from broken building to broken, abandoned building, letting the sarcophagi of each one keep him hidden.

He was going back to the museum, to where he suspected Mato had left, or would soon leave, through the portal that Baz could not pass through. He had to see for himself. She shouldn't be able to do it, not

just once, but twice. What power did she hold, and who the hell was she? Not his Mato, his sweet, former bride-to-be. Alore must have gotten hold of her; there was no other explanation for why she'd been with Taig, walking willingly by his side.

The night was humid, a sticky sweetness in the air. His steps meandered so that he'd know if anyone, or anything, followed him.

Baz passed through the park where Alore and her guard first found him. Lilac scented in the air, the blossoms hanging low on dead-weighted bushes. They were the only things that didn't hunt him this night. He kept his bow, notched, though not tightened, the poison tips of his arrow ready to fly. This time, he wouldn't get caught by surprise. This time, he wanted the queen and her hunter to find him.

He traveled all night but still didn't tire. Day readied to cusp upon the horizon. Baz made it up the broken stones of the steps leading into the museum when they found him. They were waiting. For a split instant, Taig's eyes turned to sympathy. Only a moment, though, then he drew protectively near the woman by his side.

Alore stepped forward, a canny smile on her lips. "Sebastian of Zelal. I've missed you." She reached for him. Baz flinched. "Where have you been, you naughty man?"

He didn't doubt that ideas of punishment swirled in her maniacal mind. He smiled, a grin that lied and protected.

"Killing monsters."

"And gaining trust among the commoners. Sharp man. I knew you were my soldier," she said lightly. No matter how subtly she dangled it, she reminded him she owned him. "What do you think, Taig? Should we share with him what we learned?"

"Inside," Taig said. "By the gate. Maybe this time he'll make it through to the beyond. If not..."

"I agree," she said, eyes snapping at the suggestion of mayhem. "No point in wasting opportunity."

Taig stepped aside so Baz could pass, halting him at the landing. "Your weapon," he said.

Baz frowned. Taig's grin was deadly. "The one you borrowed. No further need for it, is there?"

They were going to injure or kill him. In his heart, he prepared for it. Better to act as if he were under their jurisdiction. If Baz learned anything in life, it was how to lie with the best of them—just before he

stuck his dagger between their ribs or into their cold, deceitful hearts.

He followed behind Alore, Taig at his back. They walked deeper into the museum, bypassing fallen portraits and lushly decorated artifacts, until Alore halted by the gate. It was immense, taller, and wider than Baz first recognized.

Alore gestured with a coy smile. "Try it. Show us what you've learned in your time away from us."

If he touched it, would it burn? The first one had, but this one; no, this one invited him in. Baz returned her smile, his smothered with deceit. Just as he stepped forward, Alore laid her palm over his heart.

"Or... perhaps we can work out a deal, hmm?"

He didn't answer. He felt his heart throb where she touched him. There was no time to run. Baz weakened, stumbling, and swaying the longer her fingers sucked, and fed. Life bled from him. Taig was right to warn him. She was shameless and without conscience. In just moments, his mortality severed, bit by bit removing any part of him that loved, fought, forgave. Much more, he'd not survive. Could she give back just as eagerly as she took? Pray that she gifted life as she stole it!

"Poor Sebastian. All those days away and the lure of killing everywhere. How *did* you fail my small request?"

Baz didn't say a word, a trick he learned by serving the Regent. Monsters like them filled silence with their own offering. At any moment, she might serve his death warrant. He couldn't stand much longer, and only the recognition that Otter, Savannah, and Zora waited for his return kept him upright.

Alore's eyes sparkled with something inhuman and disastrous. "Break the seal of the portal," she said. "Or bring me a beast. Those were my conditions."

"They fight in packs," Baz said, gritting his teeth as a new wash of life slipped from him. "Let me bring your soldier. If he's a worthy warrior, you will get what you seek."

Alore studied him, then tipped her head back with a laugh. Merriment never sounded so evil. Her lethal hand removed from his heart, even while her eyes devoured his humanity. His legs wanted to crumble underneath him, but giving up now was the last thing he'd ever do. Baz knew death, and he'd never been afraid of it. Maybe this was his time. If so, he'd die knowing he defended those hiding under

his care.

Images of Savannah, broken and sleeping on the floor of his shelter, and Zora, resting near her mother, filled him with worried despair. Otter, who stayed near the females in a perpetual watch, even while the boy was too exhausted to keep his eyes open, made Sebastian falter at any retaliation. They needed him. He was the greatest warrior of Yrurra. If he failed, they would be hunted, and their souls devoured. Alore would make sure of it.

"How precious," she said, scarily intuitive. In that moment, he understood. She knew who he hid. "You want her. You'd die for her."

"Yes."

"Is your pretty prisoner aware that you belong to me?"

His teeth gritted. "She knows she lives in constant danger. I am the least of it."

"Interesting," Alore said. "You keep my enemy on a leash, but who has the leash on you?"

Baz stiffened. "I'd like to think I don't need one."

She scared the shit out of him. He was man enough to recognize it.

"What about your captives, soldier? Is their leash tight enough to keep my anger at bay? Perhaps I should send my warrior to look after them."

"She's an innocent. They all are."

Her laugh sent chills along his spine. "I crave innocence," she said. "It intoxicates so delightfully while I feed. I wonder how they'd taste as I suck life from their mortal bodies."

"I'll finish the job," he said. "Leave them be."

"Your loyalty is pleasing. But I wonder, will it save them?"

It took everything he had not to remove the sword from its sheath. It would be his last move, the one that sealed Savannah's fate. He hesitated. His pride was worthless if they died on his account. His realization was cold and regretful. He'd never loved, but Savannah was everything, and the memory of her and the others needing him made him swallow dissent.

