



Princess of Death

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Category: Romance, Paranormal, Fantasy

Description: Twenty four years have passed since Talon and Calista defeated Barron and his sons. The dragons were freed of their mental imprisonment and now they soar proudly in the skies above the Southern Isles.

Twenty four years of peace.

Until Lily Rothschild's galleon sails off course and ends up far to the east...

My parents didn't raise me to be a beautiful princess in a gown.

Didn't raise me to sit on the terrace and drink tea and birth children.

At twenty-three years old, I'm still unwed and geriatric to most people.

But neither of my parents have ever cared. My mother has always wanted me to live the life that I want. My father raised me like a son.

Taught me the sword. How to fish and hunt. How to sail in the dark.

And my mother taught me how to speak with dragons.

When I decide to live a life of adventure, I can see the hint of sadness in my father's eyes, the worry that he always wears for me.

But he lets me go. Encourages me to live the life that I want without reservation.

It makes me love him all the more.

I set sail with my crew, see white beaches and dense jungle, visit villages across the world, even take a vampire for a lover. But our ship becomes caught in a storm and is blown off course, and I find myself in the one place my father warned me to never visit.

We get stuck on the rocks of an island and have to wait for the tide to rise before we can leave. But this island is strange, everything is dead and the mist is suffocating on the lungs. And then I hear my name, spoken in a voice deep and powerful, an endless echo in my mind. "Lily Rothschild — come to me."

A behemoth of a man, over six feet tall and with muscles thicker than tree trunks, he stands before me in a midnight blue uniform with a broadsword across his back. With deep brown hair, his eyes are dark like the earth and hard like a tombstone. I know who he is without an introduction.

The God of The Underworld.

"Daughter of Talon Rothschild, King of the Southern Isles, a man who doesn't pay his debts. You shouldn't have come here."

I'm a woman who fears nothing — but I fear him. My heart races in a way it never has. This is an opponent I could never match. But there's also an indescribable burn between us. Despite how terrifying he is, he's also the most beautiful man I've ever laid eyes on. He stares at me with an intensity and a confidence none of my lovers

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LILY

Pristine white and pure, it blanketed the branches of the pines and the earth.

Snow.

My mother had described it to me once, but it was hard to understand, living in the Southern Isles, a place with copious sunshine, hot and humid summers, and winters that were sometimes foggy and bone-chilling.

But it never snowed.

Our galleon was secured to the dock, exactly where we'd left it weeks ago. Bobbing in the waves that came in and rose up the white beach. I hadn't packed clothes for this weather, but the vampires who'd welcomed us had been generous.

Viper watched my stare, his slitted eyes hot against my cheek. "You can stay."

After I stared at the snow a moment longer, I turned back to him. A gorgeous man who served as a general in his brother's army. Granted immortal life because of the venom of a kingsnake that had bitten him hundreds of years before. Our ship had docked to secure supplies because our journey had taken longer than I'd expected—and then it took even longer once I met him. "I've already been gone from home for far too long." I'd told my father not to worry, and he said he wouldn't—but we both knew that was a lie.

Viper didn't ask again, just stared at me like he wanted to memorize my face.

I'd had some passionate, clandestine affairs, but having a vampire as a lover was definitely at the top of the list. I knew I was his prey so I should be afraid of him, but I never was, and that made it so much more fun.

My mother would be furious if she knew—and a little proud.

"Then come back—someday."

"I might."

A foot taller than me and in the armor and uniform he wore to represent his king, he was muscular and thick in all the right places. He looked at me a moment longer before his arm circled the small of my back, and he pulled me in for a kiss.

A kiss goodbye.

It was slow and purposeful, his hand sliding underneath my coat to feel the bare skin of my back. It lasted a long time, a kiss to burn in our memories long after it was over. He pulled away and gently removed his embrace. "Be safe."

"I sailed to a distant place I don't know and had an affair with a vampire who warned me he might kill me... I don't play safe."

He smirked, affection reaching his eyes. "Not all monsters are as good as I am. Remember that." He stepped back and waited for me to go, burying his sadness beneath the surface as much as possible. "Goodbye, Lily."

"Goodbye, Viper." I gave him a final look before I turned away and joined my crew on the dock. They were loading supplies onto the ship and preparing to set sail. I

placed my own supplies on the bed in my cabin then returned above deck to prepare the ship for departure.

Captain Hartshire gave his orders. “Tormac, the anchor. Gerard, untie the ropes. Lily, get up the main sail.”

“Should I rub it, Captain?” I teased.

He tried to stay serious, but a hint of amusement came over his face. “Just get it up, Lily.”

We set sail and journeyed over the ocean for weeks. The air was cold most of the time, drying our skin and cracking our lips when the wind stuck us head on. Most of the landmasses we’d found on our journey weren’t on the map, so we had new discoveries to report to my father when we returned.

We’d spent the last six months traveling the world, lounging on warm beaches with bottles of rum, squeezing through thick jungles and finding exotic fruit we’d never known before. We saw distant places and met new people, and of course, found treasure along the way.

I let the men keep it all. As Princess of the Southern Isles, I had no need for jewels and coin. I was on this journey for sport, not greed.

We left the Northern Isles, the land where my mother was from, and then began our trek across the Great Sea to the south. I’d been so eager to sail away from home on this voyage, to be truly on my own for the first time, but six months of travel had finally made me weary and sick for home.

I missed my mother’s warm embrace.

I missed my father's smile.

I even missed my brother.

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I stood at the bow of the ship and looked to the sea beyond. It was almost sunset, and the sky was a beautiful array of colors. The clouds were puffy and thick, and a breeze picked up from the west.

The sails started to flap harder above me, the wind as powerful as the strike of sword against shield. I stared at it and suddenly felt a chill sweep across me when the air had been humid a moment ago.

I turned to the west, seeing nothing but angry ocean out in the distance.

Captain Hartshire joined me, leaning against the mast of the front sail. He pulled a cigar out of his front pocket and lit up. "Your father will be happy to see you in the same condition as when you left."

I continued to stare to the west, studying the waves and the clouds that were so dark I could barely make them out.

"I told him I didn't want a novice sailor on such an epic voyage, but he insisted that you could handle it." He took a puff of the cigar and let the smoke dance on his tongue before he let it out again. "He was right."

I turned to look at him head on. "A storm approaches from the west."

He stuck the cigar between his lips to hold it in place and turned to follow my stare. "Rain and a storm are two very different things."

"Rain doesn't cause whitecaps."

“We’re in the middle of the Great Sea,” he said. “There are always whitecaps. Besides, the wind is blowing in the opposite direction.”

“My father told me the direction of the wind can be as fickle as the currents.”

He looked over the horizon again, the distance growing hazier by the second in the dying light. “Whether it’s a storm or not, that doesn’t change our course.”

“If we try to push through it, who knows where we’ll end up. But if we try to get out ahead of it?—”

“Lily.” He pulled the cigar out of his mouth and held it between his fingertips. “I just said I think you’re a damn good sailor. Understand the galleon the way a man understands a woman’s body. But you’re still young and inexperienced—remember that.”

A flush of anger rushed through me because the wrong decision could get us all killed. “With all due respect, I’ve probably been sailing for longer than you have. My father has taken me and my brother out to sea since I could stand on my own two feet. And I’m telling you, that’s not rain. That’s a storm.”

Captain Hartshire slipped the cigar back between his lips, his eyes showing irritation at my protest. “Even if you’re right, we can return to the Southern Isles before it arrives.”

“Based on what evidence?” I snapped. “More experience means more arrogance, it seems.”

His eyes flashed back and forth between mine, and the silent anger on his face was like a scream. “Be grateful you’re your father’s daughter. Otherwise, you’d be in the cell for that kind of insubordination.”

“I’m not insubordinate. I’m trying to keep us all alive?—”

“Enough.” He raised his voice now, drawing the attention of the other members of the crew. “Take a rowboat east if you want. I won’t stop you. But this galleon is headed south. Help us get there or leave.” He sucked on the end of his cigar as he walked off. He let the smoke release then barked orders to the crew. “Show the sea the meaning of haste, gentlemen.”

It felt as if a bucket of water was being poured over me endlessly. The only reprieve from the drenching was the wind. When a gust struck from the opposite direction, the rain changed its track, and for a mere second, it didn’t pour down my face.

The torches continued to blow out. Jacob constantly had to light them again so we could see what we were doing. Every time I checked the compass my father had given me, it was spinning furiously in a circle because the galleon constantly changed directions.

I tried to push out my mind to feel Zehemoth, to feel any dragon nearby to ask for help, but we were too far away from the Southern Isles to make contact. Perhaps I would have had better luck if the storm weren’t rampant. A dragon could fly overhead, and even if we had no acquaintance, my father’s name alone would grant me protection.

But if my father knew about the storm in the Great Sea, he would mount Khazmuda and fly over the clouds—just in case I was there and needed help. He’d let me go on this adventure without trying to convince me to stay, but I knew it nearly killed him to do so. I knew he carried the worry in his chest every day, that he counted down the days to my return.

But I still felt nothing.

The galleon rocked sharply to the right, so far, I thought the ship was about to tip over. “To the port side!” I called into the darkness. “Everyone!”

I dropped to my hands and knees and crawled, climbed up the wooden planks of the ship to the opposite side, which was high in the air now. The whereabouts of my crew was unknown. The limited times I could see were ruined by the rain that poured into my eyes.

I made it to the opposite railing and gripped tight.

Then the galleon started to tip the other way, leveling once more on the rocky sea.

Yells erupted into the night.

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“Catch the wind with the sails.” That would bring us farther east, but I would rather try to beat the storm than spin around in the eye. “Let’s get out ahead of it.” I didn’t know if anyone listened because I couldn’t see a damn thing.

“Aye!”

“Aye!”

I stumbled to the mast where Davin worked to turn the sail. I grabbed on to the rope and helped him turn it before I locked it into position until the galleon followed the wind. The crew must have worked the other sails because I felt us turn. Then we changed the sails again, straightened out, despite the severity of the storm, and locked them into place.

I had no idea where we were headed. It was so dark and visibility was nonexistent, so we could crash into a pile of rocks any second. We could crash and sink, drown in the whitecaps.

I pictured my father’s devastated face.

My mother’s tears.

Felt Khazmuda’s sadness.

“We aren’t dying out here!” I had no idea where Captain Hartshire was. Hadn’t heard his voice for hours, so he may have been thrown off the ship. “Hold the masts. She’ll get us out of this.”

I knew the boat hit rocks when I heard the scrape of the hull.

Scraaaaappppppeeee.

The boat dragged over the surface until it came to a stop and didn't move again, despite the fierce wind that continued to pound us. The rain didn't let up. The storm that felt more like a hurricane continued.

I knew this was it.

We would sink.

The crew panicked and rushed to the rowboats hooked over the edge of the railings to drop them into the water...as if that would make a difference.

For a ship this size, with the amount of cargo in the hold, we should sink quickly.

But we didn't move.

While the crew continued to panic and drop the boats into the water, I looked over the railing and peered into the darkness. My eyes strained with the focus, and then I heard the sound.

The sound of trees blowing in the wind.

"We've struck land!" I couldn't see the crew on the other side of the boat, but I heard them approach then felt and smelled them beside me. There was a break in the clouds, and then the moon was exposed, blanketing us in white light that shone against the bark of the trees and the white sands of the beach.

I saw just a glimpse, but that was all it took.

Dead trees. Bare lands. Emptiness.

But it was a refuge, nonetheless.

“We’ll take shelter in our cabins until the storm passes.” The wind was so strong I could feel my words strike me in the face the moment they left my mouth. The storm was powerful enough that it made the wind as physical as a dragon, made my words fly over the dead island.

We descended deeper into the ship and took refuge in the crew’s quarters, bunk beds secured to the walls so they wouldn’t slide across the floor when the sea was rocky. Someone lit a lantern, and for the first time, I could actually see my own hands, see the company that had commanded the galleon against the odds.

My eyes went to every face, seeing the exhaustion, fear, and despair.

I sat in an unoccupied chair, feeling my damp clothes sticking to my skin. Now that the imminent fear was gone and the fire of adrenaline had been extinguished, I started to shiver from the cold.

The rain continued to pound the deck above. The wind howled like a pack of wolves that hunted us in the dark. Half of the crew had been lost—including Captain Hartshire. Shipwrecked and off course, we had to sit there and soak in our despair as we waited for the sun to rise once again.

The silence jolted me awake.

It was as loud as the scrape of our hull against the rocks, and I came into consciousness in a panic. Flashes of the storm passed across my mind, the galleon nearly capsizing, the sight of a hand grabbing one of the masts, the screams from the panicked crew. I could feel the shards of rain on my face like little daggers.

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I sat upright on my bed on the bottom bunk and stared at the door. We were underneath the deck, without windows, just the lantern for light, so I couldn't determine if it was day or night.

My clothes were dry now, and so was my hair. The salt from the ocean gave my strands waves and volume. My skin was still cold to the touch, either from the shock or the breeze. The rest of the crew was still asleep, exhausted from battling the storm for over a day straight. The others must have been thrown off and were now buried deep in the sea.

I quietly left the cabin through the hatch and stood on the deck, which was slightly slanted from where we'd landed on the rocks. It was daytime, but there was no sun, only a sea of fog so heavy that it masked the surroundings. I looked over the edge to the rocks below and realized the tide was low—so we were stuck there.

There must be damage to the hull below, and being propped on the rocks was what stopped us from sinking. It was good fortune that we'd crashed here because we all would have died if we'd had to combat that storm for much longer. Now, we could repair the ship and ride the tide when it returned.

I moved to the other railing and looked inland, seeing the hazy outline of dead trees with desiccated branches. The details of this strange place were hidden from me, but I could feel its treachery. It seemed abandoned, and if anyone resided here, they were probably unfriendly.

All we had to do was stay quiet, repair the ship, and then leave.

I pulled out the compass my father had given me, an image of a black dragon on the back—Khazmuda, my guardian if something were ever to happen to my mother and father. Most people had human godparents, but my father entrusted my life to no one except the dragon he'd been fused with for fifty years.

I opened the compass and tried to gauge my position.

North was to the left. South was to the right. And east was straight ahead.

Which meant I'd gone west...in the exact direction my father had warned me not to go.

He'd told me there was a dead island in the middle of the sea, the most dangerous place he'd ever set foot in his time as a pirate. It was the one place he'd forbidden me to go, told me to avoid at all costs.

And somehow, I'd ended up there...like it was fate.

Chills crept up my spine and froze my limbs. My heart beat differently, the adrenaline thickening my blood. I knew the sword and could fight a man, but I couldn't fight someone who even my father feared.

If only we'd sailed south, we could have avoided this...

I felt like a terrified mouse in the grass, knowing the best way to stay hidden was not to move, not to breathe. To go unnoticed by whatever hunted me from the trees. Once the crew was awake, we'd repair the ship and leave at the first chance, even if that meant we had to sail in the dark.

Lily Rothschild.

My boots had been rooted to the deck, but the sound of the voice in my head made me stumble. It came from everywhere all at once, loud the way Khazmuda's and Zehemoth's voices were. But I knew the source wasn't a dragon, not when I couldn't feel their mind through the mist.

I didn't know who this was—but I was afraid.

You shouldn't have come here.

PROLOGUE I

LILY

My father was dressed in his trousers and a long-sleeved shirt, abandoning his king's uniform and his sword. Instead, he carried a pack over his shoulder and wore a dagger at his hip. It was a cool day, the fog lingering because of the lack of heat in this bone-chilling winter. "Ready, Zunieth?"

I packed my bag the way my father had taught me. It contained my canteen, matches, dried meat and nuts, and my dagger. "I'm always ready, Dad."

The corner of his lip ticked up in a smile. "That's what I like to hear." He took my bag from my shoulder and checked it to make sure it was properly prepared for our journey before he returned it. "Good job."

My mother came through the doors, arms crossed and her eyes sharp as the dagger my father carried. "Is this really necessary, Talon?"

"Yes." He didn't look at her right away, trying to avoid the sting of her stare.

She came closer, approaching my father as an enemy rather than a wife. "You won't

be able to see in the fog.”

“That’s the point.”

“She’s only ten?—”

“She needs to know this, Calista.” His tone had been happy a moment ago, but now it darkened, and he spoke to her in a way I rarely ever heard him do. They didn’t raise their voices and shout, but this was clearly a battle.

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She continued her stare, her head tipping slightly. “I understand why this is important to you?—”

“Then let it go.”

A silent argument ensued between them, my father’s dark eyes drilling holes into hers.

My mother finally conceded the loss. “Be safe—both of you.”

“Khazmuda is always close.”

“I know he is.”

They stared at each other again, the air changing around them.

My father walked up to her and cupped both of her cheeks before he gave her a quick kiss. “I love you.”

All her anger seemed to fade instantly. “I love you too.”

He stepped away so my mother could embrace me.

She gave me a hard hug and kissed my forehead. “Be safe and aware.”

“I know, Mom.”

“And listen to your father.”

I rolled my eyes. “Like you ever do...”

She smiled, her eyes beaming at the joke.

My father smirked too.

“I’ll see you soon.” She returned to the main door of the castle and walked inside. The guards closed it once she was through it.

My father came to my side and put his arm around my shoulders. “Let’s go, Zunieth.”

We took a small sailboat from the port and ventured out onto the sea. The fog was heavy on the waves, obscuring our sight. He’d taken me sailing many times, so I already knew how to raise the anchor and set the sails. He sat and observed me in silence, letting me do all the work for him to judge.

“Where are we going?” I opened my pack and pulled out the map. It showed the Southern Isles, the tropical lands to the east, and the Northern Isles across the Great Sea.

“Skull Island.” He lounged in his seat as he looked into the mist, even though there was nothing to see except the fog. “Take us there. And we need food and water.”

The food in our packs was reserves for emergencies. He taught me to live off the land. I could sail us to Skull Island without issue, but I’d never done it in the fog. I had a compass to guide my direction, but without being able to see in front of me, I didn’t know what I might hit.

He didn’t seem concerned about it.

I found east with my compass and changed the sails to take us in that direction. We started to glide through the water, the wind right in our sails, taking us across the calm waves at a quick speed.

My father stared at me.

I gripped the tiller so we continued in the right direction.

But my father gave me that hard stare, like something wasn't right. "Is it wise to travel at this speed when we can't see more than ten feet in front of us?"

His disapproval stung. Made my whole body go numb. But I let it pass and addressed his concern. I changed the direction of the sails to catch less of the wind, to bring the boat to a third of its original pace.

"Now you can have more time to react if we come across another boat or an outcropping of rocks."

"Yeah."

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He looked into the mist again, growing quiet and intense.

My father was always like this on these adventures. Back at the castle and over meals, he was warm and affectionate, the best dad there ever was. But out here, he didn't feel like my dad at all.

I guided us through the water for hours, constantly checking my compass to make sure we were on the right course. Based on my memory of other landmasses, I was able to circumvent a crash.

He didn't address that.

The waves started to grow choppy, and the wind picked up, like there was a storm hidden behind the fog.

We'd sailed in a storm before, but this one seemed more intense than the others.

We'd been sailing for half a day and had another half to go. Dark came earlier in these winter months, so if we didn't get to land soon, we'd have to sail in the dark, which was easy with the stars. Except, we didn't have stars tonight.

We just had clouds.

He seemed to detect my unease because he said, "Nothing can happen to you while I'm here, Lily."

My hand remained on the tiller as I looked at him, seeing the confidence in his gaze.

“Why do you teach me these things?”

“I’m teaching you to survive. There may come a time when you’re without the protection of men and dragons. You need to learn that all you need is yourself.”

“Why would that time ever come?” I’d learned the history of the Southern Isles, knew that my father had reclaimed the kingdom that had been taken from him. But I didn’t know the specifics. “Peace has been restored to the world.”

“Peace is merely the pause between wars. It’ll probably be a very long time before our kingdom is challenged, but since we live forever, we need to be ready for it today...or in a hundred years.”

My father had told me I would fuse with a dragon when I came of age. Right now, I was far too young for that, far too young to be preserved in this small body.

“My father taught me this when I was your age, and it’s the reason I’m still here.” My father slowly came back to me, the man who wore his heart on his sleeve, who showed his love for me in just a look. “The reason I’m lucky enough to have you and your brother. My father’s legacy is the crown, but his true legacy is this, a legacy I will pass on to you.”

The storm hit.

It was just the two of us in that small boat, the wind nearly tipping us over into the cold waters. Rain splashed into my face and blurred my vision. I saw my father move around the sailboat and command the sails to remain in place when the mast nearly splintered in two.

“Dad, get Khazmuda.” Even though I was with the strongest man I’d ever known, I was still scared.

“We can do this, Lily.”

“I don’t know where we’re going.”

“You have a compass.”

“It won’t stop spinning!”

“Lily.” He came to me and grabbed me by the shoulder. “I know you can do this.”

A giant wave came over the side of the boat and struck me in the face. Ice-cold water poured over me. “Dad, I’m scared.”

“You know I would never let anything happen to you, Zunieth.” He squeezed my arm.

“I know you can do this. I know we can do this together.”

I started to cry.

“It’s okay to be scared,” he said. “But it’s never okay to give up.” He patted my arm.

“Come on. Let’s do this.” He grabbed his compass and pulled it out, seeing the dial continue to spin as the boat was knocked around in the waves. “Hold the tiller still.”

I sniffled and gripped it hard, feeling it pull due to the power of the waves.

“See that.” The dial would move northwest before it would shift somewhere else. But it would always come back. “We’re on the right track. Hold the tiller and keep your eye on the horizon like I taught you.”

The next few hours passed in the same way, buckets of rain pouring down on us, the wind stinging our eyes, the boat shifting back and forth and nearly toppling over several times. I’d thought the fog was the bigger challenge, but that had been just a

warm-up to this.

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No wonder my mother hadn't wanted me to go.

Hours later, land finally came into sight, a dark haze in the distance.

"Are we at the right place?" he called from the front of the boat. It was a test. He already knew where we were, but I wasn't sure.

I opened the wet map and compared it to the compass that continued to spin out of control. "Yes...I think this is it."

"You think, or you know?" he questioned.

"Yes, I know it is."

Even through the rain, I could see him smile. "Attagirl."

We battled the waves until we came to shore, rising up the beach in the rain. There was a dock there with galleons tied up. Cabins on the beach. Pirates inhabited this island, pirates who were loyal to my father's rulership.

And then a dark mass came from the sky and landed directly before us, shiny black scales that dripped with rain. While my father brought the boat up the shore, Khazmuda lowered his head to look at me. Zunieth.

I ran to him and took shelter under his massive body. I gripped one of his legs and held on, using it for support as I let my exhaustion rise to the surface. "I was scared."

I was above you the entire time. Would never let anything happen to one of my hatchlings.

“I know.”

You were brave. Brave like a dragon. You should be proud.

I watched my father secure the boat, soaked to the bone with rain, and then walk up the beach to where we were standing.

Khazmuda lowered his snout and greeted my father.

Even though he must have been tired and uncomfortable from the cold water soaked into his clothes, he stopped to embrace his dragon, to place his hand upon his snout in an affectionate gesture. They seemed to have a conversation in private because I couldn't hear Khazmuda's voice anymore. Their eyes remained locked on each other until my father withdrew his hand. Rain continued to drip down his face.

He moved underneath Khazmuda's body and came to me before he took a knee. That way, our faces could be level with each other. “You have the strength of your father, the resilience of your mother, and the fire of Khazmuda. You're a Rothschild, future Queen of the Southern Isles, and I'm proud to call you my daughter.”

Just like that, all the suffering I'd endured was worth it. To see him look at me like that. To feel his pride fill the space between us.

“I know this was hard, and I hope you never have to thank me for it.” He brought me into his arms and squeezed me tightly, cupping the back of my head in his hand. He held me like that for a long time, and his breaths grew deep and uneven.

I pulled away first and saw the mist in his eyes. “Dad, why are you crying?”

His eyes immediately shifted down to hide his emotion. He sniffed then quickly blinked his tears away. “It’s a privilege to be your father...and I never take that for granted.”

2

LILY

Come to me.

I stood there, frozen in place, the words inaudible but loud enough to grip me by the throat. I stared into the fog, eyes scanning and expecting to see a man or a monster or...I wasn’t sure.

Come to me, or I will make you.

When movement returned to my limbs, I put on the armor that my father had made for me, armor that I’d tucked below the decks in case I needed it. It bore the family crest that had been in my line for generations, the dragon in the sky above. With my sword sheathed across my back, I climbed down to the rocks and made my way on land.

Once my boots hit the sand, I felt it.

Death. Void. Emptiness.

The trees stood tall here, but none were alive. The small patches of grass were dried and brown. If we wanted to survive off the land, we would find it impossible because it lacked fruit and vegetables, anything that grew.

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I took my time traveling inland, listening intently after every step, searching for the man whom I already considered an enemy. I did my best to keep the ship at my back, to know the way to the shore so I wouldn't get lost in this strange place.

But he didn't appear.

So I had to keep going, keep trekking farther into the center.

That was when the trees changed. They became bigger, mighty oaks that had died long ago. Strange wooden symbols hung from the trunks and dangled below, gently spinning when the wind blew through. Some were triangles and others were circles. I couldn't identify most of the symbols—and I certainly couldn't identify what they meant.

Then he was there.

A man in a kingly dark-blue uniform. Upon his chest was a skull trapped in weeds and bramble. His armor was black in most places, and so was the cape that hung behind him. He was tall, maybe half a foot taller than my father, his shoulders having the wingspan of a dragon. A behemoth of a man who looked so strong that the armor seemed unnecessary.

I showed fear to no one, and I did my best to uphold that now.

With short, dark hair and eyes the color of earth, he stared me down with an intensity I couldn't even describe. I didn't know whether it was hatred or disgust or...something else entirely. With no desire to blink, he continued that ruthless stare

like it was sharper than the blade hooked across his back.

I wanted to reach for my blade, but I knew that would be pointless. I could best a man with the blade—but this was not a man.

He was otherworldly.

Seconds turned into minutes, and his stare continued to smolder—like a fire that burned without wood.

The interaction was so long I had the time to study his features, the hard bones in his face, his jawline that was so sharp, it had a shadow without the sun. Veins protruded up both sides of his neck. The bottom of his face had a sprinkling of dark hair that reminded me of my father's when he chose not to shave. The longer I stared, the more details I noticed.

I was the first to speak. "How do you know my name?" I forced strength into my voice, strength that I didn't feel. My courage had been beaten in the storm, and I knew this storm I faced was far worse.

"Because I'm the God of the Underworld—and I know everything."

My father had warned me not to come here, told me an evil lurked on this island that should be avoided at all costs, and now I understood. Understood that my father's travels as a pirate had been far more extensive than he'd led me to believe.

"Daughter of Talon Rothschild, King of Dragons and the Southern Isles, a man who doesn't pay his debts." He hadn't blinked this entire time, giving me an unforgiving stare that felt like the tip of a dagger to my throat. "You shouldn't have come here."

I was too proud to show fear. I would rather die standing than groveling on my knees.

But I felt the terror everyone must feel the moment before they died. I didn't grieve for the life I didn't get to live. I grieved for my mother and father, the two people who would mourn until their dying day. "My ship got caught in a storm?—"

"And was blown off course far to the west and into my domain." The fierce stare continued. "Your father came here intentionally—and you mistakenly. But nonetheless, you're here. And now you're mine."

"You're the one who's mistaken." The temper that got me into trouble more times than I could count reared its ugly head, and I stepped forward, closer to the god. "Because I don't belong to any man."

His hard stare continued, but now, it narrowed almost imperceptibly. Instead of boiling into a rage at my defiance, he continued to simmer on low, a controlled burn. "You're arrogant—just like your father."

"I take that as a compliment," I snapped back.

His eyes narrowed further on my face, his annoyance creeping to the surface. "If Talon Rothschild won't honor the debt to my predecessor, then I will make him honor that debt—through you."

"You won't make me do a damn thing, asshole." I turned around, turning my back on the God of the Underworld, and walked away.

He appeared before me, an apparition, a ghost.

I halted as I sucked in a breath.

"You shouldn't have come here."

“Yeah, you already said that.” This time, I stepped forward to walk right through him since he clearly wasn’t real.

But I hit the plate of armor over his hard chest and bounced back.

His expression didn’t change, and he looked at me with the same fiery gaze.

I hadn’t expected him to be real. To be as physical as the trunk of a tree. To be a boulder that could crush me. “What debt does my father owe?”

“His soul.”

I did my best not to react, not to show the pitiful hand concealed behind my gaze. My father had never mentioned his encounter with the God of the Underworld. But if it were true...would he have ever told me? But what if it wasn't real, and this was just a trick for this demon to snatch another soul for his vault. “If that's true, why have you waited so long?”

“Bahamut was the one who made the deal, not me. Until Talon Rothschild's blood enters my domain, I can't touch him. But now, his blood has—as it pumps in your veins.”

Now I knew it was true—and that was why he'd made me promise not to come here.

“I tasted it like salt on the sea. Smelled it in the winds of the storm. Felt your pulse in my dead heart.” He took a step forward, coming closer to me, his eyes pulsing with rage. “Your father will serve me the way he should have served Bahamut.”

“Who the fuck is Bahamut?”

His eyes flicked back and forth between mine. “My predecessor—before your father killed him.”

My father had killed a god. He was far older than his appearance showed, and I realized he had lived a life far more interesting than he'd ever shared with me. I wanted to ask this demon for the details, but I couldn't afford to look unaware of my own family history. “If my father killed him, what do you think he'll do to you?” I

stepped toward him, bringing our faces close together, refusing to cower to anyone, even a demon.

He held his ground as his eyes remained locked on mine, over a foot taller than me, a trunk looking down at its roots. Where he should show anger, he displayed something else, a deep focus that burned like hot coals in a blazing fire. His eyes didn't shift, not once, staring at me like I was a painting rather than a woman he'd just threatened.

I held his stare as long as I could, refused to blink first, but this man was different from me. Neither dead nor alive. Could flicker like a ghost but remain physical like a stone. Muscle stacked on muscle, a tall and mighty oak, its roots ancient and steeped in the rivers of experience and wisdom.

I had no chance to defeat him, physically or mentally, but I had to pretend otherwise. "My father has the loyalty of dragons, the command of the Southern Isles and influence over the Northern Isles, has friends in high and low places, and wields a sword that killed an immortal. Tread carefully, demon."

The words didn't provoke him. He remained quiet and still, seemingly mesmerized by my words rather than enraged.

I turned my back on him a second time and headed to the ship. I expected him to appear before me again, to cut off my passage to my crew, but he did not. If he could feel the racing of my heart, he would know this was all an act, that I was scared out of my fucking mind.

Minutes passed, and I continued forward. It seemed too good to be true, that he would just let me go after threatening my bloodline, to extract a vengeance for something that had happened before I was alive. When I made it back to the ship, I saw the crew already working on the hull.

I swallowed and kept a straight face, even though it was probably as pale as snow. “This island is cursed. We need to make haste and leave it as quickly as possible.”

“Aye, Captain.” Davin chopped wood he’d hacked from a tree and carved it into planks to repair the damage from the rocks.

I was so terrified by my encounter I didn’t even react to the promotion. “I’ll get more wood.”

It took an entire day to repair the ship, all of us working together to mend everything that had shattered in the collision against the rock. We sustained off the stores we had in the hold. Despite our desire for fresh food, no one hunted or searched for sustenance on land. They all felt the God of the Underworld’s presence—they just didn’t know that’s what it was.

It was dark by the time the tide started to roll in.

“Drop the sails.” I called out orders and stepped into my new role without hesitation. I didn’t necessarily believe I deserved the promotion, but I was eager to leave that sinister place as quickly as possible. “Prepare the masts. We head northeast until we reach the Southern Isles.”

“Should we drop anchor offshore?” Davin asked. “The storm has passed, so no need to sail blindly in the dark?—”

“We need to leave this place. Now.”

None of the men challenged me. They all knew I’d seen the storm approach when Captain Hartshire had dismissed it. We were all in this situation because of his stupidity—and now he was dead.

“Wait a day before you depart.” It was the voice of a stranger, but it was somehow so familiar, it could have belonged to a lifelong friend.

My eyes shifted down the deck to see him standing there.

In his uniform and armor, his cape blowing in the wind like he was real.

Because he was real.

I glanced to the men around me, who all continued their preparations like they didn’t notice him.

“I reveal myself only to you.” He stepped closer to me, a gust of wind moving through his hair before it went still once more. “A dangerous armada approaches. Leave the island now, and you’ll cross their path.”

I lowered my voice to a whisper, afraid to cause a panic with the men because they would fear I spoke to an invisible enemy—or I spoke to myself. I wasn’t sure which would be worse. “As if I would ever believe the word of a demon.”

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His cape fluttered gently behind him, making him look more like a living king than a dead one. The intensity of his gaze didn't falter, showing me the same white-hot flames he'd exuded when we last spoke. "I do not deceive you, Lily Rothschild."

"You just want to keep me here?—"

"I don't need to keep you here to get what I want," he said. "The bond has been broken by blood."

The sails were dropped, and the masts were turned. The tide had risen, and the galleon began its slow progress over the incoming waves as it headed out to sea with the moonlight the only illumination and the stars our only company—besides the God of the Underworld.

"Drop anchor," he said simply. "Heed my warning before it's too late."

The galleon continued to inch farther out to sea, leaving the safety of the shore and moving to open water.

I turned to the crew. "Lighten the ship. Drop our supplies. We need to reach the Southern Isles at breakneck speed."

No one questioned the command. "Aye, Captain Rothschild."

His eyes flashed in rage. "Speed will not save you?—"

"Be gone." I turned back to the man who tried to command me like a servant, who

tried to treat me like a possession. “You try to intimidate me with your presence, but I won’t be intimidated. Haunt me like a ghost, but I will not cower in fear. Your words are poison, and I will not drink it.”

I moved down the deck to the stern and took the wheel from one of the crew. I guided the galleon out of the treacherous terrain, avoiding the rocks so we wouldn’t be shipwrecked once again. The waves here were minimal, as if even the sea didn’t want to touch this place. The wind traveled to the north, almost the opposite direction we wanted to head, so we wouldn’t return to the east as quickly as we’d come here.