Alore patted his cheek, her eyes targeting and undoing, as if she saw the insides of him but found him wanting. "Go. Do my bidding. Remember, it is your last chance to prove yourself."

He nodded. Her grin was gruesome and dark. He backed up, Taig's gaze burning into him.

“One more thing, my Sebastian. I have a present for you.” Baz halted, sweat running down his temple.

She gestured to Taig without a word. He left, disappearing into the darkness of the museum. Baz watched him leave, calculating the best way to take her down, her soldier along with her. There was one way out, and he had to get past her. Time passed in intangible silence, a stand-off that never culminated.

“I know what you want, Sebastian of Zelal,” she said. “Kill me. Make your strike.”

His hand reached for his knife. He paused. It was a test, one from a beautiful demon. A woman who held life and breath in her hands. He couldn't do it.

He failed.

Time softened and broke, impossible to read and more impossible to stop. There was a muffled commotion from within the darkness as Taig returned. Baz couldn't recall how long the soldier had been gone. Alore stole time just as she stole parts of his soul.

Baz turned at the sound. The familiar sound. *Fuck*, Taig wasn't alone.

The queen's guard pulled the visitor into the circle of where they stood, and it was all Baz could do not to react. “Lovely, isn't she?” Alore said. “Come, Taig. Show my soldier our prisoner.”

Savannah twisted in Taig's grip. Her bandages were bloody, exposing her wounds to the world. Baz smothered words that would expose his fear for her. He knew any reaction would incite danger from Alore. One word, that's all the Shadow Queen had to give, and it would catch Savannah up in the game that Baz tried so hard to hide from her.

“I believe you know this little treasure?”

He nodded. Alore's grin was pure wickedness.

“Put her there, Taig. Let Sebastian look at our pretty prisoner.” Alore met Baz's empty eyes. He held everything tight inside, knowing a single move meant punishment of the worst kind.

Taig pushed Savannah until her knees hit the marble floor. Baz couldn't save her. He was frozen. He was crushed and broken. If he was once a warrior, he wasn't now. Alore stole that from him, too.

“I asked if you knew her.” He bit back any words that would have stricken Savannah. Better to behave with neutrality, as if he did not

give his heart to the woman kneeling in front of him.

"She's my prisoner."

"Ah, I thought so. Well done, soldier." Alore's voice chipped with cruelty. "You're excused from your duty over her. We will take care of her for you."

Savannah kept her eyes low, not reacting. Despite that, her fear was hard to hide, her face pale, her body rigidly held.

"She's needed," he growled.

"So I've heard. The beasts of the night listen to her." Alore fixated her eyes on him, sweeping over Savannah with curious indifference.

"That has not been ascertained," Baz said. "There's no need to keep her. I'll take her back with me. After all, I have plans for her."

"As you've suggested. I, however, have a better one. Taig?"

Taig stepped forward, his grin macabre. With a gleeful sneer towards Baz, he responded, taking his booted foot, planting it on Savannah's back, and pushing. Savannah went down, her face to the floor, her body too weak to fight back.

Baz snapped. He didn't have the leeway to move, to draw his weapon. To kill. "She's mine to handle."

Alore's gaze turned icy. "Do you know what happens to those who defy me?"

Baz didn't answer. His gaze swept over Savannah's limp body. She had no fight in her. She knew her fate. Sebastian knew it, too.

"I, unlike you, take serious action," Alore said. She gestured to Taig. Baz's fear escalated, a fire, a furious frenzy. He stepped forward. He'd take them down. He'd take them both down.

Taig removed a weapon from his holster. He gave Baz a cruel, mocking glance. Then he shot, his mark true. Savannah didn't have a chance. She sprawled on the floor, blood pooling around her, a portrait of loveliness even in death. The violence happened quicker than a swallowed breath.

Taig replaced the gun where it belonged. He stepped back into Alore's shadow, his work done.

Sebastian choked back bile. His heart clenched. Disbelieving eyes met the queen's. She smiled.

"Sebastian," Alore said. "It's easy. You kill the rebels, not take them into your embrace."

His fight puddled on the floor alongside Savannah's crumpled body.

What happened to surrender? Savannah never had the chance to beg. *He* never petitioned for her. He failed, he failed, he fucking failed.

“What about the children?” he whispered. His tongue felt swollen, and his eyes misted with reluctant tears. If they’d fallen, if he’d begged, would Savannah still be alive?

“Keep them, kill them, send them back to the monsters that keep them alive. It’s no matter to me. They are spawn. Useless vermin.”

Baz had to make sure she wouldn’t destroy them, too. “They are no part of this fight.”

“They’re enemies,” she snapped. “Remember that, soldier, when you go about your day. You’re free to take her. After all, isn’t she lovely? I imagine you thought to win her over. Too late, I’m afraid. She’ll never wear your ring now.”

Baz didn’t hesitate, his eyes clouded over. He bent low, scooping her up. Blood and gore dripped to the floor as he cradled her.

“I’m burying her.”

Amusement filled the queen’s voice. “You’d better. There are wolves about.”

Baz didn’t wait for her leave to go. He backed up, his eyes never leaving the two of them. Taig’s eyes were blank. The queen’s gaze was beautiful evil.

“Enjoy her, soldier. Just think, this might have been your wedding day.” Her laughter followed him. Only when he exited the building did he cry. Jaggedly, he let his sorrow fall. Then he covered Savannah’s sweet, innocent face with his jacket, and tugged her near.

Her funeral would be partied by one. Him, the Assassin whose selfish, cowardly action killed the woman he yearned to love.

37

Ru wore the mask of Man, becoming one with their mortal body. They pasted a snarled grin on their face, dodging the pasty-faced courtiers until they reached the king's courtyard. The king stood there alone, head bowed. Ru bowed, sarcasm in each line of their body. Ru straightened without permission, their tall frame eclipsing the king's.

"Your Majesty."

There wasn't anything deferential in the voice. That was the one beauty that the mortal shield provided. Raw, do-it-be damned, power. For a human, that lesser power would have to suffice.

The king kept his gaze leveled on them, looking them over, but finding them lacking. "Get out of my presence. Who commanded you here? Get out while I still have mercy."

Ru smoothly interjected, forcing silence when a lunatic laugh was in order. "You requested me."

"I requested no one. I don't know who you think you are."

Their laugh sounded in the air between them, cynical but true. The king flustered. Ru explained, scolding like a parent to their restless child. "They call me the Devil-Dog."

Ru quieted. All was said that needed to be. The king blanched, his hands turning into fists. They held at the king's side, inactive. Such cowardice. It oozed from the king's pores.

"I expected more." The king's fists unfurled, though he kept staring nervously.

Ru grinned. No matter how they were insulted, they'd still come out ahead. "*Under every silent stream lies the deadly crag.*"

Everyone knew the prophecy, the one sang about in a traveler's caravan, the one the children chanted in play. *A ruler will rise. A ruler will fall. Under every silent stream lies the deadly crag.* It was enough of the well-known riddle to scorn the king.

"Don't waste my time," Tiran said, his body quivering and his voice thick with furious fear. His words bit out. "Can you help me?"

"I can. But will I?"

"You can if you respect your life."

Ru's smirk grew. "Do you expect negotiations? Too bad. I don't deal with the weakness of man."

Tiran's indignation was just as weak as his bodily carcass. "They say that you are a king among kings. You look more like a pauper among thieves. Know this. This is my land. You are nothing. I'll just as easily have you put to death than to listen. Now, will you fix what I need fixed?"

Ru changed the subject into one better to reveal. Unsettling the man before them was too easy. They weren't done testing and judging the king's solidarity. "I hear you keep a woman as your slave."

"What king doesn't?" Tiran fidgeted.

"I want her." They didn't, but they knew the king did. What would the king give up for his request? "I want the woman, Mato."

The king flinched. "She's not for sale."

"I suppose not," Ru said. "She carries your child."

The king's head snapped up. "Where did you hear this?"

"It's been said. We know many things."

The king paused, regaining poise. "If that's so, answer me this. *Who will rise when devastation falls?*"

It was part of the Seer's prophecy. No hesitation, Ru answered, a dark gleam in their eyes. "You want to know of the Regent. Don't worry. You will gain your great desire."

Relief spread over the king's face. "Do you have proof?"

Ru's sneer tightened. "Do you want it?"

The king seemed to understand the danger in the question. He backed up a step, coughing into his handkerchief. The cough hid his fear.

"She will succumb," Ru said. "The world succumbs with her."

"I didn't ask for a damned Seer," Tiran fumed. "Tell me this. Will I rule Yrurra? Will I rule the portal lands? Can you do it?"

Ru didn't hesitate. "I want your slave woman. Give her to us and we'll answer."

Tiran's face slowly turned red. "You? Make a demand of me? You have a death wish."

"Just a taste of her, your Majesty. She's yours, of course."

Tiran side-eyed him. He hesitated. "What do you want with her?"

"What any man would want."

The king ruminated this, giving Ru a skittish glance. "She's not for sale. Ask for something else. Anything else that is in my power, and I will give it to you."

Like a creature from the storyteller's book, Ru answered. "Your firstborn child. That is what we wish. Nothing else will suffice."

"I-I can't."

Ru turned to go. The king's voice projected out toward him, furious and scared. "The child is yours. But not until it's weaned."

They stopped, turning around, pleasure in their voice. "That will be acceptable."

Tiran stepped back a step. "What of my question?"

Ru turned, discarding any more questions furthered to him. "You've learned enough. Perhaps next time, when you turn over your child to us."

The king's brow furrowed. "Who *are* you?"

Ru laughed, a viperous hiss. "We are, as mortals say, your worst nightmare. Until next time, Tiran, king of the Yurrian land."

38

Each step was agony, each breath quicker than the last. How could he face the children when he wasn't even able to process this on his own? He held her close, her body draped with leather. His jacket served as a burial shroud. Savannah didn't deserve this fate. Unlike him, she was kind, and brave, and compassionate. When it came time to save her, Baz didn't say the right words to keep her safe. He didn't act when it was necessary. It was his fault, all his.

Through the empty, vine-filled streets, he walked, searching for the best place for her sanctuary. No ordinary graveyard would suit her. Regardless, Sebastian had to put her to rest somewhere, somewhere the predators wouldn't find her, somewhere no one would forget.

He heard the tale of new beginnings. It was told around the campfire, and it lived on everyone's tongue. Find that place, and her death would have served. Only in exquisite infamy could she be remembered, because her death lessened all that the queen might do. Savannah saved her babies. Who would save him?

His tears dried long ago. He was a warrior, after all. They didn't go away, however. They leached inside of him, breaking him slowly, step after terrible step.

She was dead. There was no coming back for her. Baz understood its lie. The woman he carried, a mother, and friend, meant more to him than the woman he once intended to marry. The woman he carried may have changed Baz for an eternity.

He stopped in a garden. It wasn't like the cultivated ones back home. This one grew wild, lush, and it survived through the death of

the land. This graveyard was hers now. Baz would guard it, whether in person or in spirit, until the day he died.

It took hours to structure the grave, hours to gain the courage to place her there. It would take hours more to gain the courage to face the children left in his possession.

Baz wasn't a father. He was a soldier, through and through. Yet with Savannah's end, he was responsible for both Zora and Otter. He'd serve her memory. He would be the best damn father he could be. In no other way could she be remembered in a way befitting her.

He stood there until the cusp of twilight, monitoring the wild animals scrambling around in their hurry to avoid the night. Sebastian claimed retribution against the night and the queen who advocated it.