The crew started to dump all unnecessary supplies into the sea, a trail of barrels and chests sprinkled like breadcrumbs behind us. If the journey was good to us, we would be home in two days. All we needed was water and a few scraps of meat to make it.

My eyes flicked back to where the God of the Underworld had been a moment ago, but he was gone. He’d finally left me in peace, sheathed his threats and his lies and disappeared like the living phantom he was.

The sea breeze moved through my hair, cold and smelling of salt, and it blew away the fear that had gripped my throat since we’d arrived at the island. Once I returned home, I would confront my father—and warn him.

“Ahoy!” Carl called from the crow’s nest. “A fleet of ships from the north!”

I continued to steer the ship and turned into the waves at the right moment how my father had taught me, cutting down time where we lagged in the sea. My fingers tightened on the handle, and I looked to the north but saw nothing but darkness.

But my eyes focused hard on the horizon until I saw it.

Torches.

That asshole was telling the truth. “Extinguish all the torches.”

The crew ran around the ship and doused the flames with cloths, submerging us into darkness except for the moonlight.

Why did it have to be so bright?

I wanted to speed ahead and avoid their path, but the moonlight would reflect off the masts once it struck at the right angle. “Raise the sails.”

They ran around the deck as the ship rose and fell on the waves, as the deck shifted left and right because we lost all our momentum almost immediately. I kept a straight face, but my stomach was in a million knots.

If they saw us, we were fucked.

As if I expected him to appear with an evil grin just to say I told you so, I looked to my right and waited for him to appear.

But he didn't.

He'd said he could pursue me everywhere, but perhaps that had been a bluff.

All the sails were raised, and the crew went idle, unsure what to do except wait for the ships to pass. In silence, we stood there, watching the fleet of ships slowly inch closer on the dark horizon, the light of their torches growing brighter as they approached.

I rested my arms on the railing as I stared over the whitecaps that gleamed in the starlight. My heart was steady, but my adrenaline was potent. We could fight a ship or two, but if it was more than that, we would be outnumbered and sunk to the bottom

within minutes. I was used to putting on a front just for being a woman, but now I had to put it on as a captain, as the leader of men who were just as scared.

The ships drew closer. If they didn't notice us, they would continue to pass to the west. By the number of torches I could see, there had to be at least ten galleons. That meant there should be a few hundred men...or thousands.

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I couldn't see my knuckles through my gloves, but I knew they would be bone-white from the way I gripped the wooden railing, listening to the waves splash against the hull as the galleons sailed closer.

Davin came to my side, his forearms resting over the edge. "We're just one ship out to sea. Probably not worth their time to stop if they see us."

I fucking hoped so. "You're probably right."

"It looks like they have bigger plans anyway."

The world was a big place, and even with my extensive travels over the last six months, I'd barely seen a fraction of it. So I had no idea who these men were or what their agenda could be. But with a fleet of ships like that, the salt air held a hint of war. "I'm sure they do."

Davin's eyes shifted to the side of my face. "Are you alright, Captain?"

I kept my eyes on the horizon. "Just eager to get home."

"It looked like you were talking to yourself before we set sail."

I definitely hadn't been talking to myself.

"And you looked pale...like you'd seen a ghost."

I'd seen something worse than a ghost. "We lost half our crew. Still shaken up."

“That wasn’t your fault.”

“Never said it was.”

“That fault lies with Captain Hartshire. And now his soul is buried in a watery grave.”

It had been his decision that had caused all this grief, but I wouldn’t say he deserved what had happened to him. “We all make mistakes.”

“I’ve never seen you make a mistake, Captain.”

If only he knew.

My eyes stayed on the horizon and watched the ships come closer. In the light of their torches, I could see some of the details of their elaborate ships, the gold-plated sides, the frescoes they’d mounted on the sides of their ships. “I’ve never seen ships like that.”

Davin turned his attention to the fleet. “Nor have I.”

It seemed like they were going to pass without incident, continue on their way to war or home for a respite. But then the galleon in the lead began to turn—and head right this way. A burst of adrenaline dropped into my stomach, and the first thing I did was push my mind out to feel another’s, to feel any dragon in my vicinity, because I knew this was bad.

But there was no one.

“Drop the sails!” I ran down the steps and worked the ropes of the first mast. “We’ve been spotted.”

Everyone sprinted to help, to get the sails down and get the ship moving.

“Dump all supplies,” I ordered. “Their ships are heavy with plated gold. We can outsail them if we turn into the wind.” That meant we’d have to go the opposite way we wanted, but it was better to delay our return and stay alive than become prisoners of war.

The crew turned the masts, and the sound of the wind catching the sails filled my ears. I turned the ship to the left and felt her drag across the water before she started to glide, the hull slicing through the water like a sharp knife through soft cheese. My hand gripped the spoke as I looked over my shoulder, seeing the entire fleet pursuing us. “Shit.” I turned to the crew on the deck. “Prepare the cannons. Fire on my command.” With half the crew dead, I’d have to line up the shot without extra men to shift the sails to catch the wind as it changed directions. That meant the ship could stall in the sea if I weren’t careful.

A victory would be impossible. But an escape might be within our reach.

I guided the ship through the water and turned slightly so the crew could aim their shots. “Fire!”

I felt the ship immediately rock with the explosions from starboard. Several cannons fired at once, and another round followed immediately afterward. I pulled on the handles of the wheel to correct our direction and didn’t see if we hit our mark.

But the men cheered, so I knew something had struck.

I glanced to the left when I saw a shadow, a glimpse of midnight blue and a black cape, but then I blinked and it was gone.

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I focused on getting us ahead with the wind in our sails, turning where I could so they could line up a shot. It was hard to navigate in the dark, to rely on the compass my father gave me for guidance.

What I wouldn't give for him to appear in the sky on the back of Khazmuda at that moment...

But no matter how I circumvented them, they were hot on my tail. We carried less cargo, but they must have more sails to pull them through the water, expert sailors to turn enormous ships sharply.

We fired until we were out of cannonballs.

I headed straight for the north, using the wind to carry us away, but when I looked over my shoulder, they were still there. "Fuck."

They came closer, one ship even creeping up until it was adjacent to ours.

I could see them clearly in the light from their torches, a commander in black armor, the crew muscular and burly like they'd had plenty to eat on their voyage. Swords gleamed in the torchlight. Their murderous intent was clear.

I couldn't die out here. I couldn't do that to my parents. Couldn't let them wonder what had happened to me, if my body was somewhere out to sea and my bones were anchors at the bottom.

I shouldn't have come.

Their galleon came right next to ours. “They’re about to board. Prepare for battle.” I secured the wheel in place with rope to make sure it would continue to the north. I was already in my armor because I’d donned it for my meeting with the God of the Underworld. It was better than most armor men got to wear, but I wasn’t sure if it would be enough.

A dragon would be better.

Their ship bumped into ours, and when the wheel tried to turn, the rope went taut from the strain. I unsheathed my blade from across my back and gripped it tightly as I stared at our adversaries. “Show no fear.”

The crew readied their swords, but they weren’t protected by armor like I was. Most of their crew wasn’t either, but the commander was the size of a bear. In all black with a vile grin on his face, he wore a cape that flapped in the air behind him. He was the first to jump and land on our deck, whipping his sword around and killing two of my crew the second he set foot on our ship.

Other sailors jumped on board with their sharp blades.

It was chaos.

Even though I was a woman, one of the guys came for me anyway, showing me no mercy.

I wouldn’t have shown him any either.

He dismissed the status of my armor and took a lazy swipe at my neck.

I blocked his sword and parried it with a quick spin before I punched him in the face and then stabbed him right through the stomach, severing his spine. I felt the

resistance of the bone before I pierced it. Then I kicked him off my blade and turned to my next opponent.

The next sailor hesitated as he looked at me, quickly learning not to underestimate me like his comrade had. He came at me then dodged before I struck, in anticipation of my ferocity. He dodged again, trying to be unpredictable, and then he came at me.

I caught his sword with mine then immediately drove him back with my hits and momentum, making his back hit the railing before I disarmed him and then kicked him in the chest so he flipped overboard.

The battle ensued on the ship, my crew clearly outnumbered, their commander a crow at the feast.

I ran down the stairs and came at him from behind before I dragged my dagger and stabbed it into the opening of his armor between his quads and his calf, right into the knee from the rear.

He screamed like a wolf then quickly spun to come down on me.

I was already ducking and rolled out of the way.

He came at me hard and fast, the dagger still in the back of his leg and the pain putting him in a rage.

I blocked hit after hit, watching his movement with the reflection of the moon on his shiny armor. Light came from the torches on their ship, but ours was still blanketed in darkness. I was a foot shorter than him, but that made it easier for me to dodge his hits and duck if I had to.

I waited until he exhausted himself with the flurry before I swiped my sword across

the side of his neck. It was a superficial wound, but blood poured out the second I withdrew my sword.

He howled again, eyes wide with viciousness.

I ran up the steps and heard his heavy footsteps behind me.

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I sliced one of the ropes from the pulley then jumped on the railing as he came for me. I jumped on top of him and pulled the rope hard against his neck to make his eyes pop out from the pressure.

He dropped his sword and reached for the rope that had already cut into him, made the blood pour out of his neck from his wound. "Give me a hand!" I didn't drop my pressure, not even to give him a killing blow, knowing how hard his heart was pounding and how little time he had left before he lost consciousness.

Davin came to my aid and slammed his blade into the opening under the commander's armpit, getting him in the chest through the side.

The commander's knees went weak, and he dropped and hit the deck.

I released the rope and stepped away.

I looked up and swore I came face-to-face with the God of the Underworld, eyes the color of dark earth, the molten center burning in his eyes. But then I blinked, and he was gone...and I wasn't sure if I imagined it.

Davin stared with wide eyes, like he couldn't believe that had just happened.

"Let's get the rest of them." Their morale would be low with the death of their commander. They hadn't feared us before, but they would fear us now. "Kill the rest, and we'll take their ship."

Still wide-eyed in shock, he just gave a nod.

I returned to the fight and helped the others. Several of my men were dead, and that pissed me off and gave me another edge. The enemy understood what kind of threat I was and either avoided me or came at me like I'd single-handedly killed their entire family.

I cut one down after the next. The crew helped me, and soon, we were the majority. Until we were the last ones standing.

Their ship continued to sail next to ours—now a ghost ship without a crew.

“Come on,” I said. “Let’s take their ship. The others may continue to focus on this one.” I ran to the wheel and released the rope before I tugged it hard to the right so it would veer off in another direction. “You’ve gotten us far, girl. But it’s time to say goodbye.” I ran to the starboard and jumped onto the golden ship before the distance had grown too great. The crew, having already boarded the golden ship, reached over the edge and helped me to the top until they pulled me on board with them.

“I can’t believe we’re still alive,” Davin blurted.

“For now,” I said. “We’ve still got to lose them. Continue north.” I grabbed the railing and stood up to watch our ship. She made her hard turn and then the wheel must have straightened out before she sailed in a straight line. The other ships followed, unable to see what had happened in the dark or too arrogant to believe that we’d killed all of their men.

“Captain!”

I turned to put out the next fire.

On the opposite side, I saw another golden ship directly next to ours, smart enough to figure out what had happened, unlike the rest. I thought I’d killed the commander of

the fleet, but one look at this guy told me he was really the one in charge.

And he looked right at me, holding an axe instead of a sword, looking like an executioner rather than a captain. He was flanked by archers, arrows tight on the strings and aimed at all of us.

But mostly me.

The man stared at me like he somehow knew I was responsible for all of this.

Davin turned to me for instruction.

The others did the same.

But none of them wore armor, so those arrows would pierce their flesh and kill them instantly.

He wore a similar armor as the others, but he had a predatory air about him, like he killed for pleasure rather than obligation. He grabbed one of the ropes that hung overhead and swung over to our new ship, making the mast creak from his weight.

He landed with a thud directly before me, the shine of his axe bright in the torchlight. The blade alone was bigger than my head. It wasn't a weapon for dueling or fighting but hacking and massacring.

I pushed out my mind again, an exercise in misguided hope.

But there was nothing.

My father was tall, and I'd inherited his height, but this man was still a behemoth by comparison. He walked right up to me, pressed his face so close to mine he

practically pushed our noses together.

I didn't flinch.

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His eyes shifted back and forth, searching for the fear I should have.

But I was a Rothschild with dragon blood in my veins, and I was too damn proud for that.

He jerked his entire body to make me believe he was about to hit me.

I didn't even blink.

A grotesque smile moved over his lips, and he stepped back. "The finest captain I've ever laid eyes on." Then he dragged those eyes down my body, over my tits and hips, before his eyes flicked back to mine once more. "A woman who's soft to the touch, but a soldier who can battle a man thrice her size. I'm not a man easily impressed—but I'm impressed, nonetheless."

"So glad I have your approval," I said sarcastically. "I can die happy now."

That should piss him off, but he grinned from ear to ear. "I like this one."

My father had told me power and corruption went hand in hand. I had no doubt what this man would do to me as his prisoner.

I'd rather die.

"We're merchants taking our products to port," I said confidently. "This interference is wholly unnecessary."

“Then why did you run?” He cocked his head, eyes locked on mine.

“Because you look prepared for war.”

He smiled slightly, like that answer stoked his fat ego. “I have a better job for you, sweetheart.”

“No thank you, asshole.”

He gave a quiet whistle. “You burn without wood.”

“Wait until you see how hot I burn...”

Instead of threatening me with his axe, he returned it across his back, practically an invitation for me to attack him. “I can’t wait to see.” He nodded to his men. “Kill the crew. Lock her in a cell.”

I quickly put my sword to his neck and pressed it into the skin. “You keep us all or kill us all.”

He looked completely at ease, like his neck was thicker than armor. “The captain goes down with the ship, not the crew.”

“I go down with both.”

He stepped into me, moved right into the blade so our faces were close together. “I can’t wait to have fun with you.”

I slammed my knee into his groin and sliced my blade across his neck.

He grabbed my wrist and forced it down on his knee so hard it nearly broke. My

blade went flying, and then he slammed his elbow down on my head, making me buckle to the deck and lose consciousness for a second. “Kill the crew. The captain is mine.”

I lay there unable to move, my body unresponsive for seconds. I heard the enemy converge and grab my men. I heard the shouts and screams as they were put to the sword or thrown overboard. “No...”

I opened my eyes and tried to get up.

And there he stood on the other side of the deck, in his midnight-blue armor, looking like one of the enemies who had captured me. He stared with eyes that were both angry and sympathetic.

And then he vanished.

I collapsed back on the deck, and the last thing I saw was the shadow of the behemoth who moved over me. The last thing I remembered was being lifted off the deck before I slipped away.

Dad, help me...

LILY

I woke up in a cell, the ship gently rocking back and forth as it sailed across the sea.

I didn't know how much time had passed. I was still in my armor, so it couldn't have been that long. My sword was gone, so the only weapons I had were my fists—which would be useless in this instance.

I sat up and pressed my back to the wall, my elbows on my knees as my fingers touched my temple. Now I had a headache after getting my ass kicked.

“You should have listened to me.”

My eyes flicked up to the man who followed me like a ghost, who flickered in and out of my sight at his convenience.

“I don't usually take a demon at their word.” I dropped my fingers from my temple and crossed my arms over my chest, suddenly overwhelmed with fatigue from this never-ending journey. Then the pain struck me...because the men I'd traveled the world with for the last six months were all dead.

I was the only survivor—for now.

“I'm not a demon. I'm Wrath, God of the Underworld, King of the Dead—and you will address me as such.”

“Or what?” I challenged. “My luck can't get much worse.”

He stood a few feet away near the bars of the cell, completely out of place imprisoned in the hull of the ship. A man so large that the tiny cell could barely accommodate him. Instead of looming over me, he squatted down, forearms on his knees. “But it can get better.” His calm confidence continued to burn in his gaze, a man who exuded his power without taunts, like the man who’d thrown me in here.

“I won’t sell my soul for freedom. I’d rather die.”

“What he wants to do to you is much worse than death.”

My eyes immediately flicked away to reject the notion, to pretend the idea had never entered my head, even though it was already there. “The answer is still no.”

He stared at me for a long time, his thoughts hidden behind the hardness of his gaze.

“There’s a small sailboat attached to the rear of their ship. Can you sail it alone?”

My eyes stayed on the bars for a second before I looked at him again, not understanding the point of the question. “What...?”

“Can you sail it alone?” he repeated.

“I can sail anything,” I said. “But what does that matter?—”

“Just be ready.”

“Ready for what?—”

All he did was raise his hand, and that silenced me.

Footsteps sounded from somewhere past the bars where I couldn’t see.

Wrath rose to his full height then moved to the corner, his back to the bars, the hilt of his heavy blade visible over one large shoulder. His eyes remained on me, the only comfort I had right now.

The man who'd punched me unlocked the door and let himself inside. "Talking to yourself, sweetheart?"

I shifted my gaze to him and watched him sit on the little stool that had been up against the wall. His armor was gone now. He wore a short-sleeved shirt that showed the thickness of his muscles, a man I couldn't best in hand-to-hand combat. "Just the God of the Underworld."

He chuckled like I'd told some clever joke. "Just when I thought I couldn't be further amused."

"Would my boot against your balls be another amusement?"

He smiled, and that was more terrifying than a scowl. "Tell me your name."

"Tell me yours first."

He stared at me a while longer, his amusement continuing to linger.

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My eyes glanced at Wrath, who continued to stand there and stare.

“That’s fair,” he said. “Bear.”

“Your name is Bear?” I asked incredulously.

“Fitting, isn’t it?”

“Ridiculous is more like it.” I glanced to Wrath again.

He didn’t smile. Didn’t seem remotely amused by the situation.

Bear turned to follow my gaze. “What do you keep looking at, sweetheart?” He turned back to me once he’d determined there was no escape route I could have possibly constructed in my mind.

“I already told you—the God of the Underworld.”

“I either hit you too hard...or you have some interesting taste.” He rubbed his palms together slowly while he stared at me like a predator. “Now, it’s your turn. Tell me your name.”

Wrath interjected before I had the chance to answer. “Lie.”

I swallowed, unsure what to do. I wanted to tell Bear exactly who I was, that my father was the King of the Southern Isles and he would burn the world to get me back. My status was my only leverage out of here, the only thing that might possibly

save me from the unthinkable.

“You didn’t trust me before,” Wrath said.

My eyes flicked to him again.

The intensity of his stare never faded. It had remained the same since we’d met days ago. Always burning, always hot. “Trust me now.”

It would be unwise to trust someone who sought retribution from my father, but he was all I had in the moment. If I’d listened to his warning, my crew would still be alive. I’d made a mistake as grave as Hartshire’s. I deserved to be at the bottom of the ocean like the rest of them. “Stephanie.”

“And your surname, Stephanie?” Bear asked. “I’ve never met a female captain. Or one who can fight like a man.” His eyes drifted over my body. “Who has armor worth more than the contents of this entire ship.”

Looked like Wrath was right. I didn’t know who Bear was or who he served. He could serve a potential enemy of the Southern Isles. Would sail there and lay destruction to the kingdom. My father and the dragons could easily defeat them, but at what cost? “Laurier.” I used my mother’s maiden name, the only one I could think of on the spot.

“And who are you, Stephanie Laurier?” he asked. “Because I know you aren’t nobody.”

“Lie,” Wrath commanded. “Lie like your life and the lives of all those you love depend on it—because it does.” Then he disappeared within the blink of an eye, vanished into thin air, made me question my own sanity.

“Who are you, Stephanie?” Bear repeated, unaware of the god who haunted the ship because he couldn’t see him.

“My parents died when I was young. I worked at the docks as a child, learned to sail as a teenager, and learned to survive before I was an adult. I sail the seas because I have no home, no roots, and the next shipment is all I have to live for.” It hurt to lie, to say something so deeply untrue. I had a home, had parents that would give their lives for mine, had a community of people so loyal to my father that they were loyal to me. Had the protection of a mighty black dragon who would give his life for mine because he viewed me as a hatchling. Had a best friend who loved me like a sister. Had a brother who did love me like a sister. It was only then that I realized how stupid this adventure was, that I had searched the world for excitement and treasure when it’d been in the very place that I’d left.

Bear stared hard into my gaze, eyes flicking back and forth between mine, studying the emotion that must have reached the surface of my stare. “Try again, sweetheart—” He was knocked against the bars when the ship gave a hard lurch to the side, as if it had struck something.

He lost his train of thought in the collision. Forgot about me altogether as he rose to his feet and left the cage. But he didn’t forget to lock the door before he left.

“What’s going on?” I called after him. “You can’t just leave me in here!” The ship gave another lurch, and I flew against the back wall. Then I heard distant screams from the deck of the ship, the terrified cries of grown men. “What the fuck is happening?” I remained against the wall and prepared for another roll in the cabin.

It went on for fifteen minutes, the dramatic rocking of the ship, the cries of the men from above. I held on to the bars so I wouldn’t fly and hit my back against the metal. Thankfully, I was in my armor to protect myself from injury.

Then the ship finally went still.

And it was quiet. So quiet, it made me wonder if I was the only one alive.

Footsteps sounded, slow and uneven, a progression that lacked intention.

I was more afraid of that sound than Bear's oncoming footsteps. I moved back against the wall and avoided the door.

The steps continued, agonizingly slow and somehow terrifying.

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Finally, the visitor came into view, a man I didn't recognize, beaten and bloody, his stomach ripped open with his entrails hanging down in front of him. His fingers were soaked in blood, and they shook as he tried to insert the key into the lock.

"Oh fuck." I pushed harder against the wall as I tried to escape, but there was nowhere to go. I wished I could just disappear like Wrath.

He finally got the door unlocked then stumbled back to get out of the way. He leaned against the other wall and stared at me, his eyes glazed over like he wasn't truly there. So injured he was harmless, he was no threat to me, but his appearance alone chilled me to the bone.

Wrath suddenly appeared before me. "Go."

My eyes flicked from the god to the massacred man who had just unlocked my cell. "What is happening?—"

"Go. You don't have much time."

I stumbled out of the cage, feeling weaker at the sight of the man who appeared more dead than alive than I had when Bear had slammed his entire weight into the back of my head. I went past Wrath and headed for the stairs. Once I grabbed the railing, I felt invigorated by the chance for freedom and ran all the way to the deck.

I saw the carnage—the entire crew dead.

Even Bear.

I caught sight of strange holes in the railing, like something had broken through, when I hadn't heard the sound of cannons.

"The stern." Wrath appeared before me again. "That's where the sailboat is. Lower it down into the water and disembark."

I glanced around at the ship again before I looked at him once more, bewildered by everything that had happened.

"Hurry," he said. "Before the other ships return."

"Why are you doing this?" I blurted. "Why are you helping me?—"

"We don't have time for this." A flash of fury moved across his gaze before he came closer to me. Then he exploded, his skin suddenly tinting black and his eyes turning into flames. "Run!"

Seeing him suddenly turn to ash in pure rage made me take off down the starboard side to the rear of the ship. The torches continued to burn, but the world around me was dark. Only the water directly next to the boat was visible. The rest was a sea of black.

I tugged on the pulley and released the rope tied in place. The small boat dropped into the water, the mast folded down across the top. I didn't have time to search for water or fishing equipment for the journey, not when Wrath followed me with a maniacal burn in his eyes.

I wrapped my ankles around the rope the way my father had taught me and slid down, feeling the slight burn of the fibers between my palms from the speed of my drop. My feet hit the sailboat, and I nearly toppled over in the waves.

The galleon continued to sail away, Wrath standing on the deck of the stern, looking down at me as his cape billowed majestically in the ocean breeze.

I suddenly felt alone, watching the shadow of the ship leave, slowly descending into darkness. Before all the light was gone, I retrieved the compass from my pocket and checked for the south.

I pulled up the mast and secured it in place, turned it to catch the wind, and then began my progression across the water, the waves too big for a boat this small out to sea. But I quieted the fears that screamed in my heart and kept moving forward, ignoring the waves that splashed my armor and cheeks, the undeniable cold from the elements.

I held on to the tiller and navigated the waves like my father had taught me, feeling like that little girl stuck in the storm. I had been scared then, but I was far more scared now—because he wasn't here to help me through this.

I blinked, and then he was there, seated directly across from me, his eyes on the galleon that was just a shadow now. "They've taken the bait."

The armor suddenly felt heavy on my chest. My lungs ached for air, but the metal wouldn't allow it. In case I toppled overboard into the sea and became weighed down to the bottom, I removed every piece and placed it in the alcove behind me so I wouldn't trip on it.

Wrath continued to stare into the dark, arms on his knees, a man too big for a boat this small. His cape filled with air like the sail above him. The darkness continued to descend, but the moonlight struck his handsome face. He turned his attention back to me.

I didn't thank him, not when I might still die out here.

“It’s a four-day journey from here—assuming all goes well.”

That meant I wouldn’t be able to sleep, not when the boat could blow off course in my slumber and I’d end up farther away. I had no water or food, so I’d have to survive long enough to feel Khazmuda’s or Zehemoth’s mind to call for aid.

“You can do this.”

“I know I can.” Everything seemed to hit me at once. The death of my captain. The loss of my crew. The ache of my muscles from fighting for my life. My encounter with a vengeful god. And now I had to sail in the dark alone and hope I made it back to my family.

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He continued to stare at me, his eyes hardening into sharp points, like he could see the feelings I didn't show. "There is no bravery without fear—and you're the bravest woman I've ever met."

My eyes wanted to flick away to avoid the power in his stare, but they stayed in place, my hand gripping the tiller, my heart beating like I was in the middle of a sprint rather than seated on a cold plank of wood. I'd been terrified of him at our first meeting, but now, I was grateful he was there...even if he wasn't really there. "Why did you save me?"

His eyes kept their intensity, staring at me with an intimacy built over years, not days. He'd never placed his hands on me, but his touch was searing-hot on my flesh. This was the man who had threatened me but now was my savior. Everything changed in an instant, but I couldn't identify when that moment had taken place. When everything had changed between us. "Because you were worth saving."

PROLOGUE II

LILY

"Come on." My father faced me in his full armor, his blade held at the ready, his eyes angry like I was actually his enemy. "Don't hold out on me, Zunieth." He circled me then spun his sword around his wrist.

My father treated me like a man rather than a daughter, at least when he trained me in the sword. He never took it easy on me, pushed me like a soldier under the dictatorship of a commander. I never turned my back on him and waited for an

opening. Most daughters had fathers who aged and became withered and weak.

But my father's strength only seemed to grow.

He slammed his fist against his chest as his face tinted red like this battle was real.
“Don't you dare give up, Lily.”

“I'm not giving up?—”

“Then move.” He continued to circle me in the courtyard among the olive trees and the red geranium flowers that flowed out of the terra-cotta pots.

Zehemoth lay on his belly a distance away, his eyes watching the battle in silence.

“I need a break?—”

“You don't get a break.” He came at me with his sword raised.

I blocked his hit and anticipated his flurry of strikes, the way he made his sword move so quickly it was like a violent dance. I blocked each hit with my sword then caught his blade in my vambraces before I pushed it off. I punched him hard in the face and forced him back.

He took a step or two before he righted himself. He smiled, his teeth coated with blood. “That's my girl.” He slammed his fist against his chest a second time before he spun the blade around his wrist again. He came at me once more.

Whenever I thought I couldn't go on, he gave me a reason to. The pride in his eyes made me feel like I could do anything.

He rushed me again, barreling down on me harder, steel against steel. After he

parried my sword, he spat blood on the stone and kept going. He'd been training me since I was a child, and now that I was a grown woman, he pushed me harder because he knew I could take it. He used his height and strength against me, simulated real battle and extended no mercy. If he disarmed me, the battle was over—and I was dead.

He slammed his elbow down on my arm to get me to drop the sword, but I moved in the nick of time and hit him so hard that he lost his grip on the hilt of his blade.

The sword dropped to the ground, and before he could react, I kicked it, and it flew off toward Zehemoth. The weapon skidded then came to a stop right in front of him.

His eyes stared at it before they lifted to me again.

My father stepped back, catching his breath as he looked at me with new eyes. Then he brought his palms together and gave a slow clap, the smirk on his face infectious. A chuckle came from his throat, a brightness in his eyes. "The blood of kings runs in those veins. The courage of a Rothschild beats in that heart." He stopped his applause and came to me, his hand moving to my shoulder the way he did with my brother. He gripped the plate of armor that covered me, but I could somehow feel his fingers through the metal. "Future Queen of the Southern Isles, Queen of Dragons, the mightiest ruler this side of the world has ever seen." He let me go then retrieved his sword from where it lay before Zehemoth.

He bent down and picked it up by the hilt before he brushed his hand over Zehemoth's snout, giving him affection the way Khazmuda did with me whenever he saw me.

Zehemoth closed his eyes like he enjoyed it.

When my father came back, he gave me a one-armed hug and kissed the side of my

temple. Then he returned to the castle to remove his armor and wash away the sweat and blood from our spar.

I sheathed my blade across my back and joined Zehemoth. A wooden bench was next to him, so I took a seat, the olive trees and flowers behind me. A cool glass of water sounded refreshing at that moment, but my body felt weak, and not from the battle that had just concluded.

Zehemoth stared at me for a while before he lifted his snout so our eyes were level. I sense your despair. He wasn't a full-grown dragon yet, just a few years away from rivaling his father's size. Just as I was a few years from true adulthood. Are you hurt?

"My father would never hurt me." He pushed me with his power and skill, but he never landed a blow that would cause me harm. Sometimes he would put a wooden blade to my neck to mark his victory, but he never actually touched me.

Zehemoth looked just like his father, Khazmuda. Covered in shiny black scales with black eyes, he was beautiful like midnight, a dragon that would be powerful and feared by anyone who gazed upon him. But his heart was pure, and his intentions were kind. The only enemy he had were the grizzlies he loved to eat. Then what troubles you, Sunieth?

My eyes trailed down to my boots against the cobblestone. I wore the armor of the kingdom, forged in the fires of dragons, the best steel to protect my beating heart. I felt like a soldier trained for a battle I didn't want to fight. "All my life, my father has prepared me for the crown. But I'm not sure if I want it." I slowly raised my eyes to his, seeing the affection Zehemoth had for me in his gaze. He was my best friend, the one I confided everything to, another brother in my family tree.

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Tell him. He will respect your wishes.

“I know he would.” Succession was transferred to male heirs. Had been that way throughout his entire family history, but my father had broken that tradition and named me his successor, regardless of my gender. It was historic and touching. My brother never seemed to care about my father’s decision—at least, he didn’t show it.

Then why do you hesitate?

“Because...” I swallowed, feeling the sting in my heart. “Ever since I can remember, he’s trained me to take his place. We’ve sailed together, we’ve sparred together, he’s taught me everything he knows. Without that...I’m not sure how much interest he would have in me.” I took a slow breath and felt the pain once my fear had been released.

Zehemoth didn’t have a changing expression the way humans did, but it was obvious that my words dug deep underneath his scales. Your father loves you, Lily.

“I know he does. But...would he love me as much?”

Yes.

“I’m not so sure...” Our time together was always spent training me. He never asked me about my dreams or my interests. He looked so proud of me, but sometimes I felt like he didn’t really know me. Just knew me as the daughter who would rule this place whenever he decided it was time for him to step aside. I had no other value. “If I told him I didn’t want to rule, he would focus on my brother...and we wouldn’t

spend as much time together. If we aren't sparring or training, then what are we doing?"

Speak to him. I assure you it will subdue the ache in your heart.

"I don't know... We don't really talk."

I'm sure he would change that if he knew the error of his ways. He's a good man, a loving father, and has simply lost focus.

I shook my head. "I like that he's proud of me. I like the way he looks at me. If I tell him, he'll never look at me that way again. I'm not sure I could live with that." My eyes dropped down to my boots again.

Zehemoth moved closer, bringing the tip of his snout close to my knee.

My hand reached forward and felt the scales of his face, the coolness against my fingertips. I watched Zehemoth's eyes close as I continued to stroke him, comforting me in the best way he knew how.

By being with me.

Hawk sat across from me at the dinner table, the cards between us. He was five years younger than me, an age gap big enough that we seemed to live in a different era of time. We didn't have a lot in common.

We played for a while, and I let him win sometimes.

When the night deepened, Mother came into the room. "Time for bed, sweetheart." She came up behind him and ran her fingers through his hair.

“I want to keep playing.”

“I know,” she said tenderly. “But it’s late.”

“It’s not late for Lily,” he argued.

“That’s because she’s an adult now.” She continued to run her fingers through his hair. “You still have a few years to go.”

“Come on?—”

“Shall I get your father?” she threatened.

My brother poked at the seam with our mother because she was the softer of the two. But my father was the authoritarian of the family, the one who could raise his voice just slightly and the foundations of the castle started to tremble.

Hawk dropped his argument and left his chair.

“Say goodnight to your sister,” Mom said.

“Night,” he said as he walked away, clearly ticked off that I got to stay up as late as I wanted.

She came around the table and kissed my temple as she gave me a one-armed hug. “Goodnight, sweetheart.”

“Night, Mom.”

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Her fingers trailed through my hair as she walked away and turned into the hallway.

The cards were still on the table, so I scooped them into a pile in front of me then started to organize them.

I sensed a shadow in the room, the presence of someone who had entered without notice. My eyes flicked up above me to see my father standing there, appearing out of nowhere. I gave a slight jump at his entry. “You scared me.” I returned my focus to the cards, and I was halfway done with returning them to the deck when I realized he hadn’t moved. I flicked my eyes up again.

No longer in his uniform because of the late hour, he was in the clothes he wore in the privacy of the castle. Trousers and a short-sleeved black cotton shirt. He still had the bearing of a king—especially when his eyes looked like that.

Intense.

I stilled when I sensed the tension in the air, when he didn’t smile at me like he usually did, when my mind told me that something was terribly wrong.

He lowered himself into the chair my brother had vacated. He was rigid, his back not touching the cushion, his arms at his sides initially but then moving to the table before him. He stared at his hands as they came together, his eyes lingering before he looked at me.

I couldn’t determine his mood—if he was angry at me and here to admonish a wrongdoing, or if he was here to deliver bad news. “What is it?”

His eyes flicked away for a moment, his face guilty for making me worry. “Khazmuda and I just had a long conversation.” Confidence returned to his body, and he looked at me once again. “You don’t want the crown—and think I won’t want you either because of that fact.”