If he ever found a way, he'd kill Alore. No qualms, no regrets.

Sebastian got out his bow. He nocked an arrow. Then he backed up from the grave, his heart not lighter, but his body a ready threat. If the predators wanted to target him, he'd target right back. Baz wouldn't fail anyone ever again.

He walked block after abandoned block, no one, or *nothing* coming after him. Before he knew it, he'd arrived at the building that housed his prisoners. They would be prisoners no more. They were family now.

Despite that, crushing fear swept through him. How would he tell them? Could he act as if nothing ever occurred? Maybe for Otter, but what of Zora? Minutes he stood there, uncertain.

Then the door cracked open, and Otter appeared. Baz straightened. He'd never let fear stop him before.

"You should be inside," he said gruffly.

Otter flushed and his eyes immediately went downcast. Timidly the boy touched his mouth, then his eyes darted inside to where Zora still hid.

"You're hungry?"

Otter nodded. Sebastian opened his pouch and grabbed food, handing it over without caution to rationing.

"Here, take this," he instructed. "But go back inside. I'll find more food for you."

The boy profusely shook his head. He pointed inside. Baz lowered the weapon he'd forgotten he held proactively in his hands. He

swallowed tightly.

“Is it Zora?”

Otter nodded once more. Baz didn't hesitate, he took the boy by the upper arm, albeit rougher than he intended. Otter, as usual, didn't say a word.

Then Otter paused. He gesticulated to Baz, pointing out to the beginning darkness, his gaze watchful but confused.

This was the conversation Baz worried about. “Stay here, boy. I have something to tell you.”

Otter obeyed, but his eyes darted outward, to the harkening night. Sebastian crouched to eye level.

“She's not coming,” he said. His throat tightened. “She's dead.”

Otter's face paled, and a choked gasp for air followed. Baz rested his hand on the boy's shoulder.

“Bad people got her. There wasn't a chance.” Otter squirmed, trying to get away. “Nowhere to go, boy. Stop, and listen to me.” His voice came out raspy and cold. Fuck. He was terrible at this. “I'm here. I'll take care of you.”

Otter shook his head, the skin around his mouth paling. “Do it now, before she sees you. Vomit it all. I did so myself.”

Eyes met his, then Otter turned his head and purged. Awkwardly, Baz patted the boy's back.

“I swear to you, and it's a promise I don't take lightly. You'll be safe with me. No one will harm you without my putting up a fight.” Baz swallowed back bile. “You're family now.”

That halted Otter's motions. Slowly the boy wiped his mouth, and he stared, stared endlessly without a single damned word.

Baz stared back, shifting uncomfortably. Shit, this was worse than he expected.

“Do what you have to do now to mourn,” he said, his voice too harsh. He tried to soften it, but failed abysmally. “Can't let the girl see it.”

Otter flushed, but this time his eyes met his own, growing understanding in his sharp nod. Baz looked over the boy's shoulder, catering to Otter's brief breakdown.

“Best to go in. No leaving unless I'm with you. You'll be safer that way.”

Baz grunted for the boy to go ahead of him. His palm stayed on

Otter's shoulder in what he hoped was a fatherly gesture. The boy winced, so maybe not.

"Otter," Baz said. "One thing."

The boy turned back to him. "Don't give me shit over this. I just need to know." Otter nodded, not making any move. "Why don't you talk?"

Otter lowered his chin, sniffing lightly. He shrugged.

"Now, don't give me that. What happened? Were you hurt? I can't communicate with you like that indefinitely."

Otter faced him, and tears misted the boy's eyes, along with a scowl on his face. He didn't answer, damn him, but what he expressed was good enough. He made claws, striking the air in a slash. Yeah, it was what Baz expected. Those beasts were a menace. No, they were enemy.

"They hurt someone you loved? Family?" Otter nodded, making Baz sigh. "We'll work on it. Not today, though. Let's go in. Come on."

Zora gave him a muted snuffle upon entering. She sucked her thumb in a gesture too young for her age, and her hair was a wild mess. That was something else he'd have to learn, the intricacies of hair-threading. Savannah made it look so easy. He wouldn't think of her. Too painful; too damn fresh.

Baz took out another bar of food. "Here, kiddo," he said. "Eat."

She turned up her nose. Then she set up a wail, one that after several minutes grated on Sebastian's ears and seemed unending. Worse, he didn't know how to get her to stop. After a few minutes, he just picked her up and started pacing. The crying stopped, and Zora laid her head on his shoulder.

"I want Mama," she whispered.

"I know, kid."

He didn't say anything else. What else could be said? He knew one thing only. Alore and Taig would search them out, no matter where they went. It wasn't safe in the hideout, and the monsters were just one thing more to worry about.

The banging came in the pre-dawn. Baz opened his eyes, disengaging from the toddler's arms. Zora fell asleep on him last night, making it near impossible to eat or if he had to, defend. Otter was already awake, and without a single or command, took the little girl from Baz.

The room was already in shambles from the walls caving in. Now they had to make it to the back exit before those fucking beasts discovered where they were at. Baz looked outside. The numbers of them had doubled, if not tripled. This was a full-out attack.

Baz secured his weapons and didn't bother to keep quiet. "Let's go. Hurry."

Otter handed him the knife Baz slept with, but Baz shook his head. "Keep it. You might need it."

Greedy fingers poked through the empty spaces in the walls. There was no time to fight them all. Better to run and then hide. Baz grabbed Otter by the collar, pulling him back.

"Let me go first. Those bastards are everywhere."

Otter nodded. Baz took Zora off the boy's arms. She would keep him from defending them, but no matter. They had to run, and quickly.

He gave the alert, giving a curt nod to the boy. "All clear."

The boy hesitated. Baz shot him a targeted look. "No time to be shitting around, kid. Stay with me, and for fuck's sake, don't look back."

With one last look to Otter, Baz exited the building. He heard the grunts, the hisses, the unnatural clicks that came from the other side of the building. Otter kept to his side, his face pale and terrified. If Baz didn't have them, he might go hunting. As it was, he had two lives to save. The children were now his to protect, and god knows, he wouldn't fail them as he failed Savannah.

Further and further they ran, escaping the beasts, hiding in the shadows of the overgrown, empty buildings. Otter slowed down. Zora whimpered against his chest. They couldn't stop now.

"Come on," Baz encouraged. "We're almost there."

He didn't know where *there* was. He only knew that the further they got away from the destructive hive, the safer they'd be. They ran until Otter started flagging behind. They ran without Baz actively able to guard them, his weapons clutched tight to his body as he held Zora. The invisible compass pointed north, but to defy the odds, south they went. Escaping the city meant freedom, and eventually they'd have to stop and rejuvenate.

They camped for the night in an old building, one just as shambled as the one they left. By morning, it was time to move on. Slower and slower, they paced along. It was a guess only, but each time they

crossed a bridge, Baz counted it a victory. He handed water to the kids, gave them dried pieces of his food. They both started getting cranky, though thank the goddess, only one of them whined. Otter still wasn't speaking.

Baz had to find shelter before nightfall. Night after night, he found somewhere for them to rest their heads while he scarcely slept. His fear escalated, his senses heightened to a fever pitch. Would the bitch queen, Alore, try to find them? Taig was a hunter, same as him, but he knew the area, while Baz did not. The sooner they got out of the city, the better.

After a great while, the buckled road narrowed. Trees lined the streets, and the buildings were a longer distance apart, the threat of coming across the monsters less frequent. The sounds of clicking, humming, raging were lost behind them.

Baz slowed, Otter breathing a sigh of relief that they were taking a break. They were running out of provisions, and the long commute to this land of wilderness and hidden homes made it worse.

"You did good today. You kept up," Baz said. Otter said nothing in return. Zora had long ago fallen asleep in Sebastian's arms. The boy would not answer, so Baz nodded curtly. "We'll camp here."

There was a home tucked away from the road, with a long driveway leading to it. "Let me check things out first." Otter nodded, but he looked so tired, likely anything Baz had to tell the same half-hearted reply would follow him. "Go under those trees and get close to the bushes. Hide until I get back."

Baz handed Zora to the boy, making sure he got a nod in return. Only then did he remove one of his daggers, before stalking close to the house.

The home was further back than he assumed. A garden long depleted of its food was planted next to the driveway. There was a smokehouse to the right of the home, its door hanging lopsided. This was a family home, small, efficient, and thankfully empty. One quick sweep of the rooms and Baz was satisfied.

He headed back to where the children were. "Come on," he said, gesturing to the boy, while scooping up the girl. "Let's rest."

Otter trudged beside him, his footfalls dragging. Zora resumed sucking her thumb, and while Baz wasn't an expert, he guessed she only did that when her emotions got the best of her.

She dejectedly whispered against his chest. "Mama..."

Baz froze, then hesitantly patted her back. That is what he'd seen Savannah do to reassure her. But what about Otter? The boy was reclusive, and for the scant number of days Baz knew him, he'd hidden away from all of them, even if he stuck to a corner of a room. Clearly, the boy didn't want interaction. Baz was going to force it on him.

"Kid," Baz said, setting the girl down in the tiny sized living room. "Find something to use as bedding. There's got to be something we can use. It looks as if whoever lived here left in a hurry."

Minutes later, Otter came back with stale blankets and one lonely pillow. That Otter could find anything at all, sleep-deprived and stone-faced, showed he'd make it through this fuckery. Sebastian hoped so.

"Good. Now, rest. I'll keep watch."

It had been dusk when they entered the home. Now dawn lit the sky with hazy colors of pink and purple. Baz opened his eyes. He fell asleep, damn him. Being too tired wasn't an excuse. If he'd done that in Yrurra, the queen would've killed him without a word.

He looked to the children, his new wards. They curled into themselves, still resting, oblivious to his bad mood. Sebastian rose to his feet, extracting a knife as he paced through the house. There were no signs of intrusion. Good thing, because he was peeved enough at himself to take it out on whoever crossed him.

Someone tiptoed up behind him. Baz turned, a snarl on his lips, and his knife raised. Otter jumped, then curled his body towards the wall, shyly wiping away the tears that welled up and dropped from his eyes.

"Fuck, kid. You almost got a belly full of knife." Putting the weapon away, he stepped forward, turning the boy towards him. The boy's silence was ridiculous, and he refused to tolerate it.

"No more, do you hear me? If you want something, you ask. If you creep up behind me, you give a fucking warning. Do you get what I'm saying? No more goddamn silence."

Otter said nothing. "Tell me you understand," Baz growled. "I won't put up with silence when I know goddamn well that you know how to talk."

The boy didn't speak, meeting Baz's gaze with his own stubborn one. Otter pointed towards the living area, where Zora slept on, alone.

"She's awake?" Otter nodded. Baz didn't get to inspect the rest of the home as he'd intended. But fuck that, he was a family man now. Best to keep them close. Those predators could be anywhere. As for victory over making Otter talk, that also could wait.

"Take a few of the food bars out of my pouch," Baz said. "I refilled the water last night. Take the water pouch, too. I'll be back in a minute or two."

Fear struck over Otter's face, then he tried to cover it over. "I'll come back," Baz said. The boy lowered his head, his lower lips quivering. "I won't leave you here. Is that what worries you?"

Otter nodded. "Don't get yourself worked up," Baz said. "You're mine now. We're family."