Zehemoth.

He continued to stare at me, his eyes hard like he was angry.

My breathing escalated, feeling the sting of betrayal and the discomfort of my father’s wrath.

He stared at me for a long time, so focused he didn’t need to blink, looking at me like an enemy across the table rather than his own flesh and blood. “Is that true?”

This was exactly why I never would have mentioned it to him. Because he would get wounded and angry like this. “Yes...”

A flash of hesitation moved across his face, as if he didn’t expect me to admit it. As if Khazmuda had misinterpreted Zehemoth’s message. As if this was all some kind of misunderstanding. After a beat, his eyes narrowed in pain, his anger dropped. “I don’t understand, Zunieth.”

It was easier to tolerate his anger instead of his pain. Now I felt horrible. “Ever since I can remember, it’s been fishing and sailing and fighting and history and dragon-riding. You always said you were training me to take the crown, but not once did you ask if I even wanted it.”

His shoulders moved to the back of the chair, and he stared.

“We sailed through storms when I was a child. Had me fight you with sword and

shield when I was younger than Hawk is now. Recruited me to this intense, all-consuming regime without ever asking if I even wanted it.”

He remained silent, hanging on every word, his expression stiff and hard like he was forcing his emotions back.

“But I kept up with it because...” My eyes flicked away. “Because if I told you the truth, we would never spend time together. You would put all your focus on Hawk and mold him into the man you want him to be. I would be forgotten.”

His only reaction was a deep breath, a painful one.

“You’ve never once asked me what I want...what I care about...because you don’t care.”

He sank farther into the chair, an elbow moving to the armrest as his fingers rested against his lips. His eyes shifted elsewhere, and he seemed to shut me out momentarily.

“I live for your approval and your love and your pride, so I never would have said anything. Nothing is worth the loss of that. But it looks like Zehemoth has made that decision without my consent.”

My father continued to stare elsewhere, focusing on the wall behind me as he listened to me speak, his fingers still eclipsing his lips.

I had nothing more to say, so I stayed quiet.

Minutes of silence passed, heavy like rain clouds, a storm swirling around us both.

He finally dropped his hand and shifted his gaze to the table. “You’re right. I’ve

never asked what you wanted, Lily. I just assumed that you would want to be the first queen to take the throne, an option that has been denied to so many women before you.” Disapproval and disappointment were heavy in his voice. He couldn’t mask it. “I thought having a father who wanted more for you than marriage and children would make you proud.”

“That’s not what I said?—”

“I thought having a father who raised his daughter as a son is what you would want.”

“Dad—”

“You have no idea how much I love you.” His eyes lifted to mine, and he looked more ferocious than an angry bear. “That I would give my life here and now so you may live. That I would be broken beyond comprehension if I ever lost you.” His eyes started to mist with a fog that rose from the sea. “That you and your brother are the single most important things to me in this world. I thought the love I had for your mother triumphed all—and then I had you two. I wish you could understand what a blessing you are to me.” He breathed hard for several seconds then forced the mist in his gaze to dissipate.

“Dad—”

“You had your turn to speak. Now, this is mine.” He leaned over the table as he came down on me. “I had greater reasons for teaching you all those things than preparing you for a crown. I taught you to survive. There may come a day when you need it—and you will live because of it.”

I wanted to speak, but I knew he wasn’t done. Nowhere near it.

“I admit that my focus was too sharp, that I blurred out all other aspects of life as if we were at war this very minute. But when you’ve endured the hardships I’ve endured...” He hesitated, his eyes flicking away for a moment before he came back to me. “It’s hard to think of anything else.”

“What hardships?—”

“I support whatever you desire. Whatever your dreams may be, I will help you reach them. I’m sorry that I made you think my love is conditional, Lily Rothschild, because it’s very much the opposite.” His eyes started to mist again. “I’ve failed as a father for letting you believe that, even for a second, and I’m sorry from the bottom of my heart.”

It was like a dagger to the heart. I felt sick from the injury, from the pain I’d caused. “You’ve never failed as a father, Dad.” I reached my hand across the table to where he lay. My fingers grabbed his, and I squeezed them.

He inhaled a slow breath and bottled his emotions the best he could. Then he gripped my hand, squeezed it like I dangled over the edge of a cliff. His other hand cupped the back of mine, and he cradled our hold. He stared for a long time, cocooning my hand in his embrace. “My greatest dream was to be a father. The day your mother told me she was pregnant...was one of the happiest of my life. And then you were born...and you were perfect. Watching you grow into this smart, independent, and strong woman has been everything I’ve ever wanted. A dream come true.” He lifted his chin and looked at me. “I’m proud of the woman you’ve become, regardless of the title you hold, regardless of how you choose to spend your life.” His love and affection were visible in his gaze once more.

“I’m sorry for what I said.”

He shook his head slightly. “It’s my job to support you—and I failed.”

“You didn’t fail?—”

“Fatherhood is the hardest thing I’ve ever done, but also the best thing I’ve ever done. And despite the fact that you’re an adult now, it’s still my job to support you and guide you. I lost my way, but I’ve found it again.” He released my hands and pulled his hands back to his body. “Tell me what you desire, Zunieth.”

I felt the change in our relationship, the way we grew further apart for a moment but came back together stronger than ever. “All I’ve known is the Southern Isles. I want to see more of the world. You told me you used to be a pirate, that you saw the most amazing places and met the most interesting people. That’s what I desire.”

I waited for his disappointment and admonishment. To tell me that a life of adventure was no place for a woman. That it was unsafe and foolish. But he smiled slightly and gave a nod. “A life of adventure and exploration... We’ll make it happen.”

“Really?” I asked in quiet surprise.

“Yes.”

“You aren’t going to tell me it’s dangerous and stupid?”

“You already know those things, Lily. I’ve taught you to sail through the harshest conditions. I’ve taught you to fight a man twice your size. I’ve prepared you for the life you want, and that makes me proud.”

It was that easy—and I should have known it would be that easy.

“You’re young, with a long life ahead of you. Enjoy it.”

No other woman could tell her father she wanted to be a pirate and he would approve. He would tell her to stay home, to find a nice young man, and get married. To have children and devote her life to raising a family. But not my father.

“But I still have more to teach you before you leave. Is that okay?”

“Yeah,” I said with a smile. “I’m not in a rush.”

LILY

With every passing day without food or water, I grew weaker.

I turned away from the sun during the day to protect my skin, but I continued to sweat and lose precious fluids. The nights were worse because of the wind and the invisible waves. Splashes of water would come from nowhere and strike me in the face. It was ice-cold and salty, but it kept me awake.

By the third morning, I couldn't keep my eyes open.

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Every time I thought I would fall asleep, I would splash cold water on my face, and that would keep me awake for a bit.

I wasn't sure if Wrath was there or not. Sometimes I caught a flash of him, but it easily could have been a hallucination. I continued to check my compass to make sure I was on the right path, but I was surrounded by the constant blue of the sea, the horizon that stretched on endlessly.

I pushed my mind out every hour, hoping I was close enough to feel someone in the skies.

There was nothing.

I suddenly fell asleep, tipped over, and nearly rolled out of the boat. I hit the side of my head, and that jerked me awake. I already had a headache from the dehydration, and now there was a pulse of pain in my head.

“You’re close.”

My eyes opened to see Wrath across from me.

“You’ve come too far to get lost at sea, Lily Rothschild.”

“I—I can’t stay awake.”

“A dragon is close. Hold on.”

“How—how do you know this?”

“Because I know everything.” He looked into the blue sky mixed with white clouds.

“Hold on a little longer.”

“Okay...” I held on to the tiller, swaying on the seat from the exhaustion and the pain. I fell asleep for a second here and there and then jerked awake again. Reality was hard to understand when my perception was false.

“A dragon is in sight. Call for aid.”

I was so tired, I could barely find the energy. Please help me. I’m Lily Rothschild, Princess of the Southern Isles... Please take me to the castle. I couldn’t find the strength to say more, not even in my head. I slumped forward, unable to hold on a moment longer, slipping under with exhaustion or giving in to the collapse of my body. I wasn’t sure which.

I know who you are, Zunieth.

I recognized his voice, having heard it in my head all my life. Khazmuda...

I’m almost there.

Tell my father...that I’m okay.

He’s with me now.

I had no water left in my body to shed, but my eyes still misted. “Dad...”

I lay there and felt cold scales touch my skin as they wrapped around my body. Then I was lifted from the boat, a gust of wind in my hair, and I knew I was being lifted

into the skies by a mighty dragon whose scales were darker than the depths of midnight.

I woke up when I felt hard cobblestone underneath me. My eyes cracked open, and then I saw people crowded around me. “Water...”

My mother’s pained voice came to my ears. “Give me the canteen.”

Someone cupped the back of my head and helped me drink. I drank it all, felt it splash down my dirty clothes and get all over me. When it was empty, I was still parched.

“Water...”

Another bottle was pressed to my lips, and I drank again, eyes closed, feeling water get all over me. They repeated the action until I shook my head, unable to drink anymore. I should have been starving, but I was so delirious from sleep-deprivation and dehydration that I didn’t notice my hunger.

Strong arms scooped underneath me, and I was lifted from the ground.

“Get the doctor here,” my mother ordered to someone.

I assumed the person who carried me was my father. I fell asleep in his arms and was out until I felt my body hit the bed. The rest was a blur, but I knew I was undressed and then bathed and cleaned before I was tucked into the soft sheets of a bed.

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I felt the world rock back and forth even though it was steady, and then I drifted off to sleep.

“Will she be alright?” My mom was normally so fearless and rational, but her voice was heavy with unshed tears.

“Yes.” My father was strong as always, giving nothing to fear.

“It’s been a day. She needs to eat. She needs more water.”

“She needs sleep first,” he said calmly.

“What if she’s not okay, Talon?” She sniffled.

“She will be.”

“How do you know?” They spoke in whispers not to wake me, but I must have gotten a decent amount of sleep if quiet voices were enough to stir me.

“Because she’s our daughter.”

My mind started to stir like the slow ascent of a sunrise. I became more aware of the world around me, noticed the way I was able to think clearly in a way I hadn’t recently. My eyes felt a surge of strength, and I opened them to see my old bedchambers, the place where I used to live before I moved out of the castle.

My left hand felt warm, and when I looked down at it, I saw my mother was holding

it as she lay beside me. Fully dressed, she lay on top of the bed, dead asleep like she was exhausted from waiting for me to wake up.

I looked to my right and found my father at my bedside, asleep in the high-backed chair, his hand close to mine like he'd been holding it before he slipped under the veil of sleep.

On the nightstand were a couple glasses of water and a plate of bread, pastries, and cookies, stuff that could sit out for days before going bad. I drank one glass of water and then downed the next. My stomach was so angry it nearly jumped out of my throat, so I grabbed a pastry and scarfed it down before I ate a few pieces of bread then a couple cookies. Crumbs got everywhere.

Dad was the first one to open his eyes, seeing me brush off the crumbs that got on my shirt and the sheets. He stiffened in the chair and went on high alert. "Lily." He left the chair and sat on the edge of the bed before he pulled me into a hard hug, squeezing me tightly as he rested his chin on my head. His breaths quickened, and I felt the fast beat of his heart through his skin. He held me like that for a long time, his uneven breaths continuing.

"I'm okay, Dad."

It took a while for him to let me go, and when he did, I saw the tears he refused to hide. He opened his mouth to speak, but it seemed too soon for him to form words because he closed it once more.

My mother woke up at the sound of his voice and sat up. "Lily." She hugged me harder than my father and cradled me close. "Thank Riviana." She cupped the back of my head and kissed me on the forehead.

It was a joyous and painful reunion. When my brother came into the room and

hugged me, it was emotional all over again.

“Do you need anything?” Hawk asked.

“Food,” I said. “As much food as you can bring.”

My father would normally chuckle at something like that, but this time, he didn’t.

“I’m on it.” Hawk left the bedchambers.

It turned solemn once more, like I’d died at sea rather than survived to tell the tale. Neither one of them seemed to want to ask because they were afraid of the answer.

My mother spoke first. “They say that storm in the Great Sea was the worst we’ve ever had. When it made landfall in the Southern Isles, lots of homes were destroyed. Your father and Khazmuda were above the clouds, searching for your mind.”

My father stared at me, his eyes carrying the weight of his failure.

“Honestly, it’s good you didn’t find us,” I said. “I don’t think Khazmuda would have been able to escape the winds.”

“We thought the same,” my father said. “So our plan was to get me to you instead.”

It hurt to look my father in the eye because I knew he meant that. He would have helped me sail that ship out of the storm, and if he failed, we would have sunk to the bottom of the ocean together. Now, my eyes started to moisten as I thought about all the pain I’d put him through. “I’m sorry...”

His eyes shifted away like he couldn’t accept my apology right now. “What happened to the crew?”

I'd been so focused on my own survival the last few days, I hadn't thought of them. I hadn't had a chance to grieve or accept what had happened. And now that I was safe and rested, it hit me hard. "I'm the only survivor."

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My mother took a heavy breath. “What happened?”

“We were on our way home when I spotted the storm on the horizon. I told Captain Hartshire that we should get ahead of it and turn west, but he disagreed. A few hours later, we were battling the storm and lost half the crew—including the captain.”

My father said nothing, but spiteful anger was heavy in his gaze.

My mother listened on, mesmerized by the tale.

“We were blown off course and...” This was the part where I should tell my father exactly where we’d ended up, but something made me stop. My eyes flicked away to other parts of the room in expectation of Wrath, God of the Underworld, but he was nowhere to be found. “We hit some rocks... we were stuck there. The way we landed kept us protected from the storm, so that saved us. Once the storm passed, we repaired the ship and headed on our way. But that wasn’t the end of it.”

No, it just got worse.

Both of my parents listened with rapt attention.

“A fleet of warships passed in the night. We raised our sails in the hope they would miss us in the dark, but they spotted us. They boarded our ship, and we fought them off. But then another came. They took me prisoner and killed the others.”

My father’s chin dropped slightly, and his entire face contorted in both anger and disgust.

My mother's face went pale as milk, like she didn't want to hear any more.

I put their misery to rest. "Nothing happened to me. I escaped shortly after they put me in a cell."

My father lifted his chin again, his unease quickly assuaged. "How?"

I still didn't know how. I didn't know what Wrath had done to kill everyone on the ship. "They thought they locked the door, but I noticed it didn't click when they turned the key. I was able to walk out, sneak to the back of the boat, and take one of their sailboats. I dropped it into the water, and they didn't notice me get left behind."

"And you sailed all the way here alone on that little sailboat?" my mother asked incredulously.

I nodded. "The journey took three days. There was no fishing gear in the boat, so I couldn't fish or hunt. There wasn't water either, and of course, it didn't rain so soon after a storm." Telling the story made me relive it, reminded me of everything that had happened to get me here now, safe in my bed with my family. My eyes turned to my father, and his dark eyes were heavy with the weight of sorrow. "I'm still here because of you. I kept that galleon above water because of the storms we faced together. I killed men who boarded our ship and slaughtered a commander who was more beast than a man. And I made it across the ocean in that little boat...because of everything you taught me."

His eyes misted in both pride and pain.

"I'm the only survivor...because of you."

This time, he didn't blink his tears away or redirect his stare. He'd never looked more proud to call me his daughter, never looked more emotional than he did now, like

he'd fulfilled his purpose as a father. "That's my girl."

I stayed in my old bedchambers for a few days until I was fully recovered. When I felt strong enough to go out on my own again, I left the castle and went back to where I'd been living before I left, one of the villas, a private building that was separate from the castle on top of the cliff. It had a spectacular view of the ocean, was near the olive trees in the garden and the mighty oaks that cast long shadows at sunset.

It was a one-bedroom house with a large living room and a kitchen, close enough to the castle that I was near my family, but also far enough away that I had my own privacy as an adult. Six months on my own had made me treasure my independence and privacy, but it also made me appreciate my family more than I had before.

The villa was the perfect compromise.

I cooked my own meals and spent time alone. My parents seemed to understand that I needed space. A lot had happened to me recently. The guys who had shared the galleon had been more than crew members, especially after sailing together for six months. We'd become a strange, dysfunctional family.

I sat at the dining table alone with a hot cup of tea, the fire burning in the hearth for warmth as the sun went down and the cold crept in from the surface of the ocean. I listened to it crackle and burn, saw earth-toned eyes in the red flames.

A knock sounded on the door and shattered my reverie. "It's open." It had to be my mother or father, because a dragon didn't knock. He just barged into my head whenever he felt like it.

My mom opened the door, holding a casserole. "Thought you might be hungry."

"Is it sweet potato casserole?"

She smiled. “Your favorite.”

I patted the surface of the table with my palm. “Have a seat.”

She chuckled then placed it in the center before she sat across from me.

I grabbed two forks from the kitchen then sat down again, eating straight out of the dish because it was just me in this villa. The meal was still warm from being pulled out of the oven, and it practically melted on my tongue the second it was in my mouth.

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My mother watched me eat, motherly affection in her gaze. “I know the final part of your journey didn’t end well, but whatabout everything that came before it? You must have seen some amazing things.”

“We did. We traveled far to the west and found these beautiful, warm beaches. We took a long respite there just because the fruit from the trees was so good. We had been on the verge of getting scurvy, and it cured that really quick. Met other pirates who said they were searching for the treasure of an old king...doubt they’ll ever find it. We also headed far to the north and found snow. I’d never seen that before.”

“I hate the snow.” She grabbed a fork and took a bite.

“I kinda liked it.”

“I’ll take the warm beaches over the cold any day.”

“It was nice to lie by the fire in a cabin and watch the snow fall outside.” While I was there, the rest of the crew had headed into the main city to participate in the Tournament of Cards. Apparently, one of the champions was a snake. I’d stayed behind with Viper, and we’d hardly left that cabin for weeks.

“Sounds cozy.” She took another bite and gave me a look. The kind full of playful accusation. Like she knew something, even though she’d been halfway across the world. “The only thing better than a warm blanket in the cold is a hot man...”

“Mom.” I set down my fork, so red I couldn’t take another bite.

“Just sayin’.” She smirked then took another bite. “So...was there a blanket or a man?”

“Did you really just ask me that?”

“Sweetheart, you’re an adult now. I’m not your mother anymore.”

“You’ll always be my mom, no matter how old I am.”

“Alright, then. Forget I said anything.” She continued to eat.

“No, that’s not what I meant,” I said. “When I was lost out there, all I wanted was Dad to fly through the sky and help me. I’ve been an adult for years now, but there will never be a time when I don’t need you guys for something. When I don’t get scared...or want a sweet potato casserole.”

She dropped her guard and smirked again. “I’m still your mother...even after all these years.”

I heard my father talk about his parents sometimes, his brother Silas. He kept their memory alive. “Well...there was someone else in that cabin.”

Her eyebrows rose, and that knowing smile was back. “You don’t say...”

“His name was Viper.”

“And what was he like?”

“Hot,” I said with a chuckle. “Big and muscular. Strong and silent type.”

“That does sound hot.”

“And he was a vampire.”

She was about to scoop her fork through the casserole when her eyebrows jumped up on her face. “What did you just say?”

I chuckled. “Want to go back to being my mother?”

She ignored what I said. “As in, one of those blood-sucking monsters that feed off humans? That can turn you into a soulless monster?—”

“None of that happened, so we’re good, Mom.”

“Fuck me...” She took a second to compose herself, to let the terror pass by. She had dark hair like I did, and her green eyes had been passed down to me. I had a little bit of my father in my appearance too, but it was subtle. His attributes were mostly in my soul and personality—and my temper.

“It was fun.”

She rolled her eyes. “I bet it was.”

“He didn’t ask me to stay, but he wanted me to stay. Now, I wished I had. If I’d just waited another week, perhaps we would have skipped all that tragedy.” And I wouldn’t have met a god who was both my enemy and my savior.

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“Why didn’t you?”

“I missed home. And I didn’t see it being more than it was.”

“Some men are just for a night—and one man will be forever.”

“Did you have your vampire phase, Mom?”

She quickly shook her head and focused on the casserole again. “Your father is my one and only.”

“Really? You seem more adventurous than that.”

“Well, I was young when I met him.” She kept her eyes on the casserole and scooped another bite. She’d been so excited for information a second ago, but now she seemed withdrawn. “Every love story is different.”

“How did you know he was the one?”

She finished her bite but still took another moment to answer the question. “When I realized he was the first man I could truly rely on. When I knew he would burn down the world and everyone in it just for me.”

It was romantic and violent...and suited my father perfectly. “That’s sweet.”

“I hope you find a man who does the same for you.”

A man in a dark-blue uniform and a black cape appeared in my mind, his stare ruthless, his command unquestionable. Then it disappeared as quickly as it came, like the flicker of a candle. Did I picture that myself...or did I actually see it?

5

LILY

Now that my adventure had ended in tragedy, I wasn't sure what to do next with my life. The idea of setting sail ever again didn't interest me. And I knew my father would forbid me from taking another voyage, at least this soon.

I spent my time in my villa or sitting in the shadow of the oak, looking out at the sea. Sometimes I would go to the royal library and grab a book to read. I read one now, seated by the fire long after the sunset.

I hadn't eaten dinner, but I wasn't in the mood to cook. Sometimes I would help myself to the kitchen in the castle, usually finding something lying around. I would normally eat dinner with my family, but I wasn't in the mood for conversation or cards.

My eyes were on the page of my book, the blanket over me, and then I felt it.

The presence of another.

My eyes hesitated before they lifted from the parchment, spotting the enormous man standing in my dining room, scanning the details of my accommodations before his dark eyes found mine. He was kingly in his uniform and cape, his sword across his back like he was prepared for a battle that he was already guaranteed to win.

He stared at me for several hard seconds before he stepped into the sitting room, two

couches and one armchair around a coffee table on a plush rug. The ceiling was high, twenty feet in the air, far above his tall stature.

My fingers absent-mindedly shut the book. My eyes didn't leave his.

"You didn't tell him."

A shiver ran down my spine when I heard his voice. It came from a stranger, but it was pleasant on my ears like it came from a friend...or someone more intimate. Bumps appeared on my skin even though I was perfectly warm with my blanket. My breaths had been so calm, and now they were erratic from the unease.

He took a seat in the armchair, his spine perfectly straight with his rounded shoulders, his cape draped over one of the armrests. Knees apart with his hands resting together between his thighs. As with every other time we'd come face-to-face, he barely blinked when he regarded me—as if he might miss something. "Why?"

He really did know everything.

He read my mind. "Just because you don't see me doesn't mean I'm not there."

I wondered if I had ever been alone since I'd arrived at his shores. If he followed me everywhere, stood beside me in silent rooms, watched my father hug me and my mother kiss me. He haunted me—whether I knew it or not.

"Why?" he repeated.

"I don't know," I said honestly. "My father is grateful I'm alive. I don't want to tell him I brought the God of the Underworld home with me."

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“You know what I think?”

My eyes narrowed.

“There’s no way to tell him without incriminating yourself. You did the one thing he asked you not to do.”

“I didn’t do it by choice.”

“But nonetheless, you’ve rekindled an unpaid debt.”

“This debt had nothing to do with you, so why do you care?”

“As God of the Underworld, it’s my job to make sure all debts are paid.”

I sat up, feeling my signature temper flare like a lit torch. “Let me get this straight. You save me from those assholes and get me home—and now you’re back to threatening me again? You told me I was worth saving, but now I’m worth provoking?”

“I’m not provoking you,” he said calmly. “Just reminding you of our predicament.”

“As I said before, my father killed your predecessor, and he’ll kill you too.”

The God of the Underworld smiled, and it somehow felt like a threat. “Yes, he succeeded before. But he had the power of surprise on his side at the time. Not anymore. If he faces me, he will lose his life and his soul.”

This line of conversation made me sick to my stomach. “Talk about my father like that?—”

“I have a proposition for you. A way to repay your father’s debt.”

“I already said I won’t give you my soul.”

“I would never take it—even if you offered.” His smile faded, and the intensity returned to his gaze. “I want you, Lily Rothschild.”

The cool shiver I’d felt moments ago suddenly burned white-hot. I could feel it in my face. Feel it in the numbness in my hands and feet. His words could be interpreted in many different ways, but I was certain I knew how he meant them.

“Do you accept?”

Was I actually considering this? “What are the terms?”

“You’re a smart girl.” The corner of his mouth flicked up in a smile. “Until I’m satisfied.”

“That’s it?” I asked incredulously. “Awfully vague and advantageous.”

“I won’t put a timeline on it, not when time passes differently for me.”

“Does it pass at all if you’re immortal?”

He absorbed the question in silence, seeming to mull it over. “It’s complicated.”

“I need something more concrete than that.”

“Which means you’re receptive.” He looked like a predator once again, the same way he had on the dead island out to sea. His eyes ate me whole.

“You threatened to kill my father, so I don’t have much of a choice.”

“Your father brought this upon himself. He wouldn’t want you to intervene on his behalf. You owe him and me nothing. The proposal I’ve given you is entirely optional.” Through his clothing and his armor, the thickness of his muscles was visible, the distinct bulge in his arms like a cannonball was cradled in his elbow. “But my fire makes yours burn, and yours makes mine grow.”

I had been reckless when I’d bedded a vampire who could have killed me. But screwing the God of the Underworld was a whole different level of recklessness. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

He had a stare more powerful than a dragon’s. His dark eyes reminded me of Khazmuda’s, inherently threatening until he had a reason not to be. But no matter how hostile Wrath seemed to be, he never seemed dangerous. At least, not a danger to me. “That the wildfire that burns between us is mutual. I feel your heat on my face, and I know you feel mine.”

“That’s quite an assumption.”

“Then correct it.”

My heart dropped into free fall and never landed. My balance was compromised, and I was certain that played across my face. My confidence was vanquished, my vulnerability ripped from my soul and put on display.

He didn't gloat. The corner of his mouth didn't rise in a smile. “I had every intention of finishing Bahamut's work when you came to my lands. But I changed my mind after you left—because my desire for you is far greater than my revenge. Take this deal, and I vow to leave your father untouched. Your servitude will pay his debt in full.”

“Servitude...I don't care for that description.”

He didn't rephrase it. Didn't backpedal. Just stared at me.

Wrath had followed me everywhere, had proven to me he had the ability to make good on his word. And I knew it wasn't a lie to trick me, because my father knew about the island for a reason. If I did this, my father would truly be free of his past. He would do anything for me, sink to the bottom of the ocean with me, and I would do anything for him.

Even this.

“We need concrete terms. I won't be tricked into a lifetime imprisonment.”

A sharpness entered his gaze, a hint of excitement.

“I will not give you my life or my soul.”

“I asked for neither of those things.”

“But you’ll try to trick me into it, and I won’t be a fool.”

“The God of the Underworld is never misleading. He says what he means and means what he says. My desire for you is purely of the flesh. I wish you no harm, which has been proven beyond a doubt.”

Because he’d saved me from a horrible fate.

“I want you until I’m satisfied.”

“I said that’s too vague.”

“Then I want ten years.”

“Ten years?”

“As I said, time passes differently for me.”

“You want ten years when you don’t even know if we’ll have chemistry, if the sex will even be good?”

His stare hardened on my face, his confidence intensity crackling like flames in a fire. “If I burn for you across the room, imagine the fiery blaze when I can finally touch you. When I can make you mine.”

The heat he described suddenly emerged within me, a gentle flame that I couldn’t blow out. It burned on and on. “Ten years, regardless of how you experience time, is

way too long. If I meet someone?—”

“You will not meet someone. This is a binding contract, a commitment between the two of us.”

“Then it definitely can’t be ten years.”

“Then we’re back to my previous suggestion—until I’m satisfied.”

“Six months.”

“No.”

“Anything more than that is unreasonable.”

“You forget you’re paying your father’s debt—an enormous one.”

“One year. And that’s the most I’m willing to offer?—”

“No.”

“Then, no deal,” I snapped. “One year of my life is plenty generous.”

Last time he’d gotten angry, he’d suddenly turned into hot ash and brought the underworld to the surface, but he retained his composure. “Then we’ll pursue my previous suggestion—and end it when the time feels right.”

“I already said that was too vague.”

“You also have the power to decide when to end it.”

“I do?”

“Yes.”

“What if I decide to end it in a single day?”

“You won’t.”

My eyes narrowed. “You wanted to lock me into a binding contract a minute ago, and now you’re willing to play it by ear? Why?”

“Because if we agree on a date, it ends on that date even if we want it to continue. But if it remains open, it can continue for as long as we wish.”

“You’re the one deciding all of this, so I don’t understand.”

He'd been still for a while, rigid in place, not even moving to take a breath. "My word is my bond. I have to honor it."

"But you're the one in charge."

"It's complicated." He relaxed back into the armchair for the first time, one ankle resting on the opposite knee, dressed for battle rather than a night in front of the fire. His elbow moved to the armrest, and he absent-mindedly brushed his fingers across his chin, his dark eyes leaving my face for the first time. "We're in agreement?"

"Yes...I think so." I swallowed, unable to believe I'd made a deal with Wrath, God of the Underworld.

His eyes found mine again. "This deal is binding and can't be undone."

"It can, because you said I could end it when I want."

"You have to bed me at least once. That's my final term—and it can't be negotiated."

It was the one loophole I'd found, but he closed it before I could exploit it.

He stared at me for a while, his fair skin untainted by battle or physical hardship, his complexion pristine. He had intention in his gaze, an implied acceptance.

I was as stubborn as a dragon and I should venomously oppose his invitation, but it seemed like a small price to release the invisible shackles on my father's wrists. But if he knew I bedded a monster for his freedom, he would travel to the underworld just to kill him. "Fine."

"Then we're in agreement." He was on his feet instantly and advanced toward me. His leg pressed against the coffee table, and he nudged it across the rug to the side so

he had better access to me on the couch.

I was in shock.

He grabbed the blanket and yanked it off, exposing my legs to the cold air. I was in nothing but a long, baggy shirt and knee-high gray socks.

“You want to do this now?” I yanked the blanket back to cover myself.

His chin was already tilted down, catching a glimpse of my bare legs and my exposed underwear. He seemed to like what he saw because his eyes suddenly had a glaze to them, like sugar sprinkled on a warm cookie. “Yes.”

“Well, I’m not ready.” He’d just sprung this on me, appearing out of thin air on a cold night in my home. I’d signed the contract with my word, and now my predicament was ironclad. But I wasn’t ready to jump in headfirst just yet. “I just need some time.”

He continued to stand before me, not acting on the disappointment he wore on his sleeve. “I’ll come for you tomorrow night.”

“Whoa, that’s still too quick?—”

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He was already gone, disappearing quicker than I could blink.

I stared at the place where he'd been and felt his absence as potently as I'd felt his presence. I pulled the blanket tighter around me as my heart raced in a quiet panic. The fire cracked and popped, and I suddenly felt alone.

I left my villa at first light and followed the trail down the cliff that hugged the kingdom. The sun slowly rose and brought heat to the world, and I enjoyed the long shadows that grew shorter as time passed.

I made it to the wildlands outside the kingdom, where several farmers had relocated to till the fresh soil. It was sparse, without any real protection, but they felt safe in the presence of the dragons that frequently flew overhead.

I reached Poppy Meadow, tall grass mixed with orange poppy flowers in the sunlight. They swayed in the gusts of breeze before they straightened again, the sunshine reflecting off their green stalks.

He was impossible to miss, a black rock in the middle of the bright field.

Like a dog that had found the perfect sun spot, Zehemoth slept quietly on the grass, curled up with his snout near his tail, his wings folded into his body.

When I reached out my mind to feel his, I felt his dullness and knew he was napping. Since this was his favorite spot to soak up the sunshine on his black scales, I knew where to find him.

I joined him on the grass and used my pack as a pillow. I lay beside the large black dragon and listened to him breathe quietly and occasionally snore. My body was warmed in the sunshine, and I felt my mind grow fuzzy in the soft grass. I watched the blue sky and the white clouds, seeing the little birds cross overhead as they sang their song. And then I felt myself drift away, the calm sunshine gone and the storm wild. Water splashed over the edge and struck me in the face. I saw Wrath there and heard his voice in my mind. Because you were worth saving.

I felt scales gently prod my body. Sunieth.

My mind gently came to the surface, the storm quickly replaced by peace. “This spot really is comfy.” I moved my arms over my head and stretched my body, elongating my spine and pointing my toes.

His snout covered my view of the sky, and he rubbed my entire body gently, his mouth big enough to snatch me up into a single bite. This place is a secret—do not share it.

“You told me, so it’s not much of a secret.”

But I tell you everything, Sunieth.

I slid my hands over his smooth scales, slicker than rain-soaked cobblestone. “Alright, I’ll keep my mouth shut.”

There are many grizzlies here. Great for hunting. He withdrew his head and stepped aside so I could have my space to sit up.

“All of you will drive the bears into extinction if you keep this up. How about elk or cows?” I sat up and crossed my legs, feeling the sunshine burn down on me like gentle fire. I squinted whenever I lifted my chin.

The antlers always get in the way. And cows are chewy because they're lazy.

"More than a bear?"

Bears climb mountains and trees. They hunt for their own food. Cows just stand there and graze.

"All good points."

He scooted back then lay on his belly, bringing his chin to the ground so our eyes were level. His were pitch black, and the details were hard to see, except on days like this, when the sunshine brought out the nuances of his eyes, the flecks of gray in the middle, along with the hint of gold right in the center. His eyes had been orange when he was born, but they'd darkened as he'd aged. How are you?

"I'm okay. Getting used to being home."

Home is the one place you should never have to get used to.

"I know, but I was gone for so long. And it's weird to be here, knowing the rest of my crew will never have that privilege. I would join them at the pub and we'd swap stories, but I'm the only one who made it back. Hank had a family...Davin had a fiancée...they all had people they left behind."

Now I understand. Survivor's guilt is what you feel.

"I guess."

My father told me he felt the same way when he escaped the Southern Isles. His mind was stronger than the others, able to eject the mental attack from the enemy. Constantine, the strongest of our kind, succumbed to their forces. My father never

understood why he was lucky and his king was not.

“I guess we’ll never know.”

I’ve wanted to visit you, but my father said you needed space to grieve.

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“You know you’re always welcome to visit me, Zehemoth.” We’d been inseparable since he was born. I was young when he hatched, but I could recall the hazy memory. He grew much quicker than I did, and even when he couldn’t speak my language, we still played together. When he tried to blow out fire and it was just smoke, I would laugh for minutes. He grew bigger, and once he could speak, our friendship was forged like steel. “You’re my best friend.”

His eyes were terrifying to most, but whenever he looked at me, it was with such gentleness. I missed you, Sunieth.

“I missed you too.”

I hope you don’t leave again.

“I don’t think I’ll be going anywhere for a while.”

Because you’re afraid or because you don’t want to?

“I guess both? But I’m not sure what my purpose is now.”

You’re a daughter. A sister. A friend. You have a great purpose.

My eyes softened as I listened to him shower me with love. “I know, Zehemoth. But now, I’m not sure what to do with my life. I thought sailing the seas would be a great adventure, and it was. But because of the way it ended...I’m not sure I could ever go back.”

His dark eyes watched me without blinking, somewhat reminding me of Wrath in that sense. Trees stay in place when they have roots. Seeds spread because they have nothing to keep them in place. You act like a seed, when you're a mighty oak with roots that go back generations.

"What does that mean?"

You have family and friends who love you, so I'm not sure what you're looking for.

"I'm not looking for anything, Zehemoth."

Then perhaps you're running from something.

"What could I be running from?" I asked, trying to keep the offense out of my voice.

He stared at me for a while. Yourself.

"Myself?"

Your father didn't expect you to rule because you're the firstborn. He expected it because you've shown tremendous potential, ever since you were a child. The weight of that responsibility has suffocated you, so you decided to run from it.

My eyes dropped as I swallowed. "And why would I be suffocated by that?"

Because you fear you'll never live up to your father's legacy—the greatest king who's ever ruled the Southern Isles.

I bowed my head because his words stung like salt in an open wound.

You survived the open sea when all others perished. Your strength and resilience go

without question.

“That’s not the whole story...”

Then what is?

The God of the Underworld presented himself to me, haunted me, and then spared me rape and servitude. But I couldn’t tell anyone that, not even Zehemoth, not when it could get back to my father. “There was just a lot of luck involved.”

He blinked. You need a purpose. Let your destiny be your purpose. To be Queen of the Southern Isles, the Dragon Queen, the mightiest and fairest of them all.

“My mother is pretty mighty and fair.”

But she’s not the queen by blood. Only you have the blood of the Rothschilds in your veins.

“I told my father I wasn’t interested, and he accepted that. It’s done.”

Yes, he accepted it. But that doesn’t mean he wanted to.

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“Hawk is an adult now. He’d be a great king.”

But you would be an exceptional queen?—

“Zehemoth.”

He stiffened at my change in tone.

“Did my father put you up to this?”

He raised his head slightly.No.

“Then why are you pushing this so hard?”

Because I’m your best friend. And as your best friend, it’s my job to say the things you don’t want to hear. I meant what I said—that you would be a great queen. And I would be honored to serve as your companion as you defend the Southern Isles and protect my kin as your own people.

My eyes drifted to the blades on the ground, and I plucked one out of the earth then wrapped it around my finger. Another subtle breeze moved through the meadow, catching a few of my strands of hair. “I appreciate your words, Zehemoth. But I’m finished with this conversation.”

I left the dishes in the sink because I didn’t feel like washing them tonight. The bottle of Barsetti wine on the counter was almost empty, so I poured the rest into my glass and took a drink as I walked toward the fire in the living room.

He appeared before me, in nothing but comfortable trousers that hung low on his hips. His bare feet were on my rug, and his bare chest was cast in the glow of the firelight.

“Fuck.” I gave a jolt and splashed the wine across the floor. Almost dropped the glass too.

He didn’t react, as if he expected to startle me. He was bigger than his uniform and armor suggested, a powerful chest that was thick like the walls that protected this kingdom. All the individual muscles of his shoulders and arms were visible in the shadows between the cuts of his physique. And he had thick veins everywhere, rivers all over his earth. His abdomen was tight with the same grooves of muscles, and more veins disappeared beneath the waistband of his trousers.

Still and silent like a statue that stood in the town square, he watched me with his potent stare.

I didn’t rush to clean up the wine, far more focused on the behemoth before me. “You scared the life out of me.” Frazzled, I ran my fingers through my hair then returned the wineglass to the counter. “Why are you here?”

One eyebrow cocked just a touch.

“Shit, I forgot.”

He tilted his head slightly, his stare still intense.

“Sorry, I have a lot on my mind right now.” I shouldn’t apologize to a man who demanded me to sleep with him, but I had made a deal. And he was by far the most ripped, muscular, strong man I’d ever laid eyes on. Viper was one hell of a man, but Wrath... No words. “Come back tomorrow.”

He didn't say anything, but his eyes looked furious. "I was already patient once. I won't be again."

"Well, that's too fucking bad." I turned away from him and opened the cabinet that housed the wine bottles. I grabbed a Bordeaux before I carried it to the counter and tried to pull out the cork, but it was a stubborn son of a bitch that wouldn't come free.

Wrath joined me at the counter and took over, removing the cork effortlessly like he'd done it a hundred times. He left the bottle on the counter then turned his full attention on me once more, a tree that loomed over me.

I didn't look directly at him. I was in my loose t-shirt and my knee-high socks again, but this time, I didn't care that I was on display. I pulled my wineglass close and tipped the bottle to pour the aromatic contents, the hint of stone fruit and olive.

He continued his angry stare.

I took a drink then licked my lips, feeling his eyes hot on my cheek.

"What troubles you?" The anger wasn't audible in his voice, not obvious like it'd been in his gaze.

"I thought you knew everything."

"I had other matters that required my attention today. To you, it's been a day, but for me, it's been a week since I last saw you."

"How does that work?" I took another drink of the wine.

He pulled the wineglass from my hand and set it aside. "Tell me what makes your eyes grow callous."

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I wouldn't share my thoughts and feelings with a man only I could see. If anyone watched me through the window, they would think I'd gone insane. "I said come back tomorrow."

"I will, but I still want to know your sorrow."

I finally turned to look at him directly.

He showed no hint of anger or resentment. Just a distant hint of concern.

"Why?"

He pivoted his body toward me, casting a shadow over me as he blocked the fire. It was the closest he'd been to me since we'd met in his lands, far to the west. He didn't touch me, but he was so close that it felt like his hands were all over me. "The same reason I saved you."

My breathing was different when he was near. It was either the potential danger...or the fact that he was the single most breathtaking man I'd ever seen. It made sense he was so beautiful since he was an immortal god with powers that I didn't understand. And he took pity upon me—a mortal.

I was the first one to look away. "I got into an argument with my best friend. He said some things I didn't want to hear."

He remained right beside me, his presence formidable and comforting at the same time. Instead of smelling like most men, pine and the outdoors with a hint of sweat,

he smelled like smoke from a fire, ash that still burned hot. It was subtle and delicate but made me think of the outdoor fires I'd built with my father when we explored the wilderness for a week. "And what were those things?"

I pulled my wineglass closer to me across the counter before I stepped away, walking around the statue of a man to the dining table. I took a seat, still smelling the soup that I'd whipped up from what I found in the garden.

When I looked over, expecting to see Wrath across the room in the kitchen, he was already seated in front of me, as if he'd left and reappeared before I noticed. With elbows on the table, his arms big like melons that matured in the summer season, he looked at me, his knuckles distinct, his hands big.

"Would you like some wine?"

"I don't care for it."

"Because you drink the souls of innocents?" I teased...somewhat.

His stare didn't change, rock hard like the rest of him. "What were those things?" he repeated, maintaining his interest as if he actually cared.

Maybe he did. "Since I'm the firstborn, my father raised me to be his successor as Queen of the Southern Isles. Ever since I could walk, he had been teaching me how to survive, how to fight, and how to navigate by the stars. Six years ago, I told him I didn't want it. That I wanted to sail the world and see distant places."

He listened more intently than any man had ever listened to me, with razor-sharp focus, hanging on every word as if it was as important as the previous one. As if I was about to reveal the details of a hidden treasure that had been lost to humankind for centuries.

“But Zehemoth thinks I’m just running away from my responsibility.”

He didn’t ask who Zehemoth was. Perhaps he already knew. “Are you?”

“I—I don’t know. I guess...”

His sharply intelligent eyes watched me with the colored tones of the earth, rich and dark in their hue. His joined hands came together against his chin and bottom lip. “I felt your presence on my shores. Felt the Rothschild blood in your veins. I also felt your power and your mystique. When I first came upon you, I assumed I would face Talon Rothschild’s son—but I met his daughter instead. In the armor of a king and with a sword a woman so petite shouldn’t be able to carry.” He stopped, eyes locked on mine like he was remembering our encounter with great detail. “Carrying a powerful confidence as a shield and eyes so ruthlessly intelligent it made me second-guess my own prowess. Every man who crosses my path cowers in fear—except you.”

My fingers rested on the top of my wineglass. I wanted to drop my gaze and look at the surface of the table, but there was a magnetism to his stare that locked me in place.

“I watched you command the galleon as a captain. I watched you evade a fleet of warships with every intention of sinking you to the ocean floor. In the shadows that none alive can pierce, I watched you slaughter men like a farmer slaughters sheep. I watched you destroy a man thrice your size. I knew Talon Rothschild had trained his daughter to take his place, and he trained her well. I didn’t meet a woman who lost her way—but a queen on her path to greatness.”

I felt a flush of heat up my neck, a coldness down my spine. The weight of responsibility that I thought I shed had returned to my shoulders, and it was heavier than before. I suddenly felt breathless when I hadn’t moved in minutes. My eyes

dropped to the wineglass where my fingers rested, needing a break from the confidence of a god.

“You insult the crown by not taking it.”

My fingers traced the rim, remembering the night I’d told my father I didn’t want the responsibility he carried so effortlessly. He’d smiled and supported me, but I’d seen the disappointment deep behind his eyes.

“Lily Rothschild.”

My eyes flicked back up to his at the command in his voice.

“Why do you deny your birthright? Why do you deny what you’ve rightfully earned?”

We’d barely exchanged a few words, but he had been there with me when I’d survived my greatest challenge, and that created a sense of closeness I couldn’t explain. But even so, I didn’t know why I shared so much with him when I rejected Zehemoth’s concern. “You may think I’ve earned it, but I’m not sure I agree.”

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His eyes narrowed slightly, his hands lowering to the table and exposing his hard chest once again. The strongest man I'd ever seen, nothing but tight skin over muscle, not a hint of anything else anywhere.

“The Southern Isles was taken by a maniacal tyrant. He imprisoned its people, the dragons, and poisoned the lush earth. Against all odds, my father slayed the evil king and took back the lands that belonged to him. He freed the dragons and rehabilitated our people and these lands back to their pristine perfection.” My mother had shared the story with me when I was young, and it hit me so deeply. I realized my father was more than the man who raised me, but the greatest king this world had ever known. At every age, I noticed the way people respected him, not because they had to, but because they truly revered him. He was a man of integrity, faithful to my mother when other kings would have strayed. He put his people before himself, protected the dragons as his own kin. “My father is a great man, greater than I'll ever be. I'll only live in his shadow, and if evil ever marched on these shores, I'm not sure if I have the strength or the resilience to protect it or avenge it the way he has.”

Wrath wore no expression as he listened, eyes hard as he absorbed what I'd been too ashamed to share with Zehemoth. My best friend would never think less of me, would tell me how great I was and make me feel special, but I didn't deserve his praise. He loved me for me, whether I was the victor or the vanquished. But I decided to share with Wrath instead, and I wasn't sure why. “I've witnessed your valor and bravery firsthand. If there had been a way to save your crew, you would have done so, even to your own detriment. If someone challenged your kingdom and your people, I have no doubt that you would fight them until the bloody end. Mortals don't share the valor and bravery you wore like a flag. They're selfish and cowardly. When I laid eyes upon you, I knew you were a woman who would be remembered for centuries—and

that was why I saved you. You are not your father.” He stared, eyes flicking back and forth between mine. “You’re more.”

My eyes immediately darted away at his words, words that were too hefty for me to accept.

“And it’s the reason I want you so deeply.”

6

LILY

I sat across from Jean in The Fiery Dragon, a pub in the center of the kingdom. I watched him with shrewd eyes and waited for him to take his turn.

Decades older than me, he stared down at his hand and tried to figure out his next move.

“The sun is going to rise by the time you make a decision.”

His irritated eyes flicked up to mine. “You can’t intimidate me, Lily.”

“Not trying to intimidate you. Trying to rush you.” My hand kept my cards flat on the surface, so there was no chance he or anyone behind me could read my hand.

He stared at me a moment longer before he grabbed his coins and tossed them into the center of the table.

“Ooh, tough guy.” I grabbed my coins and pushed them into the center as well.

Across the bar, I noticed a quick commotion, everyone moving away from the door.

Two groups of men at nearby tables grabbed their tankards and quickly vacated their seats. My eyes narrowed then spotted the man who emerged through the parting of the crowd.

My father.

He was dressed in his normal clothes, a long-sleeved black shirt that was tight on his arms and black trousers. Even when he didn't wear the uniform with the family crest in the center, everyone knew exactly who he was. Statues were erected in the town square in his honor. Artists painted his picture and hung them in their restaurants and establishments. Revered and adored by all.

His eyes found mine, and he gave a slight smirk.

“We ain't got all day, kid,” Jean rapped his knuckles on the surface of the table.

There were several open seats at the bar because at least a dozen men moved out of my father's way. He took a seat and was immediately given service. A tankard of beer was presented to him like they'd already had it ready when he walked inside. He took a drink then turned to me, leaning against the corner and watching the game as a spectator.

I realized that Jean had put more money into the pot, like he had a good hand or wanted me to believe such. I met his bet but didn't exceed it, making him believe that I was only trying to keep his pace. “Moment of truth.”

He tossed his cards on the table, having a full suit. That meant he had one of each card, the dragon, the king, the bear, and the elf. He smirked like there was no way I could possibly beat that.

I tossed my cards onto the table. I had four dragons—the highest hand.

His face immediately became crestfallen.

“I’m in a charitable mood, so I’ll split the pot with you.”

“I don’t need your charity.” He swiped his hand across the surface of the table and sent the coins across the floor. He knocked over his beer too, then walked off.

“Sore loser.”

My father left his seat then kneeled on the floor to pick up all the coins my opponent had tossed aside. I helped him, and others immediately joined in because my father was the last person who should pick up anything.

We made a stack on the table, and my father grabbed his beer before he took the vacated seat. “That’s a lot of coin. What are you going to do with it?”

“Buy more beer.”

He smirked.

“Probably donate most of it to the orphanage. I wanted to grab a few things at the market tomorrow.” I lived on the castle grounds and ate dinner with my family sometimes, but I carried on an independent life. Earned my own money gambling or finding work in the village. Sometimes, I harvested crops with the farmers, and other times, I picked up a few shifts at a local pub serving beer to its patrons. I’d thought I would find more treasure than I could handle on my journey as a pirate, but I’d ended up losing everything instead.

My father told me the royal treasury was open to me for whatever I needed, but he never pushed it on me. He seemed to respect the fact that I wanted to take care of myself, and he never suggested it again.

“How did you know I was here?”

“Zehemoth said you were playing cards tonight. Assumed this was the place.”

“You wanna play a hand?” I scooped the cards into a pile in the center of the table then shuffled them. “No bets, of course.”

My father took a drink from his tankard then licked the foam off his lips. “Let’s go.”

We played a couple hands, the two of us quiet most of the time. My father was an unpredictable player without obvious tells. And he knew me well enough to read my tells easily. We were evenly matched.

“How are you?” he asked after he got his second beer. “Haven’t seen you in a while.”

“Just getting used to home.” I traded some of my cards for new ones then glanced at my hand before I covered it once more.

My father did the same. “Winter shouldn’t be here so soon, but I think it’s upon us.”

“Yeah.” I felt the chill in the evenings. The days were mild but had a cool crispness. Flowers were absent, and the trees were already withered. “That storm was severe.”

“I suspect it’ll be a difficult winter.”

“Will you reduce tariffs?”

“I think I’ll remove them entirely.”

“Really? You’ve never done that before.”

“Because I think this will be the harshest winter we’ve had in a long time.” He set his hand down for me to see.

I put mine down, and he beat me.

He seemed to be finished playing because he didn’t pile the cards in the center. He grabbed his tankard by the handle and took a drink. When he emptied the contents, he set it to the side, and without his asking, the waitress brought another.

My father always felt so much older to me, but now that we were almost the same age in appearance, it felt strange. We looked more like brother and sister than father and daughter. Being fused with Khazmuda had frozen him in youth, barely thirty. We were still six years apart, but that gap was growing thin.

“When I was your age, we had a winter that eclipsed both fall and spring. Toward the end, we were sustaining off onions since those were the only things we had left. My father not only lifted tariffs and taxes for that season, but the entire year, so everyone would have time to recuperate their losses.”

“You were eating onions too?”

“Yes,” he said. “My father believed the best way to rule the people was to be one of the people. So, when they suffered, we suffered too. When they thrived, we thrived. It was the best way to understand and anticipate the needs of the kingdom as a whole.”

“Is that why you don’t eat onions?” I noticed he never had them in stew. They were never prepared in our cooked meals. When we were served salads, only his plate wouldn’t have sliced onion.

“Yes.” He smiled at the memory. “I’ve had my share.”

“Well, hopefully that doesn’t happen again.”

“I’d rather eat whatever Khazmuda catches than that.”

“Like bear?” I asked in surprise.

“I’ve had it a couple times. Not so bad.”

I took a drink from my tankard, wanting to taste the beer and stop thinking about onions and bear. I thought about the warm islands where the air was always moist, when there was always warmth all year-round. Traveling there for the winter didn’t sound so bad...if it were closer. “How have you been?”

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He paused before he answered. “Good.” He had dark eyes that reminded me of Wrath’s. Dark like the earth after a heavy rain, almost the color of mud. There was an emptiness to his gaze, something he hid from me.

“You don’t sound good.”

The corner of his mouth lifted in a smile, but it didn’t reach his eyes. He remained mired in subtle despair. “I just worry about you.”

“I’m okay, Dad.”

“Physically, yes. But you’re different.”

“New places and new experiences change a person.”

“But I see the shadow of grief on your face. I see the burden of emotion. I wish I could help you carry it.” His pained eyes looked into mine with unconditional love, his heart on his sleeve.

“I’ll be okay, Dad. It just takes time.” Time to accept the fact that I would live while the others would be eaten by fish and their bones would litter the ocean bed for eternity. I couldn’t save them.

He gave a slight nod.

“I knew what I signed up for when I left.” I didn’t quite expect all those terrible things, but I had been prepared to face them when they hit me head on. “I just wish I

wasn't the only one who made it back."

"It wasn't your fault. The fault lies with Captain Hartshire when he ignored your pleas."

"He didn't do it on purpose." He didn't want his whole crew to end up dead—including himself. "He made a mistake. It happens."

His eyes softened. "I'm glad you got that from your mother."

"What?"

"Empathy. I've never had much of it."

"But you're so kind."

He smirked, amusement entering his gaze. "To you."

I knew of his heroism and his victories and nothing else. It was hard to imagine him being ruthless when he was always so giving to his family and his people. "Who have you been unkind to?"

"A lot of people."

"That's hard to imagine."

His eyes moved elsewhere, and he brought his new tankard closer. "I was a different person than I am now. I was angry—really angry."

Because his uncle killed his family and took his kingdom. That would piss anyone off. "I can't even imagine." If someone came to the Southern Isles and murdered

everyone I loved right before my eyes...

“I’m glad you don’t know that anger—and hopefully never know it.”

“Yeah, me too.”

He took a drink of his pint then turned quiet for a while. His gaze settled elsewhere, like he thought of different matters. But then his eyes came back to me, his expression sharper. “I hate to broach this subject. I wanted to give you some time before I brought up the incident, but it’s something we need to discuss.”

Was he going to ask if I’d traveled to the forbidden island to the west? If I’d disobeyed his wishes and encountered a vengeful god? My heart was just seconds from exploding. If he looked me in the eye and asked for the truth, I wouldn’t be able to lie.

“You said the men who killed your crew were on a fleet of warships. As the protector of the Southern Isles, I need to know everything you can recall.”

I tried not to look too relieved because the topic was still serious. “Honestly, I can’t recall much. It all happened so fast. But they were men no different from you and me. But their ships were made of gold.”

“Made of gold...” He said the words slowly, like he couldn’t believe what I said.

“Not entirely. But I could see frescoes of gold on the sides of their hull. See it in their railings. At the top of the crow’s nest. A very obscene display of wealth for a ship that could easily get lost at sea.”

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His eyes were focused on my face, but he didn't seem to be looking at me. His thoughts were elsewhere, in the past or far away on the sea. "And you know nothing else?"

"The man who locked me in the cell was called Bear... That's it."

"Bear."

"Yeah."

"And how did you escape?"

I'd already told him this. "He left the door unlocked. I snuck to the back of the ship and left."

He continued to stare at me, looking like an opponent in a card match. Trying to see my tells. Trying to determine if I bluffed or if I should fold.

Did he know I was lying?

"Do you think they would have searched for you?"

"Even if they wanted to, it was dark and I was on a little boat." No way they would have been able to find me. And they probably wouldn't want to after Wrath killed everyone on board.

"You don't know where they were going or where they came from?" he asked.

“No.”

“How many ships?”

“Hard to know for sure, but probably ten.”

“Ten galleons,” he said more to himself than me. “That’s a lot of men.”

“Yeah.”

“The world is a big place. Not all matters pertain to us. But it’s smart to be aware. Pirates and sailors sell goods at our ports and our markets. Word travels far across the world. I’m sure many people are aware of the kingdom on the sea with an army of dragons. Any ambitious man would want that, and I almost couldn’t judge them for it.”

“Even if they come for us, they’re no match for us. We have the advantage of the cliffs, and we have the dragons.”

“The moment you assume you’re invincible, you become vulnerable,” he said. “I’ve never heard of goldenships. Hopefully this matter doesn’t concern us, that whatever their ambitions are have nothing to do with us, but it’s best to remain cautious.”

I’d been home for weeks now, and unfamiliar ships hadn’t been sighted from our shores. If they were going to follow me, it would have happened already.

“I’ll increase the perimeter of our scouts. And I’ll ask my sailors and pirates if they know anything about this fleet of golden ships.”

For those moments, my father was no longer my dad, but King of the Southern Isles, the protector of humans and dragons. He did it effortlessly, without panic and only

with caution. “We’ve had decades of peace. I’m sure that will continue.”

“Hopefully,” he said noncommittally.

“Why are you so doubtful?”

“Because men are all the same.” He said it with resignation and without elaboration.

“But you aren’t,” I reminded him.

It looked like he might smile, but he never did. That emotion never broke through.

“You worked so hard to retake the Southern Isles decades ago, but it seems like you don’t want the job anymore.”

“What makes you say that?” His eyes focused on mine.

“Well, you’ve been training me my entire life to take over.”

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He turned quiet, the awkward subject broached for the first time in years. After our conversation at the dinner table on a dark night in distant memory, we'd never discussed it again. He only supported my pirating ventures. "I love this place. I love these people. I want to know it's in good hands when I'm gone."

"If you're gone."

He stared.

"You're fused with Khazmuda and granted eternal life. We look more like siblings than father and daughter. You speak of your demise like it's certain, when you're the most powerful king in the world. None other can say they have an army of a hundred dragons that are loyal to him and him alone."

"The world is a big place, Lily. To overestimate yourself is to underestimate your enemy," he said. "And when I'm gone doesn't necessarily mean by death. It also means the day when it's appropriate for me to step aside and let someone take my place."

"But if you live forever, why would anyone take your place?"

He sat forward, as if he wanted to make sure no one else heard us speak. "Because that would make me a dictator, Zunieth."

"Dad, everyone loves you?—"

"Because most of our people were alive when I saved them from tyranny. But as the

generations pass, they'll only know the stories...and stories fade. There may come a day when the people demand someone new. No man should live forever, and to impose an eternal rule because I've been blessed with immortality feels wrong."

My father was the smartest and bravest man I knew, but he was oblivious to his own qualities. Most men were arrogant and assumed they should rule forever. But he was humble enough to question whether he should.

He grabbed his tankard and took a drink before he directed his stare elsewhere in the bar. Now would be the time to revisit my interest in the position, but he never pressed it. He accepted my decision without question.

That meant a lot to me. "It's ironic that you say all of this, because the reason I've never wanted to succeed you is because I'm unworthy."

His eyes shifted to me first before he turned his head. He cocked his head slightly, narrowed his eyes like he didn't catch what I said. "In what way?"

"I've grown up hearing the tales of your bravery. Of the day you returned to the Southern Isles and banished evil from these lands. The way you rescued the dragons because of your undying love for Khazmuda. The way you avenged your family and freed the people your family has ruled for generations. Mom told me about the battle at Riviana Star, how you saved the Great Tree from the invasion of evil. I don't have an ounce of that kind of strength."

I could see a glaze over his eyes, and a heavy moment of silence passed in which he just stared at me. "You're wrong." Love burned in his eyes, a mix of pride and affection in his deep stare. "You're your mother's daughter, the bravest woman I've ever known. She may not wield a sword and fight in wars, but her resilience is harder than any shield I've carried. And you're your father's daughter, brave and fierce with zero tolerance for bullshit. Put those together...and you have the most extraordinary

human I've ever met." He swallowed. "I will not ask you to take the crown if you don't want it. I will not be disappointed if you walk your own path, because your life is yours to live. But if you think you're unqualified for the job, you couldn't be more wrong."

"You don't understand the shadow that you cast?—"

"And you don't understand that you're the sun."

My eyes dropped when he paid me the greatest compliment.

"My objectivity isn't masked by love. I've witnessed your potential since birth. Your reign would eclipse mine. The people would sleep soundly knowing you guard their lives and nurture their happiness. If I believed you were unfit for the position, I would tell you."

"You would?"

"Yes." He said it without doubt. "I would help you work toward it, but until you proved yourself worthy, I wouldn't hand it to you."

"What about Hawk?" I asked. "Do you think he's fit?"

My father didn't answer straightaway. His eyes drifted away for a moment before they returned. "My son has many admirable qualities. He's inherited my strength but not my humility. I fear he would become drunk on power and abandon his responsibilities as he pursued other interests."

I couldn't believe he told me the truth.

"Does he know this?"

He gave a nod. “We’ve spoken about it. Has been a source of tension for us the last few years.”

I had no idea. “Are you helping him improve?”

“In some ways. But his limitations are more about his attitude and mind, and those are attributes I can’t easily fix. I believe life experience is what he needs. He would be better suited as a general because his prowess in battle is unquestioned. Like most young men, he’s only interested in women, wealth, and pints.”

My brother and I didn’t really talk about stuff like that. He conducted himself differently in my presence.

“But you have so much depth. Bottomless.”

7

LILY

I tossed the bag of coins onto the table when I walked inside the villa. With an audible clank, they smacked against the surface and slid across the wood. It was cold inside the villa because the fire had been out all day, so I tossed some logs into the hearth before I lit it ablaze.

I walked into my bedroom and changed into the clothes I preferred to wear around the house, linen shirts that were several sizes too big and fit like a dress with my knee-high socks. When I returned to the living room, I gave a sudden jerk.

Wrath.

Dressed as he'd been the night before, he was in nothing but those low-hanging trousers, a thick vein protruding from the tight skin. The veins were distinct over his arms too, as well as the backs of his hands. He stared at me with a hint of ash in his eyes—like he was furious.

“Why are you mad?—”

“Because I want you.”

I entered the living room and stepped closer to him, the firelight hitting the corners and casting shadows. The air was cold, and it would take a while for it to feel cozy again. I stopped feet away from him, feeling his powerful aura like heat from the sun.

I felt his desperation even though he was a man who never had to be desperate for a woman. “I don’t know what the underworld is like, but I imagine you could have anyone you want.”

“I want you.” He stepped closer to me, but he didn’t touch me. His eyes were anxious and angry and full of yearning. A few feet stretched between us, but I could feel his heat like he was the fire in the hearth. “And only you.”

My pulse quickened in my neck, and I could feel it just beneath the skin. My villa had felt cold a moment ago, but now it was warm from the searing heat of his desire. I had plenty of experience with men, but with Wrath, I suddenly felt like a virgin who didn’t know what to do or where to begin.

He came nearer, bringing his face close to mine, his chin dipped so he could look at me. “Do not fear me.” He touched me for the first time, sliding his hand into my hair and pulling it from my face.

A flush spread through my body, a desire that exploded from my core. I’d walked in the door with my thoughts focused elsewhere, but the touch of his palm against my neck made me think of only him. “I don’t.”

He gently swiped his thumb over my cheek, starting at the corner of my mouth before he moved it to the top of my cheekbone. He looked into my eyes like he was mesmerized by their color. With arms bigger than my head and shoulders thicker than the walls that built this villa, he touched me with unexpected gentleness.

His eyes moved down to my lips, and he stared at them next, cradling my head differently like he had full control over my body. His fingers stilled in my hair, his stare hungry. Then he dipped his head and kissed me, his mouth landing on mine with the softness of dew on a spring morning.

Our mouths paused against each other, his burning heat transferring to my lips and setting me on fire. Then he kissed me again, just as slowly, and again. He dug his fingers into my hair, and he handled me with a tenderness that I didn't expect.

My hand moved to his wrist, and I gripped him, feeling the veins on his skin, the heat he produced through his flesh when I wasn't sure if he was actually alive or dead.

His pace abruptly changed. His mouth took mine with the demand of a god, and he devoured my mouth like it would feed his tainted soul. He hooked his other arm around the small of my back, and he squeezed me into him like I wasn't close enough. His breath was warm, and his tongue swiped with perfectly timed precision. He kissed me with the experience of a man who kissed a lot of women...but somehow made me feel like the only one who mattered.

I didn't expect to get lost so quickly. Didn't expect to feel my body begin to drift as if weightless. I cupped his cheek and felt the coarseness of his shadowed jawline. I felt the hard bones underneath his skin, felt a vein down his neck. I shared with him like he was more than a stranger, but I didn't expect our physical union to be as seamless.

He was strong enough to lift me into him with a single arm and carry me into my bedroom. The room was cold because it was the farthest from the main fireplace. I had a small hearth in the corner but didn't often light it. The light from the fire in the sitting room barely reached it, a golden glow spilling across the bed.

He laid me down on the duvet before he righted himself at the foot of the bed. He dropped his trousers and had nothing underneath—except his manhood. Plump and thick, it was ready for me from just a kiss.

I tried not to stare, but I'd never seen anything like it.

He climbed on top of me on the bed and reached underneath my shirt to grab my

panties. He tugged it over one hip then forced it over the other, moving quickly, like he was too anxious to slow down.

He left my socks on and went for my top, pulling the baggy shirt free so my tits were exposed to the cold air. He stopped to look at me when I was bare to him, his dark eyes drinking me in to appreciate my body.

He dipped his head and kissed my neck then my collarbone, slowly moving down and kissing the valley between my breasts. He was a mountain over me, big enough to cast a shadow without sunlight. When he kissed my belly, I expected him to come back to my mouth, but he continued to go south.

All the way south.

I was always groomed because I didn't know when a heated moment would occur, so I was ready for him. His big arms hooked behind my thighs, and he pressed his face right into my flesh, kissing me just the way he kissed my mouth.

I sucked in a breath between my teeth, arched my back the second I felt his hard mouth against my soft flesh. I gasped again as the kiss continued, feeling him kiss me better than I could teach a man. "Oh..."

His kiss was aggressive but purposeful, and he applied hard pressure like he wasn't afraid to hurt me. It was so much contact that it made me whimper, so much unexpected pleasure at once.

He didn't move to a new place on my body. He stayed between my thighs, either because that was his destination or because it was obvious how much I enjoyed his being there.

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My hips rocked into his face, my spine continued to straighten and arch, and then I dug one of my hands into his dark hair and moaned again. The room was still cold, but now I didn't feel it, not when he made me sweat with just his kiss.

I felt the sun on the horizon, felt the burn deep inside my core. It happened so fast, and it happened with the God of the Underworld. I should feel disgusted by this proposition, coerced into a form of indentured servitude, but now that it was happening before my eyes, it felt completely different.

I cupped the back of his head and continued to writhe into him, wanting more of what he had already generously given. I burned hotter and hotter, exploded into an inferno, and then cried out as I came, arching my back toward the ceiling and feeling the tears squeeze out of my eyes. My hips bucked on their own, and despite the way I shifted and moved uncontrollably, he continued to work his magic.

My body relaxed a moment later, and the tears dripped down my cheeks.

Once I was finished, he moved up my body, his thick arms spreading me open as he made himself at home between my thighs. He was an enormous man, our proportions a contradiction to each other, but he didn't seem dissuaded by my relative petiteness.

I hadn't been ready for this moments ago, but now I ached.

With his arms tucked behind my knees and my body stretched into the position that he wanted, he guided his head to my entrance and gently pushed, lubricated by the kisses he'd already planted there.

I didn't know how we were going to make this work. It was like sheathing a two-handed blade in the scabbard of a dagger.

But he pushed gently over and over, stretching my flesh and my folds and making room for himself to plunge inside me. He was a cliff of rocks above me, chiseled and hard even at this angle, and his eyes watched mine dance as he entered me.

I couldn't open my legs any wider to make this work. My body was forced to accept him by his command. I breathed through the pain of the stretch, moaned several times and then winced immediately afterward.

When he was settled within me, he held himself still, dipping his head slightly over me.

My hands went to his chest and then his shoulders, feeling just how hard he was, how big he was...how gorgeous he was.

His eyes looked over me, contorted as far as possible to take him, and then he lowered his head to kiss me. A wet kiss with breath and tongue, packed with desire and possession. When he pulled away, he started to thrust, giving me deep and even strokes from the start, hitting the back of my channel every time.

Every stroke hurt...but felt so damn good.

The muscles of his hard stomach flexed and shifted with his movements. His big arms looked even bigger holding up his immense weight on top of me. His eyes were dark in their desire, and he looked at me like a possession he'd claimed in his name.

Just the sight of him was the biggest turn-on.