Just saying it gutted Sebastian. Not even Mato's family gave him this feeling. He didn't want borrowed children, aunts, uncles. No, these kids were *his*. They depended on him. Despite the situation making it that way, Baz celebrated. Family meant everything to him, as he'd had none but what belonged to his former bride-to-be.

"Go into the other room and stay with Zora," Baz said. "She's too little to be on her own. Understand?" Otter nodded. Sebastian knew the boy would listen, so he turned back to the hallway. He felt, rather than saw, the boy head in the opposite direction. Only then did he go back into warrior-mode.

The hallway looked like a war had been fought in it. Clothes everywhere, discarded toys, shoes. Some were so old they were decomposing. Baz tapped on the solid walls. They hadn't been victim to age and wear. Mentally, he filed and remembered each thing for later use as he went deeper into the house. This home had scarcely been touched by the ravages of the ancient invasion. This place could work as a base of safety for a few days.

Baz turned back, comfortable enough with his decision to lower his weapons. Just then, a flurry of movement came from his right side. A knife held out, aimed at his ribs. Sebastian fielded it just before being stabbed.

He grabbed the small person—a child, a boy slightly older than Otter, and just as scrawny. He was starved and the child's glare was feral. A growl turned into a whimper as Baz squeezed the hand holding the weapon. The boy dropped the knife, his face paling into a jaundiced acceptance. He knew his fate, for he bowed his head and

cried.

Sebastian chastised himself for his laziness. He should have made sure no one else was in the area. It made his reaction harsher than needed.

"Who are you?" he roughly asked, none too gently shaking the child. The boy cried harder. It was enough to piss Sebastian off. His next question wasn't as cordial. "Damn it, kid. Tell me. Are you alone?"

The boy peered up at him, eyes fiery, lips dry and cracked, his gaze so ferocious that Baz knew the boy had lived defensively for a very long time. The child looked wild, hair long and tangled, dirt covering each inch of bared skin. The child lived in squalor, and it was no wonder he acted like an animal.

"My sister," the boy hissed, anger taking over once more.

"Where is she?"

"Hiding."

"Where?" The kid didn't answer. Baz shook him harder, making a whimper of pain escape. After a moment of sharp discipline, the boy pointed to the area behind Baz, nodding tersely to whoever it was. Sebastian dropped his grip, and the boy darted off into the room that Otter and Zora waited in.

Sebastian turned, sliding another weapon from its sleeve. It wasn't much that startled him, but the female before him did. The young woman, slight and small, with an appearance too similar to the boy's not to be relative, hunted him with expert stealth. The gun held in her tiny hands didn't surprise him. The way she held it with authority did.

"Who are you?" she ordered. Her hand didn't falter. Her eyes were deadly cold.

Baz allowed his hand with his weapon to drop, falsifying his intentions. Then he snapped forward, snatching the gun from her hands. The female's eyes widened. Wisely, fear stepped in, and she backed up a step.

"Who are *you*?" he asked, tucking the gun to his side, ready to use it against her if necessary. He had no qualm about killing a child. He'd certainly had to do it before.

"No one," she said, eyeing the gun. Her eyes were hungry with despair, savvy recognition in them that her battle had already been lost. Her chin raised, her voice watery with want. "Give me my gun."

"A gun doesn't belong in the hands of someone afraid to shoot it."

"You're lucky you're alive. I planned to kill you."

Baz chuckled lightly, amusement leaking into his voice. "If you could, you would have."

Her face fell at that truth, and she whispered grimly, vibrant icy-blue eyes not leaving his face. "What are you going to do to us?"

He holstered the gun, giving her an examining stare, not awarding her an answer. "Is it just the two of you?"

She sucked in her lower lip, hesitating. "Yes. Just us."

Baz grunted. Though her face paled as she answered, it wasn't a lie. He would have spotted one immediately.

He slid his gaze over her, immersing himself in each detail. He knew never to underestimate anyone, and he wasn't about to start now. She sharply inhaled at his perusal, drawing attention to a body too thin, but matured enough to have sharp lines and rounded curves. He considered her further. She wasn't a child, nor could he tell if she was an adult. With the grime covering her and how starkly starved she looked, it was hard to tell. Nut-brown hair chopped at her heart-shaped jawline. Her eyes were stormy, a conglomeration of gray and blue with an outer lining of bronze iris.

Despite her ragged appearance, she was pretty. He hated pretty. Women used it to their advantage, and the only one he knew that hadn't was dead now.

"What's your name?" Her eyes narrowed, but no matter how wary she was, he'd have it from her. "Your name," he barked.

"Evangeline," she whispered, "My brother is Jeremy." She backed up enough that he guessed she planned to run. His hand shot out and grabbed her by the upper arm. She winced, but said nothing. She was apparently used to pain, and there was something in her look that made Baz loosen his grip and then drop it altogether. He wanted nothing to do with a female who might deceive him, and he hated himself that he even noticed whether she responded to him or not.

"What are you going to do to me and my brother?"

"I'm going to feed you." Her eyes shot up to his. "Then I want answers."

"You won't... you won't hurt us?"

Baz answered, surly and gruff. "No. Now go into the other room and have Otter give you something to eat. We'll talk after I survey the

premises.”

She skirted past him; her gaze not leaving his face. She was prey, and he was the predator. Baz gritted his teeth, even as his eyes followed her while she skirted away. He rubbed a hand over his face and heaved a deep exhale. Then he holstered his gun and stalked into the next room, determined to have nothing to do with her.

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Peace and understanding and forced decay were long in coming. Maybe it would never surface, not in her lifetime. That didn't mean she denied the rebellion or her duty to it.

Evangeline's mission was clear. Seduce the man standing before her and Jeremy, and find out information that could clear the rebellion from its shrouded hell.