He kept up the same pace with his movements, his enormous dick hitting me over and

over, the sound of my arousal coating his length audible with every thrust. My cream built up at the base of his dick as his pelvic bone rubbed into my clit. He was so hard inside me that he must have been close to release, but he didn't have to edge himself. He didn't have to stop and kiss me for a break. He continued like he was an expert at keeping his ammunition in the cannon.

I didn't feel rushed to come like I sometimes did with other guys. Some of them didn't wait for me to go first, so I had to take what I could get before the opportunity was gone. But I could tell that this ride would only stop when I wanted it to stop. I'd already had my release, but now I wanted to release like this, with him deep inside me, a god between my legs. "I'm almost there..." I planted my hands on his chest, and I felt my body press into the mattress over and over from his weight and his thrusts.

He increased his pace, shoving his fat dick inside me with more frequency and rubbing my clit harder.

The flush of heat that came over me was greater than the last time, a fire that licked my skin and made me melt. Smoke came from my eyes because the flames were so intense. I felt myself combust around him. My hips tried to thrust into the inferno, but they were pinned in place by his powerful arms. Another round of tears burned my eyes and streaked down my cheeks. It was hard for me to release more than once. It only happened when I was particularly charged and the circumstances were right.

Wrath seemed to be the right circumstance.

I dug my nails into his arm as I finished, swept away in a crescendo that was infinitely better than the first.

Before I was completely done, I watched him release. He'd been inaudible the entire time, focused solely on me and our union, but the sexiest moan escaped his lips, and

his skin immediately darkened as ash appeared in patches across his flesh. The cords in his skin deepened like taut rope, and he gave his final pumps inside me, moaning again when he gave me his desire.

It was not until after the satisfaction had passed that I realized what I'd done—slept with Wrath, God of the Underworld.

And I liked it.

When I woke up, the hearth in my room was lit with a small fire. Shadows danced on the walls, and the curtains to the bedroom window had been drawn closed. I opened my eyes and blinked several times as I stared at the fire, unsure whether it was night or day.

I adjusted my position in bed and felt the hardness beside me.

I wasn't alone.

I looked at the naked man next to me, his head propped on the pillow, his eyes on me like he'd been staring awhile. I didn't jerk away like I did when he caught me by surprise. I held my breath for a second then released it. "I—I didn't expect you to still be here."

He took up most of the bed, and he was the reason the sheets were heated, not because of the fire. "Do you want me to leave?" The sheets were bunched at his waist like he was warm from the flames. But his eyes were cold—as always.

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I turned on my side and faced him, pulling the sheet to my shoulder to fight the cold. “No.”

The hardness faded, not turning soft, but not callous either.

“I just thought you would leave after you got what you wanted.”

His stare continued, slowly sharpening. He removed his arm from behind his head and turned on his side, his large body blocking the window from my sight. “I haven’t gotten what I wanted—not even close.” He slid his hand under the sheets and grabbed the back of my thigh before he hooked it over his hip, bringing our bodies close together. My socks were still on, so I couldn’t feel the backs of his legs with the pads of my toes. But I could feel his warmth against my inner thigh, feel his hard muscle from thigh and ass. He was all man, from head to toe.

I could also feel his hard length against my stomach because it was impossible to ignore. It was practically a branch from a fallen tree, thick like a trunk. It radiated its own heat against my flesh.

He was rock hard like he wanted me, but he didn’t initiate another round. He shared my pillow, and he moved his big hand up my soft thigh to my ass. His fingers gripped the muscle and gave it a gentle squeeze.

“Did you start the fire?” I whispered.

He brought me closer to him, my tits almost touching his mountain-like chest. “You were cold.”

“I’m definitely not cold now.” I had the fire against my rear and his flames against my front. It was the most relaxed I’d been with him, the most peace I’d felt since before I’d left on my journey. Wrath was the only one who knew what I’d endured because he was there, keeping me going every step of the way. “What did you do to the men on that ship?”

He moved his hand to my lower back, and his fingers gently grazed my soft skin.

“How did you help me get away?” I pressed.

“There are dangerous things that live in the deep. I commanded one of them to destroy all those on board—except for you.”

“How—how did you do that?”

“I’m God of the Underworld and King of the Dead. I can command any corpse to rise and fulfill my orders.”

“Are you saying the creature that attacked the ship was dead?”

“Yes.”

That was not what I expected.

“A kraken.”

“What is that?”

“A giant squid.”

“I’ve never heard of anything like that.” And I’d sailed the seas for six months.

“Then consider yourself lucky.”

None of the sailors had mentioned it either. Perhaps they were just too afraid to talk about it, like it might overhear their words. “I can touch you, and you can touch me. But you didn’t reveal yourself to others in my company. Didn’t raise your sword and fight when I needed your aid.”

“You didn’t need my aid—not until the end,” he said. “And it doesn’t work that way. I don’t interfere with the living, only the dead.”

“Raising a giant octopus to kill everyone on a ship doesn’t count as interference?” I asked incredulously.

A slight smirk moved over his lips. “I didn’t directly interfere. I can touch you and feel you because you came to my lands. That barrier between us is broken.”

“So...could you take me to the underworld?”

“Yes,” he said. “I can take you to many places.”

My heart started to race.

He seemed to feel it in my pulse somewhere on my body because he said, “I vow never to take your life or your soul without your explicit consent. Do not fear me.” He slid his hand into my hair, and just like last time, it took my breath away.

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My hand gripped his wrist, and I briefly closed my eyes. “I can end this now if I wish?” I’d fulfilled my obligation, bedded him once, and now I could terminate this arrangement and never see him again.

He said nothing, just stared at me with a silent command.

I could wipe my hands clean and walk away. I could carry on with my life and never tell my father what had transpired. But once I dismissed Wrath from my life, he would be gone forever...and that brought me such an intense wave of sadness.

“Yes.” Wrath continued to stare at me. “But you won’t.”

I spent the next few days alone.

I took my sailboat out on the water and fished for my dinner. I stayed close to the cliffs and in sight of other sailboats. The water was flat and calm, the sunlight dancing on the surface, the air crisp from the chill of the morning. When I returned home, I prepared the fish with fresh lemon and rice and had dinner alone with my favorite bottle of white wine.

I used to enjoy being alone, but now I was used to sharing space on a ship full of comrades where you barely had a moment to yourself to think. Whenever I thought of them, I remembered they were dead, and that stung every time.

I set my dishes in the sink to worry about another time, and when I turned around, I saw the behemoth of a man leaning against the counter in the kitchen, arms crossed over his chest, his eyes quiet and demanding. He was shirtless, like he had one thing

on his mind. “Should I make all my nights free in case you stop by?”

“It would be preferable.” He pushed off the counter with his hips and came toward me, thick arms by his sides, his dark eyes formidable. I should be afraid of this god, this man who could still kill the living...indirectly. But I found myself at ease in his presence, other than the rush of heat that made me burn hotter than a lit pyre.

He cornered me into the counter, his hands moving to the edge on either side of me, boxing me in with nowhere to go—except farther into him.

My face was at his chest, and it suddenly felt humid and tropical, like I was on one of those white beaches I loved so much. My body felt an invisible pull, and my forehead rested against the center of his chest, the hardness underneath the warm flesh. My hands went to his hips, lightly touching the fabric of his trousers and then his warm skin just above it. His torso rippled from the muscle underneath the skin. I let my fingers explore as I stared at his chest and the valleys between his rows of abs.

“I feel your sadness.”

“I’m sad a lot these days.”

His hands left the counter and moved to my ass. He lifted me up and placed me on the counter, bringing our eyes almost level. “I see you look upon the horizon like you expect to see someone sail into your sight. I see you long for a life that’s different from your own.”

Whenever I sailed, I felt alive...and also alone. “You were watching me?”

“I watch you often.”

“Then why not reveal yourself to me?”

“Because I know it’s not the time,” he said. “Tell me of your sorrow.”

“It’s hard not to think of them whenever I’m on the water.” Hard not to think about the fact that Davin would never sail again. That so many good men were lost at sea because of a storm and awful men who were in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Wrath didn’t apologize or fill the silence with empty words. He just continued to stare at me.

“I know I need to move past it and be grateful I’m alive?—”

“You don’t need to do anything,” he said simply. “Everyone grieves differently. Some people grieve for a time. And some people grieve for always.”

I looked into the eyes of the King of the Dead and inexplicably felt safe. Warm like I was in bed. Comfortable like I’d known him all my life, when I really didn’t know him at all. “You speak of grief like you know it well.”

He stared at me for a while, his head slightly cocked as he absorbed my words. “I do.”

“Who have you lost?” I asked quietly, feeling a twinge of pain for a man who remained mysterious.

“Everyone.”

“You’re the King of the Dead?—”

“But I haven’t always been so.”

I wanted to know more about his story, but based on his short replies, I knew he

didn't want to give answers. He gave me a window into his soul, but the curtains were drawn and the lights were low. "You said you know everything."

"I do."

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“Then do you know the occupants of those golden ships?” My father was cautious and concerned, and that made me the same way.

“Yes.”

“Who are they?”

He dipped his chin for an instant. “That’s not how this works. I cut deals with greedy men, grant vengeance to those who need to extinguish their rage. Take souls that belong in my realm and souls that don’t belong there. I’m God of the Dead, not God of the Living, and it’s not my place to interfere with the events that unfold across this world.”

“You interfered when you killed those men.”

“I interfered for you,” he said. “And I won’t do it again.”

“So, they do have an interest in the Southern Isles.”

“You twist my words like a viper.”

“When I told my father about those men, he was concerned. That made me concerned. It looked like they were going to war. Or they’d just completed a war...”

He looked at me with confidence, with a stare that was potent with surety and strength. The only man who ever looked at me that way was my own father. The only man I knew who had a spine as hard as the steel of his blade.

I stared back, silently begging him to tell me what I wanted.

He gave a quiet breath. “They’re called Barbarians. Soldiers and warriors who served their king—until they staged a coup and murdered him and his family. Their kingdom has withered in a frost that hasn’t waned in three years. A kingdom draped in the curtains of luxury, it’s fallen to ruin. They blamed the king, and once the king was dead, they had no one to blame but themselves. They scour the seas in search of their new home, and they’ll take it by whatever force is necessary.”

My lungs ached as I sucked in a quick breath. I’d considered my father paranoid, but not anymore. Even with the dragons in our ranks, the idea of anyone challenging this beautiful place for themselves still scared me.

He watched my fear stretch across my face. “Their attention is not on your kingdom.”

“Do they know of the Southern Isles?”

“No.”

The relief was so pleasurable I wanted to feel it again. I wished I could share this with my father, but I would have no way to explain my knowledge.

His hands slid underneath my thighs, and he lifted me from the counter, bringing me into his chest like I weighed nothing.

My arms automatically circled his neck, and I was enveloped in his sweltering heat. I was still sore from our night together, but the sight of this gorgeous man made me drop any hesitation. I’d take the pain for the pleasure anytime.

He carried me to my bedroom and laid me down like last time. His bottoms were dropped, and he was naked—and of course, he was already hard. He pulled on my

garments and yanked them free like they were rags rather than nice articles of clothing. When he had me naked, he bent me into position and immediately moved his face between my thighs, drawing in a deep breath like all he wanted to do was smell me.

I'd never had a guy smell me.

It was the most possessive thing a man had ever done to me...and I liked it.

Then he kissed me, worshipped my entrance to earn his worthiness. Made me writhe slowly on the bed, breathe harder with every passing second, make me sweat when all I did was lie there.

He sucked my clit hard before he moved over me, bending my knees and folding me underneath him like last time. He didn't turn me off or ask for me to get on top. He bent me until I couldn't bend anymore then sank inside me like he'd been thinking about this moment every second since the last time it had happened.

He felt bigger than last time. He invaded my lands, carved his name into my soul, felt me deeper than anyone had before. He was the biggest man I'd ever taken, the biggest man to ever fit inside this small bed, to fit inside me.

When he was as deep as he could go, he gave a moan in satisfaction. Veins popped in his arms and his neck, and he held himself still as he looked down at me, like a predator admiring the prey it had caught. Then he started to rock into me, his big dick making room for itself within my flesh. His kiss softened the friction between our bodies, and when that had been soaked up, my arousal did the rest of the work.

It hurt, made me wince, but he continued like he couldn't stop himself.

"Fuck, you've got a big dick."

He continued to thrust, not showing a hint of a smile. “You can handle it,Xivin.”

I gripped his arms as my eyes remained locked on his, watching him watch me, memorizing my face as I reacted to the way he feltinside me. His arms were far bigger than my hands, so I could only hold on to a section of muscle.

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Unable to move because of the way I was stretched, I lay still as he did all the work. He moaned several times and quickened his thrusts, a man succumbing to the desire of a woman, and that was so sexy to watch.

Despite the discomfort of his magnum size, I came all over his dick, swept away by the heat between our bodies that burned the room down to the stone foundation. The sex wasn't wild and crazy. He didn't throw me around or wrap his fingers around my neck. It was simple, missionary, but our bodies together were pure destruction.

He gave a heated moan as he thrust harder, pushing deeper into me with nowhere to go. The head of his dick hit a dead end, but I didn't tell him to stop, because watching him get off was so damn hot.

He filled me and came to a halt, still a mountain on top of me, storm clouds that cast my land into shadow. It was the moment he would usually let me unfold and remove the stiffness from all my joints, but he kept me there.

And his dick stayed there.

He started to thrust again, just as hard as he'd been before we'd both finished, pounding me into the mattress and making my headboard tap against the wall. Like a sailor who'd been gone at sea for months at a time, he set foot on shore and released all the desire he'd contained on his journey.

But a man who looked like this didn't have to wait long for women.

He could have anyone he wanted—dead or alive.

I pulled on a clean shirt from one of my drawers then stepped into the kitchen. An assortment of bottles of white were on the counter, but I grabbed a bottle of red before I uncorked it and poured a glass.

I took a drink then headed back to my bedroom, the house quiet like I was the only one in it. I stepped into the bedroom, and the fire had been lit in the hearth in my absence. It glowed and cast Wrath in a gentle light, making his big chest shine, creating long shadows under his jawline. His dark eyes looked a little brighter, less like the color of earth and more like copper.

I returned to bed with my glass of wine.

He sat up against the headboard and pulled me into him, making me use his chest as a pillow. My body fit between his thighs, and he wrapped his enormous arms around me.

I drank my wine and relaxed into him, cozy and warm.

He rested his chin on the back of my head, the sheets pulled to our waist.

It was hard to believe a man so big was in my bed right now, and I was the only one who could see him.

We sat together for a long time, at least an hour, and nothing was said. He certainly didn't feel like a stranger anymore, but a lover I'd had for a while. I'd felt a twinge of pain in my chest when I'd left Viper behind, but I quickly forgot about him once Wrath came into my life. He was far more dangerous than a vampire.

Guess I had a type.

"What does Xivin mean?" I looked at the fire across the room, but his arms felt like the

flames that gently heated my skin.

“It’s an endearment in the language of Xian.”

“Xian?”

“Death. The afterlife is known as the Realm of Caelum. The underworld is Xian.”

“Oh.” My glass of wine was already almost empty. I should have brought the bottle with me into my room. “And what does Xian mean?”

“There is no literal translation. But the closest I can explain it is...mine. Completely, utterly, irrevocably.” His deep voice came from behind my ear, his breaths gently grazing the soft shell.

I felt his possession whenever we were together. Whenever he looked at me. And now, I felt it verbally, knowing he would say it again. “When you aren’t here...where do you go?”

“Xian.”

“And what is that like?”

He said nothing for a while, like he might not say anything at all. “It’s a place with no color, only a spectrum of gray. The trees are withered without sunlight. The shadows are long in the light of the torches. It’s quiet except for the constant hum that thuds in the deep. Some that enter Xian choose the darkness of the forest. Others choose to serve. Others choose madness.”

Now, I wished I hadn’t asked. “It sounds like a horrible place.”

“There is beauty in all things...if you look hard enough.”

“And this is what you wanted?” I asked. “To rule the dead? To live in a land without sun?”

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He was quiet again, his face hidden because he was seated behind me. “No.”

“Then how did you come to be there?”

A heavy silence passed. The fire cracked and popped. Time continued on, the moon creeping higher into the sky outside the window. The crickets were audible in the grass that surrounded my home. “I made a deal with Bahamut long ago. My soul in exchange for a request. I served him for hundreds of years, and once he was gone, I was appointed as his replacement. It’s not a position that I wanted, but I had no choice but to take it.”

“What was the request?”

He was quiet as expected, but that silence never ended. It continued to burn long after the firewood had been extinguished. An answer never came.

I didn’t ask again. “There’s no way to be free?”

“No.”

“Have you ever?—”

“I want no more of this.” He didn’t raise his voice, but there was unquestionable power in his tone.

I let it go. “Okay.”

His muscles relaxed slightly as he gripped me.

“I like that you stay.” Sometimes my lovers slept over, but most of the time, it was just a means to an end. Viper and I had stayed together in his quarters in the castle, but we knew we had an expiration date. Wrath could disappear whenever he wished, go away as quickly as he emerged, but he stayed with me through the night like he didn’t want to go.

“You make it hard to leave.”

I walked through the courtyard of the castle. The cemetery was there near the edge of the cliffs, most of the headstones faded because they’d been weathered by the sea air and the sunshine for so many years. It contained the kings and queens that came before me, my father’s family that I didn’t have the honor of ever knowing. There was a single headstone unlike the others—because it had two names. Vivian and Lena Rothschild. And it usually had a beautiful arrangement of white flowers gathered at the base. I never saw who put them there.

I walked past it and headed toward the double doors between the olive trees.

As if my father knew I was coming, the guards opened both doors, and he emerged, dressed in his king’s uniform without his blade, the family crest with Khazmuda in the sky above. His jaw was clean like he’d shaved earlier that morning, and he usually looked angry even when he didn’t feel that way.

But when he looked at me, that hostility always dropped—and he never looked happier. “Zunieth.” He walked to me, and as if we hadn’t seen each other in weeks rather than days, he embraced me with a kiss on the temple. “How are you?”

The guilt started to get to me. If he knew I’d bedded the God of the Underworld, even if it was because I desired to, he would be so livid he would probably disown me. It

was temporary and it was a secret, but I still felt like I'd committed a horrible crime.
"Good. You?"

"My men told me you've been sailing."

"Yeah, just to catch dinner." I tried not to take anything from the stores. Wanted to live on my own and be my own person. I seemed to have inherited my father's stubbornness...among other things.

"I'm glad you're getting back on the water." He smiled.

"Khazmuda will be here soon. We're going on a hunt."

"So, you do like bear?" I teased.

He smirked. "Just for old time's sake. We both have our own families and our own lives. We don't spend time together the way we used to, not when we were inseparable."

"That's cute."

"I can see the same connection we share between you and Zehemoth."

"Yes." But we weren't fused. My father said I needed to wait until the right age to make that commitment, to be frozen in time in that appearance forevermore. He said I was still too young, needed a few more years.

"Were you here to visit your mother?"

"No. Actually, I came to see you."

His eyes narrowed slightly. “Everything alright?”

“Yes, all is well.”

He probably told Khazmuda to give him time, because he turned his head slightly as if he was having a conversation with someone that wasn't there. He looked at me again, his eyes focused like he didn't want to miss a word of what I had to say.

“I don't want to detain you. It'll be quick.”

“Everything is second to you. You know that. Khazmuda knows that.” His face remained serious and focused, proving his words with his actions. “Talk to me, Zunieth.”

“Well, I've done some thinking and...” I knew I wasn't a coward. I was someone who faced challenges head on rather than took the easy way out. Maybe I wouldn't be as great as my father, but I would certainly try. “I want the crown...if you still think I'm worthy enough to have it.”

His reaction came on slowly, like a flower that gradually bloomed in spring. Brightness reached his eyes, and then the rest of his features followed suit. The happiness was infectious, the sense of pride was strong, and the affection was the deepest it'd ever been. “You already know that answer, Lily. But is this what you want?”

I nodded. “It is. I was scared that I'd never be you. But I know I could never be you...I can only be me. It will be a different reign, guarded by a different blade, but my heart still beats the same as my forefathers—and it will beat strong for this kingdom.”

A smile lifted his lips, and he took a deep breath. Signs of mist erupted in his eyes, but they disappeared before his next blink. He stepped closer to me and gripped my shoulders, looking down at me with pride brighter than the sun. “That’s my girl.”

PROLOGUE III

LILY

My mother had the strength to smile rather than cry, tried to be excited when she probably felt terrified. “Be careful.” She embraced me in a hard hug before she kissed me upon the brow. “Don’t leave me alone with these two for long. I’m outnumbered.”

I smiled. “I won’t, Mom.”

She gave me another squeeze before she stepped aside.

Hawk came up to me next, not as emotional as either of my parents. “Bring back some treasure. Something that will impress the ladies.”

“There’s nothing you can do to impress any ladies.”

He smiled like he didn’t take it too personally. “Be careful. And don’t be afraid to go for the groin when you need to.”

“I won’t.”

He gave me a quick hug then patted me on the back. “See you soon, sis.”

“See you soon.”

He stepped away.

My father was the only one left.

He looked at me, eyes devoid of emotion, like he was utterly broken.

It killed me.

My mother moved her hand to his shoulder and gave it a squeeze of encouragement.

We stood on the docks where the ship was tied to the pier. Our supplies and essentials had already been loaded below deck. It was a beautiful day with the wind in our favor. But it was a cloudy one for me, saying goodbye like this.

He finally stepped forward and took a heavy breath to steel his nerves. He'd supported my decision when I'd told him what I wanted, but I knew now that was just a front. He was worried and scared, probably up all night wondering if he should stop me from going. He looked me in the eye and said nothing.

"I'll be okay, Dad."

His eyes dropped to the dock below us. He still said nothing, like he didn't have words.

"It'll be over before you know it."

His eyes found mine again, but he still didn't speak.

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I hated hurting him like this. “Ask me to stay, and I will.”

“Stay,” he said quickly, even pleaded with his eyes.

I felt my eyes widen in surprise.

My mother came to his side and gave his arm a squeeze. “Talon.”

He looked down at her touch before he faced me again. “This is hard for me in ways you’ll never understand.”

“I know it’s hard to let a child go on their own.”

He smiled, but it was a sad one, the saddest one I’d ever seen. “It’s more than that...but that’s a conversation for another time.” He moved into me and gripped me by the shoulders. “I’ve taught you everything I know. You have every skill to make it back to me. I tell myself this over and over, but it’s still hard.”

“I know, Dad.”

“Please be safe.”

“I promise.”

He stepped closer to me and lowered his voice. “I know your itinerary. Dragons have volunteered to circle the route every so often. If you need help, call for aid, and they will come to you.”

My heart ached even more.

“And the last thing I’ll tell you is this. Never, for any reason, travel far to the west. Your route takes you nowhere near the direction I speak of. But in case your travel plans change, heed this warning.” His eyes hardened as the anger burned forth. “A dead island sits at sea. Its trees are withered, and a fog of despair blankets its shores. Great evil lives there. Never go there, Lily Rothschild.”

“How do you know this?—”

“Promise me that you will never go there.”

I wanted to know why, wanted to know what my father had seen. “I promise. But what evil lives there?—”

“That’s a story for another time. Gives you an incentive to return.”

“Like I need more of a reason, Dad.”

The anger in his eyes slowly faded. “May the wind be in your sails. And may the sea be in your heart.” He closed his fist and placed it over his heart, the old pirate salute he used to give with his crew long ago.

I did the same, my hand over my heart. “And in yours.”

Pride entered his gaze, masked with sadness. He moved into me and hugged me hard, squeezed me like he still didn’t want me to go. “I love you, Lily Lena Rothschild.”

I squeezed him back and fought my own tears. “I love you too.”

PROLOGUE IV

WRATH

The elk moved gently through the forest, grazing on the grass between the stumps of trees, its antlers big and proud. I moved my forefinger to my lip and looked at Tiberius.

He was six years old, but his childhood had been robbed from him because of tragedy. I had to raise him to be a man when he should be enjoying boyhood as long as he could. I righted my bow and put the arrow to the string.

Tiberius watched, eyes wide with adrenaline.

I aimed the bow and released the string. The arrow launched into the air and pierced the elk in the side. He gave a guttural cry then collapsed. The other elk scattered away and dispersed before they were next.

I threw the bow over my shoulder then approached the elk. His eyes were open like he was gone the second that arrow pierced his hide. There was no suffering. Instant death.

Good.

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I removed the arrow then placed my hand on its flank. “I’m sorry.”

“Why are you saying sorry, Dad?” Tiberius asked.

I grabbed the arrow and cleaned it on my breeches before I returned it to the quiver across my back. “Because life isn’t fair.” I pulled the large elk over my shoulder and steadied the carcass before we began our journey back to the house.

Tiberius led the way.

It was a fifteen-minute walk back to our home on the outskirts of the village, a modest cabin that was just big enough for us to raise our two boys. I hunted for our meals and sold the extra meat at the market. Anya had her own garden and used the vegetables to cook in her stews. Our life was simple, but it was ours.

Until she got sick.

We approached the wooden fence around the house, our dog Pinecone barking at our approach.

Tiberius opened the gate and ran through the door. “We’re back. Dad got an elk.”

I carried the carcass to the workshop I’d built for myself. I prepared the meat away from my family, because the boys were still too young to witness that much reality. I washed my hands clean of the blood then walked inside the house.

Darius was two years older and, therefore, left in charge of his mother while I was

gone. “Was it big?”

“Almost too big to carry.” I circled him with one arm and gave him a kiss on the head. He was tall for his age. Both of my boys were. Soon, they would be men, and this time would be a memory. “Did you take care of your mother while I was gone?”

“Yeah. I made her some stew.”

“Attaboy.”

Darius ran off with Tiberius, and from the other room, I could hear Tiberius bragging about the hunt and making it sound far more exciting than it really was.

I walked through the open door into the bedroom and found her in bed.

Dying.

It hurt to look at her every time, to see how withered she was—and I couldn’t stop it. Her eyes were sunken, and she was thin. It was hard for her to speak without coughing, so she was careful with her words.

She was so weak, she didn’t even perk up at the sight of me.

“Hey, baby.” She didn’t want my pity, so I had to pretend everything was normal when my life was literally dying before my eyes.

“Hey...”

I came to her bedside and pulled up a chair. “Tiberius and I found an elk. We’ll have steak and potatoes for dinner.”

“Sounds nice...” She barely finished her words when a coughing fit took her.

I handed her a glass of water, and she downed it and spilled some down her chin. I dabbed it with a linen cloth. Witnessing her agony was a different kind of torture than actually experiencing it. I would do anything to trade places with her. Would do anything to slowly die while she continued on.

I’d hunted for many weeks to afford a doctor to come visit, but he said she had an infection of the lungs that couldn’t be cured. The winter had been harsh, and while I’d been gone fetching firewood, she’d gone into town with Tiberius because he’d sprained his wrist in my absence. A blizzard came through...and brought the sickness with it.

If I’d been there, I would have taken him myself. Or he wouldn’t have gotten hurt in the first place.

Now, I was about to lose one of the people I loved most.

Her weak hand slowly reached for mine. “Don’t look at me like that.”

My eyes dropped to our joined fingers, the heartbreak in my chest enough to make my sternum crack. We used to have a beautiful life, making love by the fire when the kids were asleep. The times when she waddled around the house with a pregnant belly were the best memories of my life. We were supposed to watch our boys become men and have their own families.

We were supposed to grow old together.

But now, I would raise my sons alone and enjoy the happiness of fatherhood while she became a memory to the sons she’d birthed.

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It wasn't fair.

I didn't say what I wanted to say and said something else instead. "I love you."

She smiled slightly. "I love you too."

In light of the fire, I held her hand and tried to cherish these last days or weeks because they were all I had left. The boys were playing in the other room, not quite old enough to understand how profoundly their lives were about to change.

She whispered to me. "I want you to move on...when I'm gone."

My eyes stayed on her fingers, and I inhaled a painful breath. "Don't..."

"I just want you to know you have my blessing...so you never have to wonder."

The idea of anyone else when there was only one woman I wanted for all my life made it hurt more. "I said, don't."

The house was quiet except for the crackling flames.

Anya was asleep in our bedroom. The boys had finally settled down after all the excitement of having their uncle down for a visit.

My brother sat across from me, never one to say much, but definitely with nothing to say now.

Because there was nothing to say.

“You know you’re welcome to live with me after it happens. I can help with the kids?—”

“I don’t need help raising my sons.” She’d been sick for weeks, and being a father was no hardship at all. They were good kids who helped around the house and took care of their mother when I wasn’t around. They were a blessing to me the day they were born, and they were a blessing to me now.

“I didn’t mean it like that.”

“I know you didn’t.”

“Then how can I help?”

I stared at the fire as the emptiness in my chest started to fester. “You can’t.”

He watched the side of my face, his hands together in his lap. “You should move into the village. The boys will have other kids to play with. Other things to distract them.”

“This is where we wanted to raise them.” I wanted them to live off the land, to stand strong on their own two feet. To appreciate nature and the gifts that it granted us. We traveled into the village on occasion. “I will continue to do that.”

Gael gave a slow nod. “I’ll stay until it happens...unless you’d like me to leave.”

It was the one thing I wanted. Not to be alone when my wife died. So I could walk through the forest and grieve without my sons having to watch their father succumb to the wave of despair that would cripple me. “I would appreciate that.”

I dropped the carcass on the table in the butcher's shop.

He looked it over and gave me a quote. "Fifty sickle."

"Done."

He put the coin on the table, and I pocketed it.

Gael had stayed behind with the boys so I could bring this to market, collect whatever coin I could to buy my wife a few things that would make her happy. Fresh flowers, her favorite cookies, a couple books...even though she wouldn't have time to read them.

The butcher seemed to catch the despair in my eyes the way someone caught the reflection of the sun in a window. "How is she?"

"It's almost time," I said.

He gave a slow nod. "I'm sorry."

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Everyone was sorry. But no one was as sorry as me.

“Madame Hatchet at the apothecary has some opium. Eases the pain of the dying.”

I didn’t want her to die. But I didn’t want her to die in pain.

“But it’s not cheap.” He reached behind the counter and produced another fifty sickle before he set it on the counter.

“You don’t need to do that.”

“Consider it an advance on your next piece of meat.”

I stared at the coin for a moment before I took it. “Thank you.”

“When I said I was sorry, I meant it.”

I gave a slight nod in appreciation.

“You’re a good father to those boys. A good husband. A good man. A rare breed these days.”

I entered the apothecary and was immediately struck by the smells. Perfumes, flowery scents, a combination of so many things that it overpowered my senses. I walked down the aisles of odds things, plants that were black instead of green or sage, vials of substances that glowed purple or blue.

The old woman behind the counter was covered in what looked like multicolored drapes. She stared at me like I was a shoplifter. “Looking for something?”

“Opium.”

She studied me before she came around the corner. “I’m sorry for your loss...”

I wasn’t ready to hear that phrase yet. Wasn’t ready to be a widower. Anya was supposed to outlive me and be taken care of by the boys we’d raised. This wasn’t how it was supposed to be—and it killed me.

She went to a vial of clear liquid before she handed it to me. She gave me a heavy look, full of compassion, as if it hadn’t been full of accusation just a moment ago. “Who is it?”

I just wanted to pay for the damn thing and leave, but I stared at the vial she gave me. “My wife.”

“From what affliction does she suffer?”

“Infection of the lungs.” I dared to hope. “You wouldn’t have anything for that, would you?”

She pressed her lips tightly together before she shook her head. “No remedy for the illness. Only the God of the Underworld can change her fate.” She moved to the counter. “That will be fifty sickle.”

I stepped up to the counter and gave her the money that I’d earned.

She made the exchange and set the vial on the counter.

“You believe in that?”

Her eyes flicked up to mine before they narrowed.

“That the gods are real.” Because if they were real, my wife wouldn’t be on her deathbed right now.

“To believe in means to assume without proof. To know means to have evidence. I don’t believe the gods are real—I know they are.”

“How so?”

“I’ve seen the God of the Underworld in the flesh. In the dead forest where the trees never grow. It was just for a moment, but I know what I saw. He strikes deals with mortals, granting their wishes in exchange for debt.”

“What kind of wishes?” I asked.

“Any kind. Power. Wealth. Saving someone’s life...”

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I felt my hope kindle from a dead fire.

“But the cost is great. So great it’s not worth paying.”

There was no price I wouldn’t pay to save my wife. “Where is the dead forest?”

Her eyes shifted back and forth between mine. “You’re too pure for such evil.”

“Where is the dead forest?” I repeated like I hadn’t heard her.

“To the north. Ten leagues from where we stand. You’ll know when you’re there.”

I snatched the vial off the counter and headed to the door. “Thank you.”

I paid for a horse from the stables and rode north through the afternoon. The steed was fed and well rested, so I made the trip within a day, arriving at my destination at sunset. Gael was still with my sons, and he would worry when I didn’t return by early evening. But he wouldn’t look for me, would stay with my wife and sons because he knew that was my priority.

I knew I was in the right place the second I arrived.

All the trees were dead, like they’d been burned.

All the terrain prior to this had been lush and full in the heat of summer. But the skies above this forest were dark with rain clouds. The ground lacked any foliage. It was bare except for dried timber and rocks and dirt.

I tied my horse to a tree and made my way inside, unsure what to look for. If I weren't so desperate, I wouldn't have taken the word of a madwoman dressed in shawls who ran a shop of potions. Instead of traveling here, I could have been home with Anya, but I hoped with insanity that this myth was actually true.

I moved through the forest, dark and dank, an eerie hum distantly audible.

“Your purpose is a stampede of wild horses. Your intent is the beat of war drums.”

I stilled at the deep voice infecting my ear like a disease.

Then he appeared, in the midnight-blue uniform of a king, protected by black armor, short blond hair and eyes like the sea. Despite the fairness of his complexion, he had a hardness in his eyes full of malice.

My heart started to run at the speed my steed had traveled here, but my face maintained its apathy. My wife's impending death was the worst thing that had happened to me, and it made everything else seem insignificant—even an encounter with an evil god.

“You do not fear me.” He smiled slightly.

“There is only one thing I fear—and it's already come to pass.” The only thing worse would be the loss of one of my boys. It didn't make me grateful that tragedy had chosen my wife instead, not when it should have chosen me.

“Most men come to me with greed in their hearts. They desire power and riches and revenge. But you're prepared to pay a heavy price for someone else's gain. Quite admirable.”

“How do you know this?—”

“Because I know everything, Callum Riverside.” There was a sudden change, a flash that came and went quickly. He was a man one moment and then a monster with horns the next—or perhaps my eyes played tricks on me. “I will spare Anya’s life, but it comes at a heavy price. I will rid her lungs of the disease that slowly kills her. Her lungs will forever ache from the damage the infection has caused. But she will live.”

“Then we have a deal.”

His eyes smiled first, but then the mouth followed. “You’re either very naive or very desperate.”

“She’s sick because of me.” I didn’t want her to die, and I didn’t want to live with the guilt either.

“Because she braved the storm to get your son help,” he said slowly, like he was watching the scene behind his eyes. “Yes, you would have survived the cold without complication, but she was too delicate to do the same. She’s not nearly as strong or hearty as you are.”

The guilt frothed up my throat and into my mouth. I felt my lungs ache for air because it hurt. If I’d just stayed home, all of this could have been avoided. I was the one who should have cared for our boy—not her. I’d failed as a father. I’d failed as a husband.

“These are my terms,” he said. “Your soul for all eternity. To do my bidding without free will, to serve me in darkness forevermore. Your actions will be unspeakable, but you will have no choice but to commit them—over and over.”

“But she will live.” I clung to the hope instead of the darkness.

“Yes,” he said. “And when you return home, you will tell her that you’re leaving—not this life for the underworld, but your marriage for another woman. At her weakest, you will abandon her and your sons and walk out the door forever. You will never tell her the deal that you made with me, and if you do, the deal is void.”

The ache stopped. “That’s barbaric.”

“As am I.” He smiled.

“I’m already giving you my soul for all eternity. Claiming my honor and integrity is unnecessary.”

“These are my terms,” he said simply.

“They’re unfair terms.”

He cocked his head slightly, his eyes growing angry. “You fail to understand the heft of your request. It’s much easier to honor superficial desires like wealth and power, but to directly interfere with the living is a much greater matter. It changes the course of the future, changes the impact on this world. She will mother more children, children that shouldn’t have ever been born. I need your soul to fester and sour and become more potent, which is why my demands are high.”

I didn’t understand the last part about the festering of my soul, and I wasn’t sure I wanted to understand.

“Once you agree, it’s forever binding. It can never be undone. Think carefully, Callum Riverside.”

I didn’t have the time to think carefully. I feared she wouldn’t even be alive by the time I made the return journey. Instead of saying goodbye to my wife, I spent those last moments in a dark forest with the God of the Underworld. Another failure on my

part. This journey couldn't be for nothing. "I don't have time to think carefully."

"Yes, she's very close now." He had no emotion, no empathy for the sick and the dying. "The fade has begun."

"It's bad enough to let my wife think the worst of me, but please don't make me do it to my sons." My eyes started to mist with pain. "I can't let them think I just walked away from them."

Without any trace of humanity, he just stared.

"That I don't love them more than anything..."

Nothing.

My eyes watered further, at the crossroads of an impossible decision.

"Even if you'd left three hours ago, you still wouldn't have made it back in time. She will die alone, your brother's hand a poor substitute for your own. She stays on this side of the veil in the hope you'll walk through the door, but her strength wanes."

"Fuck." I sniffed.

"What will you decide, Callum?"

"What will happen to her?" I asked quickly.

"If you agree? She will fall asleep. And when she wakes up tomorrow morning, she will feel the sunshine through the window. She will draw breath and feel the absence of the strain. She will be in disbelief at first—but then realize the sickness is gone. She will live a long and happy life. She will remarry and have more children. She will

see old age.”

Tears continued to burn in my eyes because it was what she deserved. My sons wouldn't have me, but they would have her. I would be hated and then replaced and forgotten, but they would have the life they deserved. “I agree to your terms.”

His eyes sharpened. “Last chance to change your mind.”

I closed my eyes and released a painful breath. “Save her...please.”

I tied the horse to the post then approached the house, my heart on fire in the pit of my stomach. I stared at the door, the last time I would ever see it, and it took all my strength to grab the handle and open it.

“Dad!” Darius was the first to run to me.

I almost broke into tears on the spot.

“Uncle Gael said Mom isn't doing well.”

I squatted down and gripped him hard, harder than I ever had, my chin on his head.

Darius tried to move out of my hold, but I wouldn't let him.

“Stay,” I ordered, using my angry voice even though I wasn't angry.

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He remained still and let me hold him.

Tiberius walked into the room, having my dark hair and my dark eyes. He was more sensitive than his brother, on the verge of tears like he knew tragedy was coming.

“Son, come here.” I opened my arm and hugged him too, holding both of my boys for the last time, my pride and joy, my whole fucking world. “I love you both—so fucking much.” I kissed each one of them on the head and squeezed them tightly. That was all I could say and keep my end of the deal.

But I wanted them to feel my love...and hope it was enough for them to remember.

“Callum?” My brother’s voice came from the bedroom.

I kissed them again then let them go. “Take care of your mother.”

They both stared at me like they didn’t understand how they would accomplish that when she was about to pass away, but they didn’t ask.

I walked into the bedroom and found her there, bone-white like she’d be dead in hours if the God of the Underworld didn’t keep her on this side of the veil, her eyes so weak she could barely lift them.

“Callum...”

Gael silently excused himself so I could have this final moment with my wife.

I took the seat where he'd been sitting and grabbed her hand.

For the last time.

I wanted to cry for what I was about to do. The way I was about to betray her, to lie to her face and act like I would ever desire another woman but her. I was about to burn my reputation to the ground, as a father and a husband, as everything that had ever mattered to me.

But she would live.

She would live.

I held on to that, because that was all I had.

"I love you," she said, speaking words she thought would be her last.

"I love you too." I felt the tears in my eyes and let them burn.

"Raise our sons to be men. Find happiness again."

I swallowed. "That will be your burden, not mine."

She had so little life left, but she had enough to furrow her eyebrows slightly.

He appeared behind her on the other side of the bed, watching the exchange with subtle glee in his eyes.

I kept my focus on her, on the touch of her hand. "Caring for you has become too much. I've found comfort in a woman at the tavern where I've spent my time lately. The burden of fatherhood and marriage has become too much for me." I didn't look

at her as I said it because I would fucking die.

“Callum, I’m dying—and these are your last words to me?”

I stared at her ice-cold hand. “Maybe you’ll make it through the night?—”

“I won’t make it a few more minutes.”

I reached into my pocket and pulled out the vial of opium. “Drink this, and you’ll recover.” I let her hand go and didn’t reach for it again because I could already tell she didn’t want it.

“I don’t understand what’s happening right now.”

“I don’t want to care for you or the boys anymore.” It was the greatest feat of acting I’d ever done, better than the actors in the traveling theater that came to visit in the summertime. “I’ve met someone, and she’s who I want to be with.” I finally had the courage to look her in the eye.

She was heartbroken.

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She was angry.

And she believed it.

I'd thought the hardest part of this would be convincing her of my infidelity and abandonment, but she believed it without protest or question.

That hurt more than selling my soul to the underworld.

How could she believe me so easily?

"Drink it." I left the chair and uncorked the bottle so it would be easier for her to drink. She would sleep soundly through the night—and wake up to a new life. "Goodbye, Anya." I turned my back on her and walked to the door.

I slowed down. Took my time.

It was the slowest I could move without actually stopping.

But she didn't speak.

Didn't protest.

Didn't fight.

Just fucking believed it.

Without saying goodbye, I stepped into the hallway.

And waited.

Waited for her to say something.

She didn't.

I heard the sound of the vial leave the nightstand and then return once she'd finished drinking it.

But that was it.

I headed to the front door.

My brother was on the couch with my boys, sitting in between them and comforting them both.

I opened the door and walked out. Couldn't say goodbye to my boys. Couldn't hug them again...because I might not let them go. I shut the door and walked through the night to where my horse waited.

Gael came after me. "What are you doing?"

I untied the reins and pulled the horse from the post.

"What are you doing?" he repeated, coming after me. "Is she gone?"

I didn't know what to say to him, didn't know how to explain any of this.

"Callum." This time, he grabbed me by the arm and yanked on me. "What the fuck is

going on?”

I shoved him off me.

He stumbled back, his eyes shocked at my rage.

“I’m done.”

“What does that mean?”

“Look after my sons, Gael.”

The horror moved into his face. “You’re just taking off? You’re going to abandon your family?—”

“You offered your help, and now I’m asking for it.” I climbed into the saddle and secured the reins in my hand.

My brother was older than me, but he was the one who looked up to me. But now, all the respect and reverence faded quicker than rain in the dry soil. “You’re a coward.”

I let the words wash over me—and then drown me in despair.

“Your wife is dying and your kids are scared, and you’re just going to leave?—”

I clapped my heels into the horse hard enough to make him take off at a run. I left out of the gate and rode in the night, the moonlight my only illumination. Torches from the village were visible in the distance. I ran even though I had nowhere to go—nowhere to escape the pain I’d caused and the contract I’d signed.

“Callum!”

PROLOGUE V

WRATH

I knew I shouldn’t have come here.

It was the middle of spring, the flowers on the bushes an opulent purple. The garden was lush with greenery. The sky was a pastel blue with only a single white cloud far in the distance. It was exactly as I remembered, the little house I'd built with my bare hands.

I stared at it for hours, seeing glimpses of someone move past the window between the curtains. There was still time to go back. My imagination was torture, but I could always tell myself it wasn't real. But once I saw reality, I couldn't unsee it.

I took a breath before I crossed the yard to the front door.

I heard voices inside. Darius. Tiberius. They were fighting about something. My hand moved to the door, but I didn't turn it.

Then Anya's voice came. "How many times have I told you not to play with that inside the house?" Her voice was angry, but she was alive and well, healthy.

It brought a mist to my eyes.

My existence was a dark servitude, but it was worth it.

Then I heard another voice. "Listen to your mother, or I'll make you listen to me."

I recognized it—because it was my brother.

I was content hearing their voices, but now his presence caused more curiosity. Bahamut said she would remarry and have more children. But had he referred to my brother all along? I turned the handle and entered the house.

It looked exactly the same...but everything had changed.

The boys played with makeshift bows and arrows they'd tried to make themselves. They were on the rug in front of the fire. Anya was in the kitchen cooking dinner, and she was pregnant.

I stared at her small belly. Someone else might not have noticed, but I had been with her every day through both of her pregnancies. I knew her body well, knew when it had changed. And now, I could see she was in the beginning of a new pregnancy, maybe three or four months along.

It'd been a year since I left.

And there was my brother. Helping her in the kitchen like he lived there. They didn't touch or kiss, but the way they moved together told me they were more than friends. She smiled at him when he handed her the salt. Her eyes lit up, just the way they used to for me.

I'd been replaced.

I'd known it would happen. Bahamut had warned me. But I hadn't expected it to happen so fast, for her to move on and have more children with my own brother, to start a new life almost the second I was gone.

"I told you not to come." Bahamut appeared on the other side of the kitchen, watching them together with mock interest. His blue eyes moved to me, absent of empathy and full of malice.

"I had to."

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“Well, now you know she wasn’t worth your sacrifice.”

Despite the tremendous pain it caused me, I returned many times.

I watched my sons grow into men. Watched Anya become someone else’s wife. Time passed differently for me in the underworld, so years to them felt like decades to me. To say I healed was too strong of a word to use.

But I accepted it.

I was condemned to an existence of permanent servitude, ushering in new souls who’d made the same mistake I did. They all did it for the wrong reasons, so I felt out of place in the darkness. Every time I visited, Bahamut was there to watch me suffer.

Like it pleased him.

He waited for me to admit that it’d been a mistake, that she hadn’t been worth the price I’d paid.

But I never did.

I stood there and watched Tiberius and Darius call my brother Dad.

And I just...accepted it.

Anya had always wanted a girl, and now she had one with her daughter. The girl wasn’t my child, so I should have no fondness for her, but it was hard not to love

someone who was half my wife...and half my brother.

And she still looked like me, in some ways.

Darius left the house first, started a carpentry business in the village. Tiberius married a pretty girl and settled down on the same land. He built their home with his bare hands, and I cried out of pride. I watched him have two sons of his own, watched him become a tall and strong man who could lift a tree trunk. He was within sight of his mother, taking care of her while caring for his own family.

I continued to visit...until Anya died.

My brother went first, and she followed just a year later.

Her life had come and gone—and my servitude was endless. But Bahamut had delivered what he promised. She had lived a long and healthy life. She loved again, had more children, and died surrounded by her grandchildren.

I stood at her headstone and stared at the etching in the stone, the date of her birth and the date of her end. She died peacefully in her sleep. Didn't succumb to a painful disease that slowly and brutally drained her life-force away.

Tiberius appeared in the cemetery with a bouquet of white flowers in his hand. The twinkle of boyhood in his eyes was far gone, either because life had broken him down...or because he believed I'd run out on him. He came closer, his dark hair turning gray, wrinkles and divots in his face. He was almost thrice my age when I'd left the house. His identity was unmistakable, but he wasn't the little boy who had helped me hunt in the forest.

He stopped at the headstone and stared down at her name in silence.

I stared at him, wishing I could speak and he would hear. I watched the breeze move a tendril of hair away from his face. I remembered teaching him to care for the horses at dawn. I remembered reading to him at bedtime. Now, he was a man in his sixties, ripe with age, fatigued with wisdom.

I'd only known him personally for six years. The rest of the time, I'd been a stranger.

He bent down and placed the flowers at her headstone.

I noticed there wasn't one for me. They never knew whether I was dead or alive, and then they stopped wondering.

He stood up again and placed his hand on the curve of the stone. "Miss you, Mom."

My heart cracked like weak stone.

"See you soon." He stepped back and began his return journey home.

"I'm proud of you, Tiberius," I said, knowing he couldn't hear me. "I wish you knew that."

Bahamut, King of the Dead, emerged from the castle and moved down the steps, his cape draping behind him, his servants cowering in fear and revering him in silence. His boots hit the dark soil, and he approached the stone dais in the center, an ethereal blue mist floating over the void.

He stopped at my side and looked to the dark sky.

It was devoid of texture or details. There were no clouds. No stars. No moonlight. It had been a hard adjustment for me in the beginning, this eternal night, but I'd come to find the quiet beauty in the pockets of despair.

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A moment later, the outline was distinct, a man who floated in midair and slowly crept toward the dais. His arms were relaxed at his sides, but his spine was slightly curved, his chest toward the sky.

He eventually came to a stop, surrounded by the blue mist.

Bahamut nodded to one of his servants. “Take him.”

Monsters that were neither man nor animal placed their long fingers on the man’s body and pulled him from the mist.

The second he was pulled free, he awoke. Fought the hold on his body and dropped to the earth. He panicked once he realized where he was, surrounded by a darkness he didn’t understand, creatures he’d never seen. He was there because of the agreement he’d forged—and it clearly wasn’t worth it. “No.”

The corner of Bahamut’s mouth rose in a smile. “Welcome home, Nathaniel.”

“No!” He tried to fight the claws and the strength of the hunched beings.

“Take him to his cell,” Bahamut ordered, watching his creatures do his bidding.

They took him up the stairs and to the castle—and he screamed the whole way.

Bahamut looked up at the sky once again, like he expected more. “Guess that’s it for the day.” He turned to look at me beside him, like he somehow knew I had something to say.

“I have a request.” A request that would surely be denied.

He continued to stare.

“I’ve served you faithfully for nearly sixty years. When I arrived here, I was quiet and compliant. I remain so.”

“Yes, you’ve adapted to the darkness quicker than others.”

Because I did it for the right reason.

“What is your request, Wrath?”

“Anya has passed on to the afterlife.” I loved her still, even after all this time, but the love was no longer the same. I’d watched her love my brother the way she loved me, the way her happiness shone brighter than the sun. My heart let her go once I knew she belonged to someone else. Her death stung, but not the way it would have decades ago. “My sons remain behind. They’re both healthy, but they’re in their sixties, and tragedy can strike at any moment.” Men tended to have shorter life-spans than women. I could lose either one of them at any moment. My brother had lived an unusually long life, dying in his eighties. I was certain that the happiness that Anya gave him was what kept him going for so long.

Bahamut’s eyes narrowed slightly as he waited for me to reach my destination.

“All I want is for them to know that I didn’t abandon them...before they’re gone.” I wanted them to know I’d watched them grow into men. I’d watched them become fathers themselves. I’d watched them care for their mother like I asked. That I loved them as much from a distance as I did when I could hold them in my arms. “Please.” It had taken all my patience to wait as long as I had. But I knew I needed to serve Bahamut for decades, to do my time to earn this slim chance.

“No.”

I fought my despair and kept a straight face, knowing he fed off sorrow.

“That’s not what we agreed to.”

“My wife is gone. The debt has been paid. I can never get this time back with my sons, but I want them to know that I was always there...even if they couldn’t see me?—”

“No.”

“How did you come to be what you are? Did you leave no one behind? Did you ever care for any living person?”

His stare slowly hardened. Rain clouds masked his blue eyes. “One day, you will come to forget everyone you ever cared for, Wrath. Give it a hundred years. Maybe two. But it will happen.”

“I will never forget my boys.” Never forget my love for them. Never forget the absolute joy they gave me. The way each one fit into a single hand when they were born. The way they would climb all over me like I was a tree.

He looked at the dais again, the subtle smile returning. “We’ll see.”

8

LILY

It started to rain.

I pulled back the curtain in the living room and watched the droplets strike the window then streak down. The branches of the olive trees were still because there was no wind. Just calm rain.

I kneeled before the fireplace and tossed on a few more logs in preparation for the cold that would seep through the cracks in greater volume.

“What does Zunieth mean?”

It was the first time I didn’t jump at his stealthy arrival. I used the fire poker to put the logs into position, the ashes scattering as the older pieces of wood crumbled apart. I returned the bronze poker to the stand and stood upright. “You were there.” I turned to face him, seeing him standing in nothing but his trousers like he lived there with me. A man strong like a tree, who could yank a mighty oak straight out of the ground and rip the roots. When I’d spoken to my father in the courtyard, he was there. I knew he could be in my presence even when I couldn’t see him. That meant he could be there at any time...or all the time.

He moved to the couch and sat down, his stomach still flat even when seated. His skin glowed in the light of the fire, the muscles distinct under his tightness. Why did a man so beautiful have to be so bad? “What does it mean?”

“Dragons have their own language. It means hatchling.”

His eyes didn’t blink as he took me in.

My father and Khazmuda both called me that. Khazmuda always treated me like one of his own, even though I wasn't covered in scales and couldn't breathe fire. He would rub his snout against me and tuck me close like I'd just hatched out of the egg.

I went to Wrath on the couch, and instead of taking the seat beside him, I moved into his warm lap.

His arms immediately enveloped me like he wanted it or expected it. His warm palm slipped underneath my long shirt and gently touched my thigh. His other hand went straight into my hair, pushing it from my face like he didn't want anything to obstruct his view.

I hadn't expected him to join me all the other nights. His presence caught me off guard. But this time, I'd waited for his arrival. Waited for him to join me in bed. Waited for his narrow hips to squeeze between my thighs.

He stared at me for minutes, his look confident, his energy intense. He could hold a stare like no one else. There was a calmness to him that was deeper than the slowest river. For a man who ruled the dead, peace throbbed underneath his skin. "Not everyone has the strength to embrace their destiny, but you do. You will bleed for your people and give your life if need be. You will rule for the people, not of the people." His focused stare continued to drink me in. "You will be a mighty queen."

He believed in me the way my parents believed in me. But they'd raised me, and he'd just met me. "You hardly know me."

"I know you better than anyone." He said it with complete confidence, with the calmness of that slow river. "I've seen regimes rise and fall. I've watched greater men succumb to petty rewards. You're different, Lily Rothschild." His fingers continued to graze me, to feel the softness of my thigh until he felt the hem of my underwear.

“I hardly know you.”

It was the first time his eyes flicked away.

“I would like to know you.” I had the power to end this at any time, but I continued to hold on. What was worse, I gripped tighter and tighter. Like a slick rope about to slip out of my grasp, I held on with both hands and heaved.

His eyes were on the fire now, his shadowed jawline distinct and sharp.

“Will you share with me?” I whispered.

“What do you wish to know?”

“Anything you’re willing to tell me.”

His fingers continued to touch me, squeezing hard to feel the definition of my muscle under my skin. It felt nice, his big hands so strong. “I lived in a very different time from yours. It’s been three hundred and seventy-seven years since I was mortal.”

“Wow.”

“Nearly four hundred years in your time, but it’s much longer in mine.”

“Why does time move differently for you?”

He never answered.

“Where did you live?”

“Outside a village called Dambridge. In a land far, far away from here. It’s been

claimed by many different kings. Changed so much I wouldn't recognize it if I ever returned. There's no proof that I was ever there."

"Did you have a family?"

“I did.”

“What kind of family?” Did he mean a wife and children? Or did he mean parents and siblings?

“I want to take you somewhere.”

“Where?” I asked. “How?”

“You said you liked white beaches. I know just the place.” He turned his head and looked at me again. “Can you spare a day or two?”

“I don’t have any plans tomorrow.”

“And if someone looks for you?”

“I doubt they will. But if they do, that could be a problem. Zehemoth won’t be able to feel my mind.”

He waited for me to make the decision.

“How does this work? Should I pack?”

“You don’t need anything.”

“And you will bring me back...right?”

His eyes hardened slightly in a hint of offense. “I’ve proven my dedication and loyalty to you. I’ve vowed never to take your life or your soul. I won’t justify your doubts with further reassurance.”

“I didn’t mean to offend you.”

“But you did, nonetheless.”

“Look, I’m not the kind of woman to blindly trust someone?—”

“It’s not blind. I warned you about the Barbarians, but you didn’t take my advice. Then I killed an entire ship of men to keep you alive. I’ve reminded you of all the qualities you possess but choose to ignore.” His dark eyes hardened to the steel of a blade, and he faced off with me like an opponent. “Do you trust me or not?”

“Trust is a strong word.”

He continued to stare me down.

“Why can’t we stay here?”

“We can. I just wanted to show you more. Forget I asked.” He rose off the couch, making me slip into the corner like snow falling off a mountain.

“Don’t go.”

“I’m not in the mood to stay.” His back was to me, and he walked toward the fire, the details of his spine and the muscles around it reminding me of a thick tree with its roots.

I left the couch and moved behind him. “Please.” My hand moved to this thick arm,

an arm so big I couldn't grip it with both hands. "I've been waiting for you all day."

He inhaled a slow breath but didn't turn to face me.

I pressed my forehead underneath his shoulder, feeling the searing heat right against my skin. My arms circled his and hugged it close, like that would have any power to keep him here with me.

But he didn't disappear.

"Take me to these white shores."

After a long stare at the fire, he turned around to face me. His eyes remained restrained in anger, but he reached down and grabbed my hand, squeezing it tightly in his. And within the blink of an eye, we were somewhere else.

The hardwood floor was suddenly replaced by sand. I felt my feet dig in slightly once we were somewhere else. His grip steadied me so I wouldn't slip farther.

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The first thing I noticed was the sound of the waves, the warmth of the air the moment it touched my skin. I turned to look at the water. It was dark except for the moonlight that reflected off it. I watched the waves rise then crash onto the beach. Some were higher than others, nearly reaching our feet.

I looked down the beach, expecting to see galleons or sloops, signs of people or a port, but there was no one around. No masts from ships in the distance. No torches from a city. It was just the two of us. “Where are we?”

“An island that’s never been found by humankind.”

I looked farther up the shore at the palm trees and the lush greenery. There was a mountain that stretched high into the darkness. Then I noticed a cabin there, a small little hut built farther inland but still close to the water. “Then how did that get here?”

“I built it.”

“You did?”

“I used to be a carpenter...in my old life.” He released my hand and walked up the shore until he reached the cabin. It didn’t have windows and appeared to be made out of palms with a thatched roof. It had two doors, and he pulled them apart, sliding them open to reveal a large opening that gave a premium view of the water.

It was modest, just a bed, a fireplace, and a couple chairs.

He took a seat in the armchair and looked at me, taking in my reaction to the cabin he

had built with his big hands.

“I love it.” I crawled into his lap again, just the way I had earlier before I’d nearly driven him away. But this time, I straddled his hips, my shirt rising over my own hips, and circled my arms around his neck. With the light that reflected off the surface of the water, I looked into his hard eyes, watched them slowly soften as he stared.

His hands made their way to my ass, and he gave me a gentle squeeze, his dick springing to life through his trousers.

My hands moved over his thick shoulders and down his chest, feeling a man more powerful than any other I’d touched. I kissed his shoulder then his chest, my hands planting against his hardabs, worshipping a man who felt more like a statue than a person.

“You’re the only woman I’ve brought here.”

My hands paused over his warm body. “It’s awfully romantic to come here alone.” I didn’t think he was lying, not when his eyes were so steely in their confidence. I shouldn’t trust a word that came out of his mouth, not when he took people to their doom, but for some stupid reason...I did.

“I built this shortly after we met.”

Even though I was seated in his lap, we were at eye level to each other because of his large size. I hesitated at his words and then quickly pieced it together. “Because you knew I would love it.”

He rose to his feet and carried me with him with effortless ease. He took me the short distance to the bed and gently laid me down before he righted himself and dropped

his trousers, revealing the big dick that was ready for me.

Then he grabbed me by the hips and dragged my ass to the edge. His large hands slipped underneath my shirt to the panties below and pulled them down, lifting my ass slightly to get them off and free of my ankles. He normally left my socks in place, but he slid them off in the humid climate because I no longer needed them for warmth. Then he yanked up my shirt to expose my tits before he gathered my hips and adjusted me to take him, his hands pressing into the backs of my thighs, his fingers digging into my flesh.

He inserted two of his big fingers inside me, pushed deep and made me wince and moan, and smeared my arousal over the head of his dick to reduce the friction between us. Then he began his entrance, slowly inching his way deeper, filling every available space in my channel until he was fully buried.

It hurt and it always would hurt, but I wouldn't change anything. He was a man worth hurting for. It made me come faster than I ever had, his length an inherent turn-on, his size matching the rest of his enormity.

A mountain over the sea, he thrust inside me gently, knowing my body well enough now not to give me more than I could take, always stopping before he hit the dead end. A god both beautiful and terrifying ruled over my body like it was his lands. His hand left one of my thighs, and he squeezed my small tits with his callused warmth. Then he moved his hand to my throat and squeezed just enough to make me pant for more breath. His thumb swiped up over my jawline, and then he slid it into my partially open mouth. As if he didn't remember how to be human, he examined me like a specimen. He felt the softness of my lips, pressed his thumb against my tongue, continued to thrust inside me as he explored the rest of me.

I clutched his hard forearm and moaned as he gripped my throat again, his dick starting to pound inside me. The waves crashed on the shore outside, loud in the

presence of the full moon. His eyes were as dark as night as they gazed upon me, focused in their intensity and almost angry in their possession.

The sight alone was enough to make me come. I felt his fingers tighten around my throat as I slipped under his spell. My body tightened, and I gripped his length firmly from within, coating him in the flood of arousal my body released just for him. I'd initially fucked him to pay off a debt, but now I fucked him to line my own pockets.

It was obvious that he enjoyed himself, but he didn't struggle to contain his desires. He could be in the moment with me without bridling his desire, enjoy my performance without ending the show.

On an untouched island away from the rest of humanity, we moved together on that bed, the heat making my skin sweat slightly, the salty air entering my lungs. The ocean continued to pound against the shore, paradise just a short walk away. I didn't have to sail months to get there. All I had to do was take the God of the Underworld by the hand.

I woke up the next morning to warm sunshine on the sheets.

The doors had been left open last night, and now the waves were quiet in the dawn. My hand reached for the powerful man beside me, but I felt nothing but his absence. I slowly stirred, so comfortable that I never wanted to rise, but my body was lonely without his company.

I left the bed but didn't don any clothes, remembering that no one else was there with us. I looked out the doors and scanned the beach and then the mountain in search of the man too large to blend in with anything.

Then I spotted him carrying two pails over his shoulders, shirtless and glistening with sweat, carrying gallons of water on his strong spine with ease. His eyes met mine

when he drew close, but he didn't acknowledge me with words. He took a knee and set down the pails that were tied to a branch he had balanced across his shoulders. One pail was full of fresh water he'd collected from a nearby stream, and the other was full of fruit he had picked. Pineapples, passion fruit, bananas. "I can hunt if you need something more substantial."

My eyes were transfixed on his immaculate body, his sheer strength and his quiet masculinity. "You're substantial enough." I moved into him and rose on my tiptoes, but it was still a struggle to meet his lips with mine.

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He hesitated at the affection like he hadn't expected it. Then he scooped his arms under my ass, and he lifted me so our mouths could meet without strain. I was a tall woman because my father was tall. I trained with men and wore armor and wielded swords, so my body was tight with muscle. But he carried me like I was a bouquet of spring flowers.

He carried me back to bed and bent me underneath him before he sank, giving a moan when he claimed me once more. "Xivin..."

We sat together in the shade of the palm tree on the beach and watched the waves meet the shore. I drank the water and enjoyed the succulent fruit while he stared out at the sea.

"You don't want any?"

His eyes remained on the horizon, and he gave a slight shake of his head.

"I notice you never eat or drink."

"It's not my preference."

"Then what do you eat?"

"I don't."

"Never?" I asked incredulously.

All he did was shake his head.

“Do you sleep? Every time I wake up, you’re already awake.” I noticed it every time we were together. Even when I woke up in the middle of the night to pee, he was wide awake as if he’d been that way the entire time.

“No.”

“Why?”

“Sleep is for rest,” he said. “I don’t need rest.”

He was hard to the touch, had emotion in his eyes, felt as real as anyone else. But sometimes I forgot he wasn’t real. He wasn’t a mortal man like my other lovers. He wasn’t alive...or dead. “Do you miss those things?”

“It’s hard to miss something that you’ve forgotten. I don’t sleep because I don’t need it. When there’s no need, there’s no desire. I don’t feel hunger either, so I don’t crave food the way you do.”

“Then how are you so big?”

“This was my appearance when I came to the underworld.”

So, he’d been this strong as a human man. If I’d seen him walk by in the village or in the fields, my mouth would have gone dry until I had a drink. My stomach would have gnawed until I had a taste. “You look more like a soldier than a carpenter.”

“Soldiers are trained to fight, and then they stand around and wait for a provocation. But on a daily basis, I moved stone and built tiles and carried game over my shoulder. I was never at rest, always working, always providing.”

“Do you miss it?”

His eyes didn't leave the water.

“I hope that wasn't an offensive question.”

“I don't miss it. Not when everyone I ever loved has been dead for hundreds of years. The house I built with my bare hands is gone. Everyone I ever knew has been replaced by descendants I wouldn't recognize in the market. I can't say there's much enjoyment in the underworld, but I tolerate it.”

He was the God of the Underworld when we met, but he'd become something else to me. A man with a beating heart and warm flesh. “What's it like there?”

“I told you.”

“I mean, are there other people there? Is it just you and...the people who've forsaken their souls?”

His arms rested on his knees, and he dug his feet deeper into the sand. “It's complicated. The forsaken who arrive through the funnel are made into servants...and other things. The underworld is this world but inverted and without light or life. It looks so different, you barely know they're mirrors of each other. And yes, there are others, the Covenant and its followers.”

I hadn't expected something so complex. “What's the Covenant?”

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He hadn't looked at me once during this conversation. His cooperation was thinner than a split hair. "It's complicated." There should be more to the story, but he never shared it. "The biggest difference between the two places is that the land of the living has a diversity of both good and evil. And down below...there's only one type. Some are smarter and more calculating than others, but overall, they're all vile."

I stared at the side of his face. "You don't seem vile."

"Which is why I keep to myself mostly."

"How do you do that as King of the Dead?"

"It sounds like a position of power, but it's a position of servitude."

"Who do you serve?—"

"Your company gives me joy." He turned to look at me, his eyes not angry, but solemn in quiet sadness. "I don't want to squander these moments thinking or talking about my eternal servitude."

I'd never pitied someone so much. There was a grip of emotion on my heart, a pain that clutched my chest so tightly it was hard to breathe. But showing that sadness would only make it worse, so I let it lie. "Your company gives me joy too."

My father was in his full armor with his cape, the symbol of the dragon in the center of his chest. He spun the sword around his wrist the way he always did before a battle commenced.

Zehemoth lay in the grass to watch our interaction, his eyes glued to us for entertainment. My father had brought us to the meadow so we could practice on the soft earth rather than the hard cobblestones of the courtyard.

He circled me and tried to pretend to decide where to strike when he already knew before he drew his sword. He stopped and stared me down, an act of intimidation that hadn't worked in years. "I'm not going to go easy on you anymore,Zunieth."

"Good."

A subtle flash of pride moved across his eyes.

I wondered if Wrath was there. There were times when I thought I felt his presence. Felt the white-hot intensity that only he could produce. But I would never know because he only revealed himself to me in the absence of others.

My father launched himself at me, and he made good on his word and gave me a version of himself he'd never shown before. He was quicker, faster, and more ruthless than he'd ever been before.

I barely had the chance to block his sword when he came at me again, slicing his blade from my neck. There wasn't time to react, so I used my vambraces to block his sword and drive him back.

But he was on top of me again, smothering me with his attack, using his free arm to slam into my body to topple me back.

I kept up, but barely, spending all my time on defense.

“Move faster—or he will defeat you.”

I dodged my father’s two-handed strike then scurried away to put distance between us.

He appeared feet away, standing in his full uniform and armor, a man who had more muscle than my own father.

I couldn’t respond, not without making it obvious I spoke to someone that only I could see.

My father didn’t let up, coming at me just the way those Barbarians had.

“You focus so much on your arms that you forget your feet.” Wrath circled us as we continued to fight, watching my movements and critiquing them in real time. “You will never defeat him in strength, only speed. Move with purpose, and your sword will follow.”

I was out of breath and already tired.

My father gave me no mercy.

“Come on, Xivin.”

“Argh.” I sidestepped my father’s sword then moved with a burst of energy, blocking the next hit then coming at him with a flurry of blows, ducking when his sword came at my neck, but still driving him back, retaking the advantage until I was the one on top of him.