The soldier had no clue they hid with the sole goal of being found. They were planted there, and the reward for obedience was another day lived. The house wasn't theirs, and neither were their names. She forgot her true one long ago.

She and the boy next to her hid and waited. Their goal was one. Bring the enemy down. The dark-haired man who examined them was that enemy. After all, he allied with the woman of cruel nature, the auburn-haired witch that hunted them all.

Jeremy would continue with the soldier after her methods incited trust. After all, her beauty and conniving innocence were why she'd been chosen. War meant sacrifice. Even their own. Especially one of their own. Death was meaningless now. To die for the cause didn't scare either of them. Not even when the soldier backed them to the wall, his dark eyes wary.

"I've given you nourishment," he said. "Now talk."

Jeremy let her lead, as she'd done from the beginning. He wasn't her brother, just a boy who fought just as she did—until hell broke loose, darkness reigned, and the light devoured. She wouldn't fail. A conniving, insidious grin punished her face. She was ready to fight,

and damn it, she would win.

“Why are you here, soldier?”

“I don’t answer questions,” he said, snarling.

“You will if you want anything from us. Please understand. I want to help you, but you scare me.”

He relaxed slightly. It wasn’t wise to antagonize him, but she couldn’t help it. He was too cocky, let alone strong. She may have voiced it sweetly, but Evangeline was anything but sweet.

Silence followed, a burrowing, but quick heat passing between them, one she hoped would happen but had not expected so soon. She ignored her own desire, as she often did. Evangeline long ago realized her position in life. She knew she had a job to do, and the man irked her with his obvious pride and privilege. Still, Lucius didn’t accept less than the best, and she answered to him, not the man before her.

The clan she worked for and lived with wasn’t the largest of the revolution, but with Lucius leading it, fear spread throughout the land. No one would stop them from overtaking the Incubo, those wicked mutations with death in their eyes. The man staring at her with a combination of curiosity and rue may have killed a few of those ungodly opponents, but they all knew whose hand he fought under. No one who supported that red-haired bitch deserved to live.

Queen, or witch, or mercenary, the woman was dangerous. The man before her, desirous or not, served her. That made him the enemy.

She placed her hand over her heart, as if catching her breath, then sidled closer. The man’s eyes narrowed, clearly, and wisely, not trusting her.

“Who are you?” he asked again.

“You know my name. What’s yours?”

It was more than just his name she wanted, she wanted the truth of who he might be, of who he might become to the cause, to Lucius, and to her. His jaw clenched. So much for cordiality.

“Baz.”

Succinct, spat out, and decidedly angry. He glared. He fumed. Evangeline pushed too far, too soon, too fast. If she weren’t careful, she’d ruin everything, and her failure would surely get back to her master. Lucius would *not* be pleased.

Jeremy shifted beside her, his side-eye warning enough. “Mister,” he said, false enthusiasm and shielded glee. “I can’t believe it. I’ve

never seen a knife like yours before. Is that a Bowie?"

He gave Evangeline another triumphant glance. Their war, silent but lethal, never ended. Jeremy wasn't her friend, and he certainly didn't have her best interest at heart. After all, he wanted Lucius to help him rise in power. They all did. Otherwise, their charismatic and dangerous leader wouldn't have them serving. Without power, without prestige, the battle between darkness and light would end before it hardly started. Jeremy hungered for what Lucius dangled in promise. Evangeline, though older and decidedly wiser, hungered too.

Baz's brow furrowed, and he scowled, remaining silent. Jeremy squirmed.

"Your knife. Isn't that a Bowie? Maybe I'm wrong. Mister, I don't mean to bother you, but it's just that I've heard of them all my life, and I never thought I'd see one. Can I look?"

Overkill, and the man before them stiffened into a tight military stance, his eyes narrowing, as if he realized it. His hand hovered over the weapon in question.

"I forged and crafted it myself, with no man's name on it but mine. And no. You can't."

Evangeline slipped into the grin that threatened from her smooth, perfected facade. Jeremy didn't know the game, too eager and too upfront, unable to keep himself and his lust for prestige in check. That made things infinitely easier for her. Still, it wouldn't do to mess up now. The threat of Lucius' wrath kept her quiet, and meek, and still. Her master ruled with an iron fist. He had to. The world ended long ago; the survivors finding nothing but chaos and destruction. He was one of the first to rise, to applaud a cause too new to celebrate.

Vigilantes cropped up to pursue peace, but with no one to keep them contained, guns spoke in the language that all understood. Lies made men into monsters. Control and deception turned the vigilant and concerned into despot.

Lucius wasn't the boy she knew. Though, neither was she the girl. Maybe that kept them from killing the other. Certainly she wanted to, and no doubt he wanted to, as well. Except, her former love was *Master* now, and Evangeline was simply another slave to keep in check.

The man before her looked strong, both of frame and of stubborn mind. She'd like to test his mettle. The woman, Savannah, had been the first to infiltrate the warrior's heart. Evangeline would be the last.

Baz jerked as her fingers lightly stroked along the hilt of the knife at his side, his muscular frame looking as if he'd snap. His temper, too. The boy, Otter, reached forward and smacked her hand away from the soldier.

Protective, was he? Evangeline smirked, jutting her hip as she placed her fingers upon the curved lushness. Mess with her, and Otter would soon see himself a prisoner, just like the others who disobeyed direction or got on her bad side.

She was second-in-command, the overlord's lover, and prized fighter. Evangeline unrepentantly, shamelessly, manipulated her way to the top, and with others willing and ready to take her place, there wasn't room to fail Lucius now.

Shunning, whether warranted or not, was his preferred punishment, death without having to dirty his own hands. Being part of a whole kept the Incubo at bay. The monsters dared not attack when a force of plenty fought back.