My father's eyes widened.

“Yes, Xivin.” Wrath moved with us, his eyes hardening in excitement.

As if it truly were a life-and-death battle, my father took the first opening he could find and slammed his fist into my chest plate to stagger me back, using his strength against me when he couldn't outmatch my speed.

I was winded as I stumbled back.

“Your feet,” Wrath repeated.

I caught my father's blade with my own then spun it around and pushed him back. I punched him in the face then slammed my elbow down on his arm, doing my best to wrest his blade from his grasp.

But he held on with a dying grip, rammed me with his shoulder, and sent me flying back.

I landed on my back—and dropped my sword.

Wrath stayed with me. “Move.”

I rolled out of the way before my father's death blow came down for me. I grabbed the sword along the way then kicked my feet out in the hope I would trip my father. I felt my shin hit armor, and he lost his balance for a mere second.

It was enough time for me to get to my feet and come at him again. I was dead tired, sweat pouring down my face, winded from my father's strikes. "Argh!" I came at him hard and struck down his blade with all my strength, expecting him to underestimate how hard I would hit.

His sword dropped.

"Yes." Wrath stepped away and gave us space.

My father chose to come for me instead of retrieving the sword. It was the right move because I would have gone for his neck. But he came at me with his fists and his size, which was somehow more intimidating than his blade.

He caught my blade with his vambraces and used his sleek armor to deflect the blows that landed on him. He was fast and strong, and his experience in battle shone through. He slammed his elbow down hard on my wrist, right into his thigh—and knocked the blade clean out of my hand.

He didn't give me a chance to react before he punched me right in the face.

I felt the blood drip from my nose instantly, felt the bruise that would be there the next day.

I ducked his next hit and then the next, avoiding his fists until I finally caught his arm between mine. I forced it down and spun it back before I kicked him in the knee.

He dropped down, and that was when I prepared to slam my elbow onto his head. "Hit." I didn't complete the blow, not when a blow like that could do serious or permanent damage to his mind or body.

My father remained on one knee, equally sweaty and exhausted. Winded, he breathed

for several seconds.

I stepped back, both of our blades lost somewhere in the grass.

Wrath stood off to the side. There was a knowing look in his gaze, a hint of admiration. Then he gave a nod before he vanished on the spot.

My father rose to his full height and ripped his gloves off his hands one by one. Then he made his hand into a fist and beat it once against the armor over his chest. “That’s my girl.” He walked toward me before he gripped me by the shoulder. “You’ve gotten better since the last time we fought.” He looked at me and didn’t cringe at the blood that came from my nose.

I swiped it away and sniffed. “We used to spar on the ship to pass the time.”

“You’ve learned from new opponents. That’s strengthened your reflexes. Your footwork is better too.” He reached into his pocket and pulled out a linen for me. “Are you alright?”

I took it and dabbed at my nose. “I’m fine, Dad.”

“Are you sure?” It was the first time he’d shown guilt for striking me.

“It didn’t even hurt.”

His eyes lightened slightly. “Do me a favor, and don’t tell your mother about this.”

“Trust me, I know how she gets.”

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“I feel like a worthless father for striking you, but I can’t train you unless I do it.”

“I know.” When the bleeding stopped, I pocketed the linen. “And I’m better for it.”

“I really did give you the best I had—without Khazmuda’s strength. You’re a remarkable fighter, Lily.” Sincerity shone through his words and reached his eyes. “There’s always room for improvement, but you stand before me as a fierce opponent.”

“You think I’d best Hawk?”

He smirked. “It wouldn’t even be close.”

“Really?”

He nodded. “As I said before, he doesn’t have the same depth.”

“Sometimes I feel like your favorite,” I said with a chuckle.

The smile faded, and the merriment to his mood did too. There was a heavy pause, a silence filled with so many things he didn’t say. “I’d always wanted a daughter. So, when you were born, it meant the world to me.”

“But families always want sons,” I said. “What made you want a girl?”

His eyes glazed over as the silence stretched. A painful smile moved over his lips, and he drew a sudden breath before he looked away. It took him a moment to look at

me once more, a sea of pain in his eyes but its origins a mystery. “I just did.”

I had dinner with my mom in the dining room, just the two of us. Dad was off with Khazmuda, and Hawk was in the village.

I had bruising on my face, but my mom didn’t ask about it.

My dad must have already mentioned it. I just wasn’t sure if he told her the truth...or made up something else.

“Your father was really impressed with your spar today.”

“He was?” I grabbed the bottle and refilled my glass. I would normally be thinking about that battle nonstop, but now something else had taken my focus. Dark eyes on a white beach. Warmth in the sheets. A man who had possessed my soul even though he promised not to take it.

“Went on about it for an hour straight.” The fire burned in the hearth behind her, and she sipped her wine rather than focused on her dinner. She smirked slightly. “Didn’t understand most of what he said, but he was excited like a child.”

“I worked really hard.” I’d trained every day since I was a child, and even though I’d told my father I wanted to pursue my own interests, I’d continued to practice. I didn’t want to waste the skills I’d worked so hard to perfect.

“I know you did, sweetheart.” She gave a gentle smile. “I’m very proud of you. Even with the blood of dragons in my veins, I could never fight the way you do. You definitely have Rothschild blood, and that’s something I can never have, only pass on.”

“You’re too pretty to fight anyway, Mom.”

Her smile widened, and color moved into her cheeks. “Stop.”

“You are.”

“You’re far prettier than I was at your age.”

I rolled my eyes. “We are the same age.” Even though we looked like sisters, I would always see her as my mom. The relationship had slowly changed since I’d left the house, and a different kind of friendship had been formed. I think our closeness in physical age contributed to that too. In a couple more years, my father and brother really would look like brothers.

“So, how are you?” she asked before she swirled her wine. “Adjusted to home yet?”

Home didn’t feel the same, not when a new man had entered my life. He could be in this room at that very moment, watching the two of us bond from the shadows. I thought about him constantly, wondered when he would appear and hold me close.

My mother waited for me to answer the question.

“Yeah...for the most part.” A part of me wanted to tell her. I trusted her implicitly, but I didn’t want her to carry the burden of this secret. It wasn’t an ordinary secret, like when I’d lost my virginity or when I did something else questionable. Keeping this from my father would be a betrayal. So I bottled it inside and kept it to myself, my feelings a cacophony of emotion and confusion. “How are things with you guys?”

“We’re both so happy you’re home. A parent can only know peace when their children are close.”

“Does Hawk know that I’ve changed my mind?”

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The mood around her suddenly changed. The smile that had been on her lips suddenly pressed together in a hard line. “I think he was a bit blindsided.”

“But Dad told me Hawk wasn’t ready.”

“But Hawk believed he had a chance when he knew you were out of the way. Not anymore.”

Hawk still lived in the castle despite reaching adulthood. He wanted more privacy, but not at the expense of the luxuries that came with royalty. The maids took care of his laundry and cleaned his bedchambers when he was out, and he always had a hot meal whenever he wanted it.

I didn’t blame him.

Since I was in the castle, I asked one of the maids to call upon him rather than visit his bedchamber unannounced.

“Prince Rothschild is not in residence,” his maid informed me. “He left several hours ago.”

“Thank you, Denise.” I left the castle through the double doors and crossed the courtyard. Made of beige cobblestone with olive trees and potted flowers cascading over the sides, it was my favorite part of the castle. It was hard to believe it’d been the center of conflict and death twenty years ago.

I heard the distant creak of the metal gates when they opened, and I turned to see the

guards allowing someone to pass through.

My brother.

Dressed in casual attire, he seemed like he'd been in the village for a visit. With dark hair like my father and a kindness to his eyes like my mother, he was a perfect blend of our parents. But he had my father's full height, and ever since he'd become a man, he'd been a source of fascination for many women.

His eyes shifted to mine, and instead of a look of warm recognition, I could see veiled hostility. His eyes shifted away, and he sighed under his breath before he directed his path toward me.

"Fun night?"

He ran his fingers through his hair as he approached me. He had the build of a man but the attitude of a boy who needed more years to mature to his finest. "Started out so. Not sure how it's gonna end."

My brother and I had never been extremely close like some other siblings, but we'd never been distant either. Five years of age difference had been enough to reduce our commonalities. We didn't share the same friends, same life events, same education in school. Every time I ended a stage in life, he was barely starting it. "I don't want the throne to be a source of animosity between us. Not worth it to me." Based on the history of the Southern Isles, envy and resentment from distant family members had been enough to nearly destroy it. I didn't want to repeat that.

Dressed in all black, he ran his fingers through his hair again, his eyes shifting to the closest olive tree. There was a heavy pause, light from the torches along the castle walls giving us illumination in the dark. Fires also burned in the braziers throughout the courtyard, making the castle grounds an eternal light in the darkness. His stare

finally came back to me. “The throne is not the source of my animosity.”

“Then what is?”

His answer was quick, like a striking viper. “Father’s favoritism.”

My heart gave a tight squeeze, but the release ached even more.

His eyes hardened in confidence. “You know of what I speak.”

I wanted the right words to form on my tongue, but not a single thought came to mind. “I’m the firstborn.”

“And I’m his only son.”

“Are you saying you wish you were his favorite?”

“I’m saying he shouldn’t have a favorite. And perhaps if he didn’t, he would see my strengths instead of my weaknesses. He would see potential rather than liability. Diagnosing my shortcomings has only drawn more attention to them. You should hear how he speaks of you—and I already know how he speaks of me.”

“He tells me you’re a brilliant fighter.”

“But he trains you to defeat me.”

“He trains me to defeat everyone, Hawk. It’s not personal.”

“It is personal,” he said. “Because he’s training you to be queen instead of me to be king.”

I felt the distance grow further between us. Felt the bonds of flesh and blood start to sever. “I will step aside if that’s what you wish. Our relationship is more important to me than any power. I would gladly serve you and support you.”

He gave a slight shake of his head. “I said it’s not about that. It’s about his love for you versus his love for me.”

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“I have no doubt Father loves us both equally, Hawk.”

“But he loves us differently.”

I wanted to defend my father, but I’d witnessed the difference firsthand. “I’m sorry you feel this way, but please don’t let it affect us. Father said how close he and his brother were, how special that relationship is. This relationship is special to me.”

The grievance in his eyes slowly softened like warm butter. “I’ve never doubted your worthiness or ability to lead our people. I’ve never questioned your qualifications because of your sex. But I believe you’re more worthy because Father wanted you to be more worthy. Because he invested his time and energy into making that fact true. Far more time and energy than he did with me. I know that’s not your problem. You didn’t ask for it, but it continues to wound me.”

“You should talk to him about it, Hawk.”

“And what is he supposed to say?” he asked quietly.

All I did was stare.

“He’s just supposed to admit that it’s true? That he preferred you from birth and I never stood a chance? No, he’s not going to say that. He’s going to deny it until his dying breath, because if he admits it to me, he has to admit it to himself. And that’s not something anyone would do.”

Rendered speechless and useless, I didn’t know how to contradict my brother, not

when I felt the favoritism that he spoke of. I wanted to defend my father out of loyalty, but this was a slight I couldn't defend, not without belittling my brother's feelings. If our positions were switched, I knew I would feel exactly the same way.

He stepped closer to me, his eyes cool ash now that his flames had been extinguished. "You've done nothing to earn my resentment, and I'm sorry for giving it to you. I will support your reign with both my love and my sword. I will watch your back if you ever need another pair of eyes. And I will look upon you with pride—because you're my sister."

10

LILY

I stood in the kitchen and washed the tomatoes under the running water. They had flecks of dirt from their home in the garden, and I watched the debris wash away until the red skin was shiny and bright. I patted each one dry with the linen.

There was a sudden spark in the air, an energy I couldn't describe, a hum so quiet I wasn't sure if I actually heard it...or simply heard my imagination. "I feel you." I spoke aloud, possibly to no one, but possibly to the man who had slowly consumed me piece by piece. I lifted my chin and looked out the window over the sink. It was dark outside, so the glass was a mirror to the room behind me.

I could see the silhouette of a muscular man leaning against the counter behind me, arms crossed over his chest, his muscles so defined they were noticeable even in the distorted reflection. "I feel your unease."

I dried my hands on the edge of the linen that supported the tomatoes then turned around to face him. The beautiful and enigmatic man who was slowly taking my soul even though he promised not to touch it.

His ankles were crossed, and he let the cabinets and counters support his weight. He was very real, his presence so distinct I felt it without sight or sound. But to anyone else who walked in here, he was just a ghost. His dark eyes took me in with sympathy, but the rest of his expression was hard as steel.

I crossed the tile floor of the kitchen and moved into him. His arms dropped when I came close, ready to envelop me in those thick muscles and cocoon me. My hands glided over his chest to his shoulders, and his hand automatically slid into my hair while he hooked his other arm around the small of my back.

I no longer jerked when he appeared out of thin air. I was never surprised by his visit, not when I suspected he was always there, always watching me. Like he'd come home to me after a hard day in the fields or service in the army.

He cradled my cheek as he looked into my face, his eyes softening further once I was in his embrace. His callused thumb swiped over my soft skin as he held me close.

My shoulders had been heavy from my brother's burden, but they suddenly felt lighter when Wrath was there, carrying everything for me with his immense strength. When he entered the room, everything felt warmer, the air lighter. The man who'd propositioned me into bed had become my lover, and not a kind of lover I'd had before.

Words weren't exchanged, but he somehow comforted me in silence, giving me a look that was both tender and authoritative. The dinner I'd wanted to prepare was abandoned, and now all I wanted to eat was this hunk of man.

"Were you there?" I whispered. "When I spoke to him?"

His eyes were locked on my face. "Yes."

“When are you not there?” He was the shadow cast by the sun in the morning, the shadow from the torches that burned in the dark. Always with me, always watching.

“When you can’t feel me.”

“But why do you watch?”

A long stare ensued, his eyes drinking mine in as he tried to find the words to form an answer. “Because you’re the only thing that brings me joy.” His thumb left my face, and his hand sank deeper into the hair at the back of my neck. “The way your hair moves in the breeze. The hardness in your eyes when you’re provoked. The way they soften when you look upon someone you love. You’re protected by the invisible armor you wear, but I notice its absence in the presence of your mother and father. I’ve come to know your life through your perspective, come to know you better than through any conversation we could have. And knowing you...settles the cracks in my heart.”

A flush of joy and pain rushed through my heart simultaneously. My feet didn’t leave the floor, but I felt myself fall forward. Fall forward into this man who wasn’t even real, who didn’t truly draw breath the way I did.

“You’re the most exceptional woman I’ve ever met, Lily Rothschild.”

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He didn't compliment my appearance like most men did. He complimented my character, seemed entranced by it, and it was the first time a man had done so...besides my father.

I rose on my tiptoes and caught his lips with my mouth. Our mouths came together with the softness of clouds, but it still caused a firestorm in my veins. The heat between us was scalding, but it burned my body deep beneath the flesh.

He met my desire with his own. With sheathed intensity, he kissed me slowly, felt my lips with purpose. Then his big arms lifted me, and he carried me to the couch in front of the fire. He dropped down into the seat and pulled me on top of him, like he wanted me to do the work tonight.

He pulled my shirt over my head and exposed my tits. The second they were within sight, he bathed them in kisses, worshipping my body like I was a statue of a goddess. He didn't take a bite of my flesh, but he devoured me like a meal he'd been craving all day.

He removed my panties and left my socks, and I tugged off his trousers before I straddled him once more, a beast of a man underneath me, almost too big to ride. I gripped his shoulders for balance, and he guided himself inside me, the arousal and desperation a cloud in his gaze.

I'd seen men want me, seen the flames of desire burn in their eyes, but the look Wrath gave me was different. Like he wanted more than my body, but my mind, my soul, my entire essence.

When we came together, I winced and whimpered because his entry was also intrusive. But then my slickness did its job, and the pain turned into pleasure. It was a tight fit—any more girth would have been a deal breaker for me.

He gripped my hips and then my ass, guiding me on top of him, showing me the way he wanted me to rock my hips to take him. His eyes were on mine, and his breaths slowly increased like he needed air the way I did. His stare burned in molten flames, and he clutched me harder as we moved together.

His hand went to my throat, and he squeezed as I continued to ride his length. “Xivin...” With his quiet confidence, he possessed me, made me his without my cooperation. He’d slowly taken me piece by piece, deepened a connection that was supposed to be only flesh.

My arms circled his neck, and I brought my body closer to his, my tits grazing his hard chest as I moved, feeling our lungs ache for breath at the same time. My fingers dug into the back of his hair, and I felt my body grind against his harder. He was the sexiest man I’d had in my bed, the sexiest man who had been underneath me with muscle on muscle, with a height that really did make him a monster, and he was the dirtiest secret I’d ever kept.

I’d bedded him enough to know his tells, and I knew he stood on the same threshold but was kind enough to wait for me to walk through first. His dick was harder than stone and loaded like a cannon ready to fire.

I came first, slathering his dick in my cream, digging my nails into flesh covered in sweat. He felt bigger as I squeezed, felt thicker than the trunk of an ancient tree. My eyes closed briefly before I found his again, seeing the same intensity as the moment when we met—when he’d looked like he’d wanted to kill me.

He gripped me harder than he probably meant to and gave his final pumps, making

me grind harder against him as he released his desire deep inside me. His hands were so big on my petite body, powerful enough to kill me with a single squeeze. But when he held me, it felt safe rather than threatening, felt like home rather than a foreign place.

He finished with a quiet moan then sank into the cushion as he relaxed, but his eyes were still hard on mine like his desire hadn't been satiated. A single round was never enough for him. If anything, it was a warm-up.

He scooped his hands underneath my thighs and lifted me as he stood, before he carried me toward the bedroom, his hard dick still crammed inside me and ready for another go. He rolled me onto the bed and moved with me, forcing me open and tilting my pelvis as far as it could go. Then he pounded into me so hard it was like he hadn't had me in a week, let alone seconds.

I lay in bed with him beside me, the fire in the hearth keeping out the winter cold, but it was his body that kept the heat right against my skin, made the sheets feel like spring sunshine. I trailed my fingers over his thick arm, following one of the rivers of his veins, a vein that no longer carried blood.

As always, he stayed. Never had somewhere else to be. "I can tell it's still bothering you."

My fingers left his arm, and I met his stare.

"I can listen."

"I don't want to bore you with my family problems."

"Your problems are my problems."

“Are they?” I whispered. “Because you’re dead and I’m alive.”

He stared into my eyes for a while. “You make me feel alive.”

This was not the Wrath I’d met weeks ago. He didn’t come to me in his king’s uniform and his heavy sword. He didn’t come to me with contention and distance. Now, he came to me like...he was the closest person to me. “My loyalty is ripped in two. I want to defend my father the way he’s always defended me, but that’s hard to do.”

“Because your brother’s claims are true.”

My eyes shifted away, partly in shame. “Admitting that to Hawk will just make it worse.”

“An admission on your part won’t change the situation.” His big hand skated over my body, feeling my soft skin under the sheets, following the swell of my hip to the valley of my waist. “This issue doesn’t concern you.”

“But it does concern me.” My eyes dropped to his chin and the haze of his chest in the background. “When I sparred with my father, I even accused him of it—jokingly, of course. But it wasn’t a joke.” My hand gently planted against his hard chest, and I expected to feel a heartbeat, but there was nothing but warm stone basking in the sun. “I’ve always felt a special connection with my father. He always told me how blessed he was to have me. That I was a gift he’d prayed for. And he told me he’d always wanted a daughter, when most kings wanted sons and heirs. But not him. I’ve never understood why.” I stared at his chest for several hard seconds, feeling the warmth slowly fade from his skin when I sucked it all away. My eyes lifted to his once more.

His eyes remained rigid in place, locked in the ironclad stare that he always gave me. It was equally possessive and gentle. His hand had gone still on my waist, and slowly,

the heat from his palm started to fade.

“Do you know why?” His stare was as stoic, but a glint deep inside those eyes hinted at something more. I wouldn’t have noticed it when we’d met or in the week that passed after, but now I knew him well enough to pick up on these slight changes in his mood. I should only know his surface, but at some point, I’d descended beneath his waves and explored his depths.

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His eyes remained hard and still, but the energy around him changed, seeped out of his skin and infected me.

“Will you tell me?”

“It’s not my place to share.”

My heart stiffened in my chest. Whatever had transpired with my father was more than a simple feeling. It was something physical, something that Wrath could see. “I wish I could talk to him about it. Wish I could talk to him about this too.”

“This?” he whispered.

“Us.” Sleeping with Wrath one time was the extent of my obligation, but now I couldn’t imagine ever asking him to leave. Couldn’t imagine replacing him with another man...one who had a heartbeat.

His range of expressions was limited, but he displayed hints of thoughts in the subtle movements of his eyes. “And what would be the contents of this conversation?”

“Despite your title, I don’t believe you’re evil.” I’d seen no hint of malice since we’d met. All I’d seen was a man literally part the sea to keep me alive. A man make love to me like I was his wife rather than fuck me like I was his whore. “Before I left these shores on my journey, he made me promise not to travel to your island. Demanded my oath like it was life-and-death. Perhaps your predecessor was different?—”

“He was vile and full of malice and absolute evil. This is a job I’m condemned to

have, but for him, it was a hobby.”

Pity rose in my heart because I could feel the sincerity in his words. I could feel his goodness every time I touched his chest. Could feel a heartbeat that didn’t exist.

“I can’t tell you how your father would react to that provocation. I can’t see the future. But I can relive the past—and I can show you his story. Or you can wait until he’s ready to share it on his terms.”

I knew the right thing to do was to be patient and wait for my father to share it with me willingly. But he’d told me he would tell me about the island when I returned, and he never did. Whenever I asked him for details, he gave none. I didn’t believe he hid the past from me maliciously. It was just too hard to talk about. Maybe experiencing the past was the only way I’d be able to get my answers. “Show me.”

We left the villa and stepped into the courtyard. It was vacant except for the lit braziers, the enormous fires continuing to crackle and burn as a gust of wind passed through. It was a clear night, the stars unusually bright without the cloud cover.

Wrath was in his uniform once again, the enormous blade across his back, looking like a king who was about to conquer foreign lands. His cape moved behind him as he walked, and he was so tall and enormous that he looked like every soldier’s worst nightmare.

He stopped and stared at one of the olive trees.

If anyone entered the courtyard, they would see me standing there alone, without any purpose for being there in the middle of the night. The castle stood tall in the background, most of the windows dark except one or two.

Wrath turned back to me and gave me a hard stare in silence.

I'd become accustomed to that stare, but its potency still left me weak.

“Shall I proceed?”

I nodded.

He faced forward once again, and for a heavy moment, nothing transpired. The nighttime air was still quiet, the braziers crackled as they burned. It was a peaceful night, reminding me of a warm summer evening...but without the summer or the warmth.

And then it suddenly changed.

Trees that had been there since I could remember were gone. The cloudless sky had suddenly become thick with smoke, so thick that the stars were hidden away behind the veil of destruction. Shouts and screams came from the distance, somewhere below the cliff toward the village. Luminous scales passed in the dark then disappeared.

I knew none of this was real, but I moved closer to Wrath anyway.

Then I heard a voice I'd recognize anywhere.

“Rooooooooooooooooarrrrrr!”

I jolted as I looked up into the sky and pictured the black scales in my mind, the mighty dragon that loved me like his own hatchling. I didn't see him until he landed on the stone courtyard—and upon his back was my father.

My father didn't climb from the saddle. He jumped straight down and landed hard on the stone, but he was on his feet a second later, like the distance of the fall and the weight of his armor and sword were inconsequential.

He unsheathed his blade and walked forward.

I took another step back...because I'd never seen my father look that way. Since he didn't age, his appearance was identical, but his spirit...was one I didn't recognize. Angry tears glistened in his eyes and nearly broke past his bottom lids. His stare was an inferno that burned hotter than the fire in Khazmuda's belly. Fully sheathed in the black armor with the dragon crest in the center and his cape behind him, he was the mighty king I'd heard of in tales.

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I recognized the moment based on the stories I had heard. It was the moment my father reclaimed the Southern Isles in his name, usurped the tyrant who had nearly condemned his homeland to extinction.

“Why are you showing me this?” I turned back to Wrath.

His eyes remained on my father as he walked past us. “You will see.”

I turned back to my father, who was rushed by a dozen soldiers in charge of protecting the castle. I felt a jolt of fear when I watched him battle them single-handedly, and I reminded myself that I didn’t need to worry about the outcome of this battle. With a ferocity he’d never shown me when we sparred, he cut down the soldiers like they’d personally wronged him.

And then they began to scream.

Soldiers who had just been executed sprang up from the ground and continued the fight—but against the other soldiers. The earth moved from the cemetery, and corpses that were mostly bones climbed out and surrounded the fray on all sides.

My eyes couldn’t believe what they were seeing—an army of the dead.

I moved close enough to Wrath that I could feel his arm. “What—what is happening?”

He didn’t answer.

The last soldier was slain and hit the ground, but then eyes snapped open once again, and he took his rank—behind my father.

My father stepped forward and drew closer to the double doors of the castle. In present times, it had the family name Rothschild carved into the wood. But at this time, there was a different name. Augustus.

“Fight me like a man, or die like a coward.” A gust of wind blew through and flapped my father’s cape into the air. He brandished his sword at his side, and even from the rear, he looked villainous. “Barron!”

I’d never seen my father so angry. Didn’t think he was capable of being that angry.

Then the doors slowly swung open, and the man I assumed to be Barron came forth, dressed in hard armor similar to my father’s, followed by his two sons. Barron was a decade or so older than my father, at least in appearance. He was heavier and looked unmatched athletically to battle my father with the sword. But he was fused with a dragon, and using that reserve of power would make him formidable.

There was a silent standoff, and even though I knew the outcome of this, I held my breath anyway.

Barron was the first to speak. “I look upon the Death King, a necromancer who’s taken the Northern Kingdoms with fiery death. But I still see Talon Rothschild—a boy.”

I spoke in a hushed whisper, like the past would be able to hear me. “A necromancer...”

Barron unsheathed his blade and stepped forward. “You’ve come all the way here to join your kin—how touching.”

They exchanged more threats back and forth, and then the silence was interrupted by a roar from a dragon I didn't recognize. "Roooooaaaaarrrrrr!" Nearly twice the size of Khazmuda, he appeared, going straight for Khazmuda in the skies above. Fire from their mouths erupted and sprayed the courtyard, setting the trees and brush aflame. Constantine tried to burn my father, but my father evaded the fire and regained his stance. The place erupted in flames, and soon, every living thing was set ablaze. The smoke was worse than it'd been moments ago, and now the sky was a combination of ash and fire.

Then I heard the drums.

Thump. Thump. Thump.

Except there were no drums. The dead began to beat the hilt of their blades against their chest plates, all in sync. They surrounded my father and his opponents, not intervening in the oncoming battle but participating with their intimidation. The beats became louder as they slammed their swords harder.

I looked around at the dead corpses that haunted my father's opponents, my own ancestors who took up one last call to fight.

Then my father joined in, his fist to his chest, hitting it so hard it seemed like the plate would cave in from his beating fist. He approached Barron with his sword in his grasp, the world hot from the flames that surrounded them both. "This is for my mother." He continued forward, beating his chest along with the dead. "For my sister, Rosella."

Barron readied his sword. So did Jairo and Kael behind him. They did their best not to appear afraid—but they were definitely unnerved.

"For my brother, Silas." My father started to raise his voice. "For King Bolton

Rothschild—my father.” He came toward Barron and stopped beating his chest. And the second he did, so did the dead who supported him. When he spoke again, it was a scream that I would never forget. “And for Vivian and Lena—my wife and daughter—the people I loved most. You took them from me—and now I’ll take everything from you!”

I watched my father defeat his enemies with angry tears and burn them alive. I watched as my castle burned, as the courtyard was destroyed by fire and ash. I watched my father reclaim his lands in our family name.

But now, I saw it differently.

The moment abruptly changed when Wrath took me to the same place, but a different day. Now, it was sometime in the middle of the night because it was dark and no one was around. The smell of ash was still potent. The stakes where Barron and his family had burned were just a pile of ash now. All the trees and flowers had been destroyed by the carnage.

My father no longer trembled with rage he could barely contain. His eyes were dry, but he looked so devastated, it was like he’d lost the battle. I’d never seen him look that way in my memory, even when I disobeyed him and he punished me, or when he was stressed about a food shortage in the kingdom or the horrible drought we had one summer.

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This misery was different.

Then a man appeared out of nothing—just like Wrath.

Dressed in the dark-blue uniform that Wrath himself wore, he looked like a king, the two-handed blade across his back. But this man was different in appearance, with blond hair and blue eyes. He was handsome like Wrath, but just from a single look, I could tell he was vile. “What have you decided?”

My father gave no distinct reaction at his appearance, like he’d expected this. “How will it happen...if I don’t choose her?”

Choose who?

“I’ll take your soul, here where you stand, and they’ll find your body at dawn. But you can avoid that, Talon Rothschild. Your dragon has agreed to serve you in this task.”

“How do you know that...?”

“Because I see everything—even when you don’t see me.”

I didn’t know my father was a necromancer, and I didn’t know that he’d made a deal with the God of the Underworld. And I didn’t know what they spoke of now. My father’s shoulders were heavy from an invisible burden, and all the fire he had during the battle had burned to ash.

“Queen Eldinar occupies a tent with her husband to the south of the city. Slit his throat. Knock her out. Carry her from the camp to the outskirts where Khazmuda can meet you. He can carry her to my lands while you remain behind. No one will suspect you, and no one will notice that Khazmuda is gone.”

“She’s the one you want, isn’t she?”

Aunt Eldinar?

“Don’t be jealous, Talon Rothschild. You may be a king to men, but she’s a queen to something far greater. If you fail to choose her, you’ll devastate the two that love you unconditionally. Imagine Calista’s face at the sight of your body. She’s lost so much—and now she’ll lose you. And your dragon, your closest friend and confidant, the one who will grieve for you the most. While your service in the underworld will be agonizing, it will pale to the hurt they must carry for the rest of their lives.” He cocked his head slightly. “Can you really betray those you love most?” He was different from Wrath in every distinguishable way. Whenever he spoke, it was with barely contained mirth, like the suffering of others was truly addictive.

My father was quiet for a long time. He seemed to be soaking in his surroundings, even if most of it was scorched to nothing. “I’m the one who made this deal. I’m the one who must suffer the consequences.” His voice shook as he spoke, an invisible doom cast directly over him. My father had never sounded so wounded, like his entire body was pierced with little daggers. It was hard to watch. “I can’t let her take my place.”

“So be it.” Within the blink of an eye, Bahamut changed, shedding his human form for the monster underneath. His skin was gray, the muscles exposed without skin, his dead heart visibly beating on the surface of his chest. He was suddenly two feet taller, with his eyes a solid black color. He pressed a palm to my father’s chest and broke through the armor.

Tears burst into my eyes, and I looked away, unable to watch what came next. “Stop. Make it stop.”

It suddenly went silent.

All I could hear was the sound of the torches and braziers.

But my eyes were still clenched shut, and I was afraid to breathe.

Wrath moved in front of me and gently grabbed the tops of my arms. “It’s gone.”

It took several breaths before I had the courage to open my eyes. They were wet, wet enough that tears dripped.

“You know how this story ends. It’s okay, Xivin.” His hands went to my cheeks, and both of his thumbs caught the tears as they streaked to my lips. He was Bahamut’s replacement, but he was so gentle and tender.

“So...what happened?”

“After your father lost his family, he sought out Bahamut on the seas. When he found him, he made a deal. He would forfeit his eternal soul in exchange for the power to reclaim his kingdom and avenge his loved ones.” His hands slid down to my neck and cradled my face. “That’s what gave him the power to command the dead.”

“So Bahamut...took him to the underworld?”

He nodded.

“How—how did he escape?”

“Queen Eldinar and your mother petitioned Riviana, the God of Caelum. Your father had previously saved the Great Tree in Riviana Star, the gateway to the Realm of Caelum, so Riviana opened the portal that separated the realms and freed him from his imprisonment. But when she did so, the portal remained open, and Bahamut became mortal and led his army to the Great Tree to take the Realm of Caelum for himself. A great battle took place, and your father prevailed with the aid of the dragons he saved.”

“I didn’t know any of this.” I felt like an immense piece of my family history had been kept from me.

“It was a victorious time—and also a painful one,” he said. “I was appointed as Bahamut’s successor shortly afterward. Your father made a deal and didn’t uphold his end of the bargain, and that has angered me for these last decades.”

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“Why?” I stepped back and let his hands fall from my body. “Why is that so egregious to you?”

He stared at me for a long time before he finally blinked. But he didn’t blink again.

“Why?” I remembered his anger when he’d spoken on the island. How he would enforce my father’s oath if I didn’t comply with his demands. He was so angry it seemed like a personal slight to him.

“Because everyone else who’s ever made a deal has been bound by it. How many have come before and after Talon Rothschild, asking for a pardon for a deal they were delirious enough to make? How many souls begged for a reprieve and received none? Talon Rothschild not only got what he wanted, but he also got his soul and his life and his family. He’s the only one who ever has, and it’s an insult to all those who weren’t so lucky.” His tenderness evaporated, and a potent anger remained behind. He’d stared at me as his lover a moment ago, but now, as his enemy.

My instinct was to snap back, but the clouds parted in my mind, and I suddenly understood. “You’ve asked for freedom...and were denied.”

“I’ve asked many times. And even when my debt was fulfilled, Bahamut denied my request—and smiled as he did so. Your father was fortunate enough to have his soul guarded by a ferocious dragon that would not let it be taken by the forces of evil. He was fortunate enough to be loved by a woman who would risk her own soul to free him. He was fortunate enough to have earned the friendship of a queen who would risk her life for their friendship. I had none of that. And all those I left behind were led to believe the worst about me...” He inhaled a short breath, and a mist appeared in his

eyes. “It’s a weight I’ve carried alone for three hundred and seventy-seven years, and just when I think the weight has lessened, it comes back heavier than before.”