The dearth of sinister stench that normally lingered on victims of the Incubo suggested Lucius hadn't analyzed the soldier's situation before moving them in to take him down. There was no sickly mixture of rot and eternity exuding from Baz's body. Instead, she breathed in male scent, musky and raw. If the man were near death, he didn't show it. Lucius told them that Sebastian hovered on the edge of mortality and death, the Shadow Queen feasting on his soul until he'd rot inside. Lucius was wrong. Fuck. What else was he wrong about?

Evangeline knew to snap out of it, and quick, or Lucius would make Alore's cruelty look kind. With twisted glee, he watched as his minions ripped fingernails from their beds, burned hair upon the scalp, and cut his symbol into the skin, licking the blood that dripped from the wound like a demented demon. He terrified all that met him, including her. She'd be a fool to dismiss him as inconsequential. Rarely did he get his own hands dirty. He had his victims punished, ostracized, and brought to him as a final blow. She refused to be one of them.

Years of subjection, fear and a life of impossibility were found in remaining mankind, and that created anarchy. Darkness reigned, the inky blackness a friend to the hunter, a cover to hide within, a fortress. Predators roamed the night. She was the predator now. The Incubo weren't the only ones who slunk through the unnatural devastation

left behind.

Other creatures were the first experiment, bestowed by Alore's special brand of horror. They didn't live long, and were soon forgotten. Crows were the harbinger of what she created after, taunting jibes, and repeating the evil cast out from the red-haired woman's lips. Each subsequent mutation posed more of a threat to residual humankind. The Incubo, the last that she transitioned, progressively became less mortal, more dangerous. That was why communes like those belonging to Lucius were vital. Without them, humans were susceptible to the change all feared and were guided towards.

Unlike the Incubo or the crows, the wild packs of half-wolf, partial-man, had no allegiance to any but their own. Alore failed to subject them, and they couldn't be used. Those wolves could be bought, a precarious situation for mortal and god alike. With canine bodies but conscious, human minds, those changed creatures worked for their kind, and no other.

The queen was stronger in those years, able to change creatures without risk to herself. Remaining humans knew how weak she'd now become, but she was still stronger than them. Even in that infallible state, she could take them all down if she chose. That was why they needed the mutations to survive.

Lucius harnessed what he could of the wolves' superior strength, long lifelines, and uncanny awareness, even knowing those of the pack could turn against him at a moment's notice. They were weapons, a reminder to Alore how flawed and imperfect she'd become. Failure wouldn't last forever. One day she'd gain entry to the mirror world, and then all mankind would be under her control.

Everyone whispered of the portal, and it was rumored to be found in the deepest and most deadly section of haunted ground. No one knew precisely, no one but Alore and her henchman, which made the danger more real.

Time after time, humans searched for a way out of the land. Time after time they were found, taken, and then changed. Evangeline would feel sorry for them—except she understood one thing. Mortal survivors weren't good. Millennia of war and conquest proved that. Lucius proved that. When faced with extinction or life, joining with the mutated wolves was Man's only option. Crimson-eyed members of the pack circled each human compound. One by one the humans

sacrificed their own, blood the payment required for protection.

Even though afraid of their protectors, no one revolted against them, either. Survivors without skill or offset let the overlords manage. Power meant giving up a measure of control to the unnatural beings. Lucius teetered on a dangerous precipice for wanting more, and for his quest and demand to take Alore's newest offering, he put them all at risk. Sebastian was the target. Evangeline understood what she faced, but to go against her overlord took the courage she lost a long time ago.

Lucius wanted his way, and he'd get it, regardless if it was her, or any other, who gave him what he demanded. Evangeline jealously craved even the minimal power he dangled over her, over Jeremy, over any of those he'd ordered to take Sebastian down. Secretly, she wanted power of her own. Maybe it wasn't a secret. After all, her lover and master bequeathed, and he threatened to take away, time and again. Perhaps all those left behind were the fools.

Despite his attractiveness and obvious strength, Evangeline couldn't see anything remarkably special about the man before her. He wasn't ordinary, though, or Lucius wouldn't want him so badly.

She would take him down. She'd die rather than fail.

Baz wasn't natural. After all, he lived where others died. Alore left no survivors, and she didn't allow for weakness. If he were alive, there was a reason for it. Evangeline's job was to sip his knowledge, to bleed him, to drain him until he sobbed for mercy. Then, at her master's command, his throat would kindly, mercifully be slit.

Spartacus, the pack leader, and their principal source of information, swore that the soldier belonged to the other world. She shuddered whenever the scratchy, human voice came out of a wolf's mouth. It wouldn't be wise to disregard him, though. Like others of his kind, Spartacus could go where they could not, by reason that they'd already used him as a tool of the enemy. Then, when done, he'd be callously forgotten.

Judging by her own impression, the alpha may be correct. Baz dressed differently, talked strange, and seemed to know little of their world. He was from the other side of the portal. The bastard had to die.

Take him down. One mantra, one mission. Lucius commanded it; so, it must come true. When the Incubo discovered the power held over

them, that they, in their imperfect transition, failed to compensate for Alore's loss of power and strength, finally the war might be won. Mortality needed victory after centuries of terrible servitude.

Those monsters, each in various stages of waste, meant to annihilate humankind. All rationality, any mercy, disappeared with each breath taken. Progressively, they transitioned. Mightily they became the Incubo, feared by all. When the Harvest came, and the culling of Alore's mutations were eradicated, only then could Man rebuild, recover, and progress. Any hope, any future, depended on the Incubo's removal.

She would be the savior. She would cause the soldier's ruin. Anything less meant failure, and Evangeline meant, by his death, to emancipate herself and to keep the entire world alive.

Do it, or fucking die.

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... To be continued.

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Thank you for reading this new book of mine! I would appreciate your review. It means so much to me as an author to hear from my readers. I hope you follow me for further books in the series.

julea payton

Thanks again. You all are the best!