He still didn’t reveal the details of his imprisonment, but the lack of information was somehow worse. I wondered what he had forfeited his soul for. What continued to haunt him hundreds of years later. “Wrath?—”

“Why does Talon Rothschild deserve peace, and I don’t?” he snarled. “Why does he deserve to be pardoned, while the rest of us suffer for all eternity? His request was selfish—mine was sacrificial.”

I stepped toward him. “Wrath?—”

He was gone. Disappeared in the blink of an eye.

I wondered if he was still there, watching me from the shadows, but I didn’t feel his presence. Didn’t feel his invisible shroud of safety that cocooned me wherever I was.

He was gone.

11

LILY

When a week passed and Wrath didn’t visit me, I feared he would never visit me again.

I stayed home every night and hoped he would show. When I prepared dinner, I glanced up more times than I could count and hoped I’d see him standing across the kitchen. My mind constantly reached for his, trying to feel him in every room I stepped into, hoping he was there watching me.

But I never felt him.

I'd done nothing to deserve his silence and distance, but I felt responsible for it anyway. It was the first time he'd shown the weight of his grief—and now I wished I didn't know. His bitterness was like fire to my skin. His pain was like a dagger in my throat. Whenever he hurt, it hurt me too.

For a man who was a temporary addition to my bed, I shouldn't care so much.

But I cared deeply.

Lily.

I felt Zehemoth's voice in my mind, felt his concern when all he said was my name.

I've felt your sorrow for days. I wanted to respect your privacy, but it's gone on so long, I don't think I can.

Having the blood of dragons was an exciting honor, but sometimes it was a pain in the ass. Thoughts and emotions were never entirely your own, not when they were intense like mine must be. Because we weren't fused, most of my emotions were my own, but apparently this sadness was like a bonfire. I'm okay, Zehemoth.

But you don't feel okay.

I was inside my villa with sunshine coming through the window. I would normally venture outside and fish for dinner or help out at the winery or head into the village, but for the past week, I'd literally done nothing.

Thud.

I felt the ground shudder from the weight of a dragon. “Dammit”

I want to see you.

I had a glass of wine on the counter beside me, so I downed the rest of it before I walked outside onto the grass, Zehemoth’s midnight-black scales out of place in the lush grass and oak trees. They glistened in the sunlight, and I knew from experience that they were warm to the touch.

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Zehemoth lowered his chin toward the earth to get a good look at me. Sunieth. He moved his snout forward and rubbed his scales into my abdomen.

It was hard to resist a hug from a creature so sweet, so I rubbed my palm over his scales and rested my cheek against the warmth of his hard shell. The sun had made the dark color reflect the heat, so it was comforting on a winter day like this. "I'm okay, Zehemoth."

But your sadness is deep like the ocean. I can't see the bottom. After he rubbed me again, he pulled away so eyes matching his scales could look at me.

"You didn't mention this to your father, right?"

No. Why?

"Let's just keep this between us."

Then you'll tell me the source of your unhappiness?

It was a secret too big to tell. When I hadn't wanted to be queen, Zehemoth had informed his father, who informed mine. It wasn't that I didn't trust him. It was just a situation so profound that he would probably fear for my safety enough to tell my father. "I've been seeing someone...but I think it might be over."

Oh...He didn't follow up with questions, either to respect my privacy or because he didn't know what to ask. I can burn him for hurting you.

A scoff started before it turned into a chuckle. “That won’t be necessary.”

I could eat all his livestock.

“No, it’s okay.”

I could?—

“No retaliation is required, Zehemoth. But thank you.”

Let me know if you change your mind. I could crush him in my talons.

“I know.” I patted him on the snout.

Did you have a fight?

“Yes...we did.”

My parents fight. It’s not the end.

I smiled. “Your parents are bonded forever and madly in love. He and I...” I didn’t even know how to describe it. “It was supposed to be temporary.”

If you knew it was supposed to be temporary, then why are you sad?

“Because...” I didn’t have an answer. And that moment of silence made me realize how complicated my situation had become. I was sad over a man I should have dismissed after our first night together. A man who would never be real, who would never share the same world with me. “You’re right...I shouldn’t be sad.”

I arrived at the castle to join my parents for dinner.

Hawk was already there, but he was quiet and sour, as if our last conversation continued to act as an anchor to his ship. I assumed he hadn't confronted my father about his true feelings, that my parents just assumed Hawk was being a sore loser about losing the crown to his sister.

We talked about small things through the first and second course, the mild weather we were having for the heart of winter. We discussed Khazmuda and his family in the valley, who were worried about wildfires because of how dry the air was. The dragons were forbidden from releasing fire until we had rain.

I sat across from my father as I picked at my food, unable to look at him the same way. The fact that he looked identical to the memory Wrath had shown me didn't help either. Just made it more real.

My eyes glanced at my mother, the woman I assumed was my father's only love.

But he'd had a life before her. Had a life before Hawk and I were born.

As if he felt my stare like a shadow across his face, he shifted his gaze to me.

I immediately glanced down at my food and stabbed my fork hard into my salad, unnecessarily so. The guilt was like a sickness that consumed the flesh, eating me to the bone. I'd violated his privacy in a way he never would have violated mine—and it felt wrong. But my heart felt consumed by the black void of death, knowing what my father had lost. Only now did I understand why it was so hard for him to let me sail away on my journey. The constant turmoil it must have caused him night and day. When the storm struck the sea and he set out with Khazmuda, he'd probably feared he would never find me—and if he was lucky, he would find my corpse to bury.

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His stare was still on my face. I could feel it like the touch of his hand.

My mother continued to speak to Hawk, the two of them oblivious to this silent standoff between my father and me.

When I refused to meet his look, he tried to break through my defenses differently. “How are you, Zunieth?”

I carried a grief that I’d never expected to hold. In my mind, my hands started to slip through the tears that I imagined dripping to my fingers. My time with Viper had been passionate and fun, but I’d been able to walk away from him with only a pinch of sadness. But fearing that I would never see Wrath again...felt like a winter storm that would never abate. “I’m well. What about you?”

He cocked his eyebrow slightly, probably because he’d never heard me respond so formally. “I’ve been in conversation with our allies. No one knows anything about the ships you described.”

The Barbarians. “Then perhaps they were just passing through.”

“Hopefully.” He took a drink of his wine then sat back in the chair when the main course was served. A piece of white fish in a cream sauce with sauteed spinach and potatoes. He didn’t seem interested in the food, meeting my gaze across the table like he wanted to say more but didn’t want to pursue a line of questioning in front of my brother. He eventually grabbed his fork and ate the dinner that the servants provided.

We all fell into silence, like we all had different matters on our minds.

I walked through the courtyard and headed to my villa, my stomach full but my heart empty.

Would Wrath never come to me again?

Was it just...over?

“Zunieth.”

I halted when I heard my father’s voice behind me. The sky was dark and covered in brilliant stars, a fluff of clouds here and there. The moonlight was so bright we didn’t even need the torches or the braziers. The gnawing of guilt in my stomach doubled when I knew I was about to face him in the very place where I’d discovered his past.

I turned to face him. “Did you need something?” Acting normal when I felt anything but was a lot harder than I thought it would be. My voice didn’t sound the same. It was slightly higher than it usually was. I noticed it, but did he notice it?

My father came before me, dressed in casual attire in his trousers and long-sleeved shirt but still looking as kingly as he had in his armor when he’d defeated his adversaries while surrounded by his army of the dead, surrounded by my ancestors who’d taken up arms once more. His dark eyes shifted back and forth between mine as he analyzed me. “The flow of your river has changed direction, and I don’t know why. What troubles you?”

“Nothing—”

“Your mother does the same thing,” he said gently. “And you look so much like her that I can read you like words on a page. Did something happen between you and your brother?”

He would never guess the source of my unease. It was impossible to do so. “No. Hawk and I talked it out. He said he supports my rulership with his heart and his sword.”

“Then what troubles you?”

I should be relieved that the God of the Underworld had left my presence forever, but I was devastated. And that was what was wrong. When had I become so attached? When had this clandestine affair become so deep? “Nothing.”

His eyes narrowed slightly. “What have I done to make you drop me as a confidant? You know you can always come to me. What has changed to make you doubt that now?”

My heart had been shattered into pieces with Wrath’s departure. But it had also been shattered when I’d watched my father grieve in battle, raise his sword and strike down his enemy while he shed tears of unbridled agony. I knew his family had been burned at the stake, and to know the woman he’d loved before my mother had burned...and so had his daughter, was just too much. Now I understood why he loved me and treasured me so deeply. Why my middle name was Lena. Why he’d wanted a daughter instead of a son. If only I could tell Hawk this, he would understand my father’s favoritism—but I could never explain how I knew. “I’m sorry I sailed away on that journey.” Tears burned in the backs of my eyes, and I tried so hard to fight them, to sheathe the pain I carried for my father. Perhaps this was why he didn’t want me to know.

The hardness in his eyes and face suddenly softened when he heard the sincerity of my words. He turned rigid, frozen in place by the agonized words I spoke.

“I’m sorry that I put you through that.” I never would have gone if I’d known what he’d suffered. If I’d understood the pain and terror it would cause him. If I’d known

he'd already lost a daughter once.

His softness waned as he studied me, desperately trying to understand the source of my words. "Why do you say this, Lily?"

"All I thought about was myself. Not you and Mom."

"Zunieth, it's not your job to worry about me and your mother."

"Even so...I'm sorry for the pain I caused you."

He continued to stare at me, his eyes a mixture of confusion and emotion, but he didn't press me with questions to understand where this began. "You can't be proud of who you are without acknowledging the suffering it took to make you. It was a difficult time for your mother and me, but it taught me to have faith in the daughter I raised, to believe that she would prevail without my protection. The same journey taught you resilience and strength, showed you have what it takes to survive, that you will succeed as queen once that day comes. It was difficult for both of us, but it's also made us better." His hand went to my arm. "Don't carry my suffering as your burden. It's my job to worry incessantly and deeply for your well-being every single day that I draw breath—and I consider it a blessing to do so."

I sniffed to steady the tears, but that made them squeeze from my eyes.

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His eyes frantically shifted back and forth between mine. “Lily, are you sure there’s nothing else wrong?”

“Yes.” I sniffed again and forced the tears to stop. “I just...” I swallowed my emotions and forced myself to regain my calm. “I know I’m a blessing to you. But you’re also a blessing to me.”

Once I was in the privacy of my villa, I let the tears stream free.

It was an ugly sob, the kind that made me gasp for breath, made my hands hide my face even though there was no one there to witness my tears. My heart ached and my chest squeezed. Everything hurt.

“Xivin.” Big hands gently squeezed my wrists and started to pull my hands from my face.

I gasped then turned away from him, leaving his hold. I was shocked he was there, but deep in the throes of my pain, I didn’t react to it. My back remained to him to hide my blotched and puffy face, to hide my weakness that I never showed to anyone. I cried so hard I couldn’t even find the words to respond to his presence.

He moved into me, hooked his arms across my chest, and gently tugged me into him, holding me from behind.

My hands automatically grabbed on to his forearms because it was comforting to be squeezed. My deep breaths slowly faded, and I took a long descent to calm. My chest rose and fell with big swells, but they slowly decreased as my eyes ran dry.

His chin rested on my head as he waited patiently.

I was broken by my father's grief but also overjoyed that Wrath had returned to me. It was the biggest contradiction of emotions I'd ever felt in my life.

He gently shifted me in his arms, at first seeing if I would cooperate instead of fight, and then he turned me completely to face him, his eyes on my beet-red face. He took me in with a moment of silence before he cupped my cheek. "What happened?"

"I didn't think you'd come back..." I turned into his palm, severing our eye contact because I didn't want to watch him look at me, see the mess I'd become.

"At first, I needed time...and then duty required me elsewhere."

I was still angry he'd left me for so long. Still mortally wounded by his absence. "You can't just do that." I stepped out of his grasp and rejected his touch, even though I longed for it like a warm fire in the snow.

He let me go.

"I said I needed time?—"

"And I didn't know if you were ever going to return." I felt my chest swell once more with angry emotion. "How was I supposed to feel? One day turned into two, and then two turned into seven, and then I feared that we were done. Who the fuck does that?"

He stared me down without needing to blink, that intensity white-hot. "I will always return, Xivin." He stepped closer to me, shirtless and a powerhouse of muscle and warm skin. "You know that."

My eyes shifted away when I couldn't handle his stare.

“Always.”

The depth of his sincerity made me shift my eyes back.

His stare was more intense than before, angry at my doubt and stirred by my turmoil.

His reassurance was like sunshine to my petals, warmth to my soil. It made me feel so much that my emotion immediately shifted back to dread. “When did this happen?” I spoke barely above a whisper, to myself and not loudly.

He gave no reaction, so it was unclear whether he heard it or not. Until he spoke. “The moment our eyes met on a dead island with trees made of stone. That’s when it happened, Xivin.”

My ducts had run dry, and now my throat felt like sandpaper. A drought had overcome me.

“Tell me your sorrow.”

I gave a slight shake of my head.

“I need to know why I was met with your rivers of tears. I need to know I didn’t cause them, and if I did, I need to know that as well so I can plead for your forgiveness.” He was barefoot and bare-chested, regarding me like a lover who shared my space, with the hard density of a stone statue and the presence of a mighty king.

I took a heavy breath. “My father and I spoke in the courtyard before I came home. I grieved for his loss, even though he doesn’t know the source of my sadness. I told him I was sorry that I left on the journey. I told him how grateful I am that he’s my father. I don’t want to see him differently, but it’s hard not to.”

Instead of growing angry at the mention of my father, he kept his stare subdued. “I don’t respect your father’s abandonment of his oath. But I respect him immensely as a father. The way he loves you reminds me...” He paused, and then his throat shifted when he swallowed.

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“Reminds you of what?” I whispered.

He never answered. “Not all people are meant to be parents. But he was always meant to be a father. I hope you judge him less for his obvious favoritism toward you. You’re the second chance he thought he might never have. You’re the balm to his wounds—which are still raw to this day.”

“I wish my brother knew.”

“Perhaps when Hawk confronts him, he’ll share that tale.”

I would never forget the image in my mind, the way my father battled three grown men with the ferocity of a dragon. He never battled me that way, showed a strength that only a god could possess. The fire in his veins was fueled by the forges of his rage—and those fires might never burn again. “I don’t think he will.” I didn’t think he ever intended to tell us about Vivian...or Lena.

Wrath’s arms were idle by his sides, and he studied my face with calm. “That loss is not yours to grieve.”

“She was my sister...my half sister.”

“But if she had lived, you would never have been born.”

“It still makes me sad. I wonder if my mother knows...”

“She does,” he said quietly.

Now I understood why the white flowers were always at their grave—because my father still loved them both...even after all this time.

After a heavy silence, Wrath moved into me again, this time cupping my face with both hands.

The distance between our hearts crippled my soul, so I melted into his touch and stepped closer to him right away, my lips finding his with softness. I missed the touch of his skin, the way he smelled, the way he could say so much without saying a word.

He kissed me back and gently pulled my bottom lip into his mouth before he let it go. “You aren’t mad at me anymore.”

“No, I am.”

He pulled back slightly to look at me.

“But I fucking missed you.”

He never smiled, but there was a hint of it now, one corner of his lips rising. He slid his hand into my hair and pulled it farther back before he dipped his head and kissed me. The kiss was slow and purposeful, full of passion and depth, not lust and desire. It was how he always kissed me, like he wanted all of me, not just a temporary piece.

He scooped his hands underneath my thighs, and he lifted me into him before he carried me to my bedroom. As always, he tenderly laid me on the bed before he slipped off my shoes and undressed me. He stood to his full height before he removed his bottoms, thick and tall like a mighty tree, his veins as roots.

It was hard to stay mad when he looked like that. Six and a half feet of man and muscle and power. His knees hit the bed, and he moved over me, making me sink

into the mattress before he folded me the way he wanted me. Holding himself above me, he looked down at me, eyes focused on my face and not my body, looking at me like my eyes were stars in the sky or sunset on a summer evening.

He made me feel seen when I never felt invisible. Made me feel special when I never felt ordinary. Made me feel so much when I thought I could only feel so little. He licked his palm and smeared the head of his dick before he guided himself inside me, watching my reaction to him like I'd never taken it before. He sank slowly, filling me to the brim before most of his shaft was sheathed in my warmth. Then he anchored his hand in my hair like I might try to escape his hold, and he rocked into me, bringing life back into my cold body, chasing away my despair with his possession.

We lay in bed together, sometime in the middle of the night, the fire slowly dying in the other room.

I didn't care about the dwindling light or the cold that crept into the bedroom, because Wrath was enough to keep the sheets warm. His arm was hooked around my waist as he held me against him, half of my body on top of his, his lips resting on my forehead.

I was tired and could easily fall asleep, but I stayed awake because I wanted to enjoy this. I didn't realize how much peace he gave me until it was taken away. Until I slept alone every night and wished he were there with me.

"If you were my father, would you have done anything differently?"

He said nothing.

"You hate him, but anyone else would have done the same."

Still, nothing.

I pulled back and propped myself on my elbow so he couldn't hide from me, so I could look down at his face beneath me.

His arm was tucked behind his head as he lay on the pillow. Not a hint of rage showed in his eyes, just calmness. "No...I wouldn't have done anything differently. But our deals were inherently different, and there was no way for me to have escaped the way he did. Bahamut couldn't undo the progress that your father had made. But my request...could be undone with the snap of a finger."

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“What was your request?” I whispered. What had he asked for? What was worth an eternity in the underworld?

His silence was his answer.

“Why won’t you tell me?” It wasn’t the first time I’d asked, and I suspected it wouldn’t be the last.

His eyes were past me on the ceiling, a haze over his gaze like his thoughts were somewhere else. “Because it’s too painful for me to speak of.”

“Even after all this time?” I whispered.

“It will always be too painful to speak of.”

“Well...you could show me.” He’d shown me my father in the past, when he’d challenged a tyrant for his kingdom and his revenge. There was no reason Wrath couldn’t do the same with his own past.

His eyes shifted to me and remained steady.

I waited, hopeful.

But he gave me nothing. “I took out my resentment on you, and that was wrong. I apologize.”

It wasn’t what I wanted, but it was something. “It’s forgiven.”

His eyes finally shifted to me once more. His hand moved deep into my hair and lightly felt the strands with his touch.

“Do you hate my father?”

“No,” he said quietly. “It’s hard to hate the man who raised you. It’s hard to hate a man I respect. It’s hard to hate a man who loves the woman I...” His fingers paused on my hair and his eyes remained somber, but something had halted his words. “...I care so deeply for.”

“Why were you there?” I asked. “When he was training me?”

“Because I want you to succeed just as much as he does. You’re great with the sword and your reflexes are sharp, but there’s always room for improvement. You focus so much on your hands and generating strength with your arms that you forget your feet—and your body will follow your steps.”

My hand moved to his chest, and I gently grazed his skin, feeling muscles so hard they were more like stone. “What duties kept you from me?” They had kept him away from me for an entire week when he was usually with me every day.

“I was collecting payment.”

“From people who made a deal like my father did?”

“Yes.”

“And you make a deal with anybody?”

“No,” he said. “Many men have sought my audience, but few have received my cooperation.”

“Why some and not others?”

“It depends on the quality of their soul.”

“Quality of their soul?” I repeated.

“Yes,” he said. “Not everyone is equal in that regard. Bahamut granted your father command of the dead because his soul was more valuable than almost any other. It was worth the investment. The same applies to everyone else. I won’t make a trade if I feel that trade is not worthy.”

“And what makes a soul valuable?”

“The person who wields it. A soul is like a garden, and the height of its vines and the fruit it bears depend on the person who tills the soil. It’s not about being good or evil. It’s about strength and purpose, about accomplishment and power. Your father was not only of noble blood, but he was ambitious and powerful and one of the greatest swordsmen who’s ever lived. That made his soul potent.”

“And how does the potency benefit you?”

That was where he hesitated, shifted his gaze away for a moment. “The specifics don’t matter. I just want you to understand that not every person who steps before me earns my aid. I’ve turned down more men and women than I’ve accepted. And this week, I had to collect payment from dozens of people.”

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Now that I'd seen Bahamut in the flesh, seen him change from a man to a demon, I wondered if Wrath was the same. "Are you...are a monster like Bahamut?" Was the man in my bed just an enticing projection? "I saw him change. I saw him suddenly appear two feet taller with horns and talons..."

"No. Bahamut was one of the Covenant before he became King of the Dead."

"The Covenant?"

"The beings who rule the underworld."

"But you're the God of the Underworld."

"I'm more of a servant than a leader. If I were truly that powerful, then I would have left my post a long time ago."

"So...this is who you are?"

"Yes. My appearance is the same as when I was alive. The underworld is home to all sorts of monstrosities."

I was relieved that Wrath was unlike Bahamut. And if he were, I'd rather believe Wrath's lie than know the truth. "What is your life like down there?"

"Work never sleeps."

"Have you...had relationships down there?"

“No.”

“So, you’ve just been celibate? Or do you only sleep with the living?”

“I’m not celibate,” he said as he looked up at me. “And I told you I’ve never done this before.”

“I thought you hadn’t taken a woman to that island before.”

“I haven’t been with a mortal woman since I joined the underworld. My intimate encounters have been with others down below.”

My heart suddenly raced in dismay. “Have you been with others since we met?” We’d never outlined the expectations for this entanglement. We were supposed to sleep together once, but then it kept happening, and we never discussed the ramifications of that.

His eyes narrowed slightly—and he was angry. “You insult me.”

“I didn’t mean to insult you. We never actually talked about it?”

“You’re the only woman I want, Xivin. All those down below are heartless traitors and narcissists. They’re a means to an end when I grow desperate. You’re the first woman I’ve actually wanted in three hundred and seventy-seven years. This is the first time I’ve felt alive since I’ve been dead.”

“I didn’t mean to offend you.”

“I won’t ask you the same question in return because I don’t need to. I don’t need to outline the terms of our relationship because I feel the commitment between our hearts. I spend every spare moment I have with you or watching you because you’re

the soul that's been taken from me. You're the joy that's only been a memory these last hundreds of years. You stepped on my shores, and my life was forever scarred by the marks you left on my heart." He didn't raise his voice, but it felt like he did when he spoke so eloquently and so passionately. He lifted himself on his elbow to meet my stare, his eyes ruthless and authoritative once more. "You're the only woman I want—and don't ever question that again."

Wrath never left before I awoke.

It was noon when my eyes opened to the enormous man beside me, rivers of veins down both of his arms, his body a living mountain. His presence in my life had made me forget my obligations. Instead of helping villagers or spending time with Zehemoth, I was in bed with the sexiest man I'd ever laid eyes on.

The moment I was awake, he moved closer to me and kissed me, his big hand cupping my cheek.

It was such a nice way to start the day.

"I need to depart."

A wave of disappointment struck me and nearly made me drown.

He could clearly read it in my eyes. "I'll return this evening."

"Can we go to the island?" I asked, wanting warm sand underneath my feet. Wanting to listen to the sound of the waves as they washed up on the shore. To know it was just the two of us and the tropical breeze.

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He leaned down and kissed me again, this time harder. “Yes.” Then he pulled away and left the bed, and the second he was on his two feet, he disappeared—just like that.

I lay there until the sheets turned cold, until I had the energy to start my day. I bathed and dressed and then headed to the courtyard, where I would ask Zehemoth to meet me. Instead of meeting in our usual place, I took a short detour to the cemetery that housed my ancestors—the very ones who’d taken up their swords twentysomething years ago.

But I saw someone already there.

At Vivian and Lena’s headstone was my mother, and she bent down and placed a handful of white flowers at the base of the stone. Tied together with a stalk of wheat, the bouquet was stunning, full of spring that we didn’t have. They must have been taken from the greenhouse.

I watched her remain on her knees as she stared at the names etched in the stone. Watched her mourn for someone she never knew. A daughter who had never been hers. A woman whom her husband had loved before her.

My mom was the most amazing woman there ever was.

I walked over and looked at the names that were still sharp in the stone when others had faded, like she had one of the stoneworkers recarve the material to make it stand out once a year. “You’re the one who leaves the flowers...”

She didn't give a jolt in surprise at my sudden approach, either because she already knew I was there or because her thoughts were somewhere else. She rose to her feet and managed to greet me with a smile, always happy to see me like my father was. "It's important to remember those who came before us."

I stared at Lena's name—my namesake. "Who were they?" I hoped my mother would tell me the truth so I wouldn't have to carry the lie, but I knew she wouldn't.

"Rothschilds." She turned back to the stone again.

"Lena must have been important since I have her name as part of mine."

She stared at the headstone for a long time. "She was. Still is." A gust of air moved through her hair before she looked at me again. She moved toward me and circled her arm around my shoulders as she guided me away from the cemetery. She rubbed my back as she walked with me to one of the tall olive trees.

There was so much I wanted to say, but I knew I shouldn't say it.

"It's a beautiful day." She looked up into the cloudless sky before she looked at me, her eyes having the same tinge of emotion my father often carried. "How about a picnic? Just us girls."

I let her guide me away from the subject I wasn't allowed to breach. I didn't want to pressure her to expose a secret that wasn't hers to reveal. But I wanted her to know what she meant to me, how I admired her for having nothing but love in her heart. "You're amazing, Mom."

First, she expressed bewilderment. Then a rush of emotion spread across her features, and a blush filled her pale cheeks. "What makes you say that, sweetheart?"

I gave a shrug. “I just don’t say it enough.”

PROLOGUE V

WRATH

“Bahamut’s attack on the Realm of Caelum has failed.” Raul, one of the five of the Covenant, sat in the center on his black throne carved out of petrified stone. Fangs protruded from his mouth, curved horns like a ram sat upon his head, and talons long and sharp as daggers protruded from his fingers and toes. With skin made of scales, fibers over his chest where his black, beating heart pumped, he was another monster like the one we’d lost. Sometimes his eyes were black as the abyss, and sometimes they were red with flames.

I stood among the others at the bottom of the stairs, beside monsters, crippled servants, and courtesans who were forced to please him. All of us were scarred by Bahamut’s brutality—and I suspected no one cared that he was gone forever.

His fate was worse than death.

Because now he was nothing, part of the abyss to which so few had ever traveled.

“Another must take his place,” Raul continued. “Another must finish his work, pay his debts, continue to fuel the underworld with the souls of the foolish that sustain us all.” He looked across the crowd, as if searching for the replacement that very moment.

His eyes stopped on me.

I almost shook my head in silent protest.

“Wrath.” His deep voice echoed off the stone columns that surrounded the stone dais. His eyes now leaped in fiery flames. “You served your sire faithfully these last centuries. We have agreed to appoint you to this position.”

I did what I was told without a word. Internalized my torture and suffered in silence. I’d done so in the hope that some mercy would be granted to me, that I would be able to confess the truth to my boys. But that mercy had never come, and the Covenant misconstrued my silence as obedience. “I reject your proposal. Choose another.” I had served Bahamut intimately, knew exactly how to continue his position if I wished. But no part of me wanted something so foul.

It had already been quiet, but now, a palpable tension passed through the crowd. Slowly, all eyes turned on me, shocked that I would reject a position of honor and power. It was a job anyone there would be happy to take.

But not me.

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Raul's eyes danced with flames. He didn't look at the other members of the Covenant, who all stared at me with the same intensity. "Step forward, Wrath."

They had already taken everything from me. I had nothing left to lose.

I moved through the crowd and broke the line, reaching the bottom of the steps that rose to the platform. I stood and looked ahead with stoicism.

Raul stared me down, a demon several feet taller than me, giving me his ire until I looked away.

I continued to hold his stare.

"Leave us," he commanded.

The crowd started to part and head back to the castle. I turned with them, knowing my punishment would come later.

"Not you."

I stilled, feeling his stare piercing my back like a sharp knife.

Everyone else continued to disperse until I stood alone, stepping into the darkness outside the line of torches. My back remained to them until I found the strength to turn around and face their cruelty.

"Rise."

The other demons remained in their chairs and stared down at me with the same silent rage.

I resisted at first, hating my situation more than I ever had. All I had to do was mindlessly do what I was told, but this promotion would make me responsible for making deals, watching people make the greatest mistakes of their lives as I benefited from their foolishness. Not a single person came here without regret. It didn't always happen right away—sometimes it took time, and then it hit hard when they least expected it.

“Rise.”

I took a deep breath and let it out slowly, missing the time when my life was my own. When I made my own decisions and decisions for the good of my family. I rose up the steps and reached the dais where they were gathered, demons whose source of power was the souls they consumed.

Raul looked me over, his chin tilted down to regard me. My life had been spent being the tallest man in every room I stepped into, six and a half feet tall like one of the trees I cut down with my axe. But now, I was overshadowed by the demons that were tall like mountains. “It was not a request, Wrath.”

“I deny your request. There are others who are as capable for the position?—”

“Bahamut selected you to succeed him in the unlikely event of his demise. That unlikely event has come to pass, and now this task has been handed to you. You will carry this burden the way you've carried all your burdens.”

“The answer is no.”

A silence pierced the air around us. The flames in his eyes rose like a fresh log had

been thrown into his hearth. “Become God of the Underworld—or an Eater.”

A rush of bile moved through me.

“Serve the underworld—or serve us.”

Once the disgust flooded my mouth, it was all I could taste. Demons were like minerals that formed in the earth, over centuries and under the right conditions of moisture and darkness and erosion. To become a demon required the ingestion of souls over a great length of time, until you became an entity of the underworld itself.

Raul smiled and showed his two rows of razor-sharp teeth. He knew what I would choose.

But I couldn’t bring myself to say the words.

His smile widened. “Wrath, God of the Underworld and King of the Dead.” He raised his palm to me, his talons sharp enough to cut skin with a single touch. Invisible power radiated from his open palm, and then I was transformed.

The unremarkable attire I wore morphed into a uniform of dark blue with the skull crest in the center. The blade across my back suddenly weighed down my spine. Spiked gloves made of petrified stone covered my hands. The shackles of responsibility were chained to my wrists and hands. The cape hung behind me, lifeless in a world without wind or sky.

Raul slowly lowered his palm, but the smile remained. “All hail King Wrath.”

I watched Lacey stand in the cemetery and look at the sea of tombstones. She placed a single flower on several graves, a white rose. There was one in particular that she stood in front of the longest, and then she placed all the flowers on that one grave.

Then she cried.

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Cried so loud it sounded like a scream.

Being the merciful god that I was, I gave her the moment to grieve.

It took minutes for her to calm, to let her tears run dry like the rocks under the desert.

“It’s time.” I came to her side, casting a shadow over the grave.

She didn’t flinch, either because she knew I was there or didn’t care.

With her shoulders slumped and her head bowed, it was like she hadn’t heard what I said.

“Are you ready?”

Her eyes remained on the writing on the stone, her husband’s name and the years that he had lived. They had been married for fifty years before he’d passed away in his late seventies. He’d grown old, but she’d remained forever preserved in a youth that she paid dearly for.

She’d come to the dead forest and sought my audience. She’d been born with a horrible scar on her face and hadn’t been blessed by beauty’s charm like the other girls her age. She had her eyes on one man, but because of her uncomely appearance, she was ignored. Barely an adult, she asked me to make her beautiful, to be preserved that way like a block of ice on the mountain tops.

Her lifetime had passed in the blink of an eye, and now it was time to pay for what

she'd bought.

"I warned you not to take this deal, Lacey." Now, she would spend an eternity in the underworld—and never join her husband in the Realm of Caelum. Their love had never been real anyway, not if she had to change her entire appearance to earn his affection.

"I have no regrets."

That was about to change.

I moved in front of her and placed my hand upon her chest. I felt the energy leave my palm and heat her flesh. Felt her soul rip from her body. And then we were in the underworld at the funnel.

I watched her body slowly float down in the mist until she hovered above the rock.

The monsters moved forth and dragged her to the ground.

Her eyes opened at their touch, and that was the moment she understood.

"Ah!" She looked around frantically at the monsters that grabbed her and shackled her wrists and ankles. They forced her forward toward the castle to be locked below. Her soul was to be harvested and fed to the Covenant.

I didn't watch her go.

Whether my customers were good or evil, I took no pleasure in making the deals I discouraged them from agreeing to.

Cecilia came to my side, dressed in all black, thick, dark hair brushed back from her

face. “What wish did you grant her?” She turned and watched Lacey be taken away, arms crossed over her chest, her dark eyes reflecting the torches that burned forevermore.

“Eternal beauty.”

She turned back to me, shifting her body until she was directly before me. “A soul is an immense cost for something so trivial.”

I spent more time telling victims not to take my deals than offering them. It made no difference. They were focused on power, revenge, or beauty...whatever it might be. They wanted their request granted there on the spot and didn't think about the consequences that would come later. “I echoed that sentiment.”

She looked me over, her eyes practically hands that gripped me. She drew close, her fingers reaching for my forearm. “Unburden yourself with me.” She traced up my arm to feel the different muscles as she came closer to my shoulder. “Or in me...”

My eyes flicked away from hers. “I have obligations that require my attention.”

“Really?” she asked playfully. “Sounds like an excuse to me.”

It was an excuse. Cecilia was beautiful, but she served the Covenant—not as a requirement because of her servitude, but because she wanted to. There was a cult of mortals who had worshipped Bahamut for centuries, and she was among them. She'd asked to join the underworld and serve Bahamut and, once he was gone, me. She was dead, but unlike most of the residents in this dark place, she had a soul. It didn't seem like she'd ever come to regret her decision, perfectly adapting to the suffocating darkness, enthralled by monsters and demons rather than afraid.

She was worse than the demons she revered.

I'd slept with her several times, but it was just a means to an end, a tonic for loneliness. It scratched the itch, but then it festered like a raw wound, and I felt dirty as if beset by an infection. My wife had been gone for so long and had bedded my brother like I didn't exist, so I felt no commitment to her.

But it felt wrong, nonetheless.

I stepped away from her touch. “Leave me be, Cecilia.”

12

LILY

I felt him before I saw him.

Felt his presence like a fire at my back. A shadow over my body. A chill from the winter wind. I turned to face him, to see those dark eyes as they burned into mine. I’d barely reached him when he outstretched his big hands toward me.

I blinked, and then I was somewhere else.

I sank into the soft sand beneath my feet. Felt the cold turn into a moist warmth that coated the skin. The sound of flames was replaced by the waves that beat the shore. A breeze moved through my hair, but I didn’t feel a sting of cold.

He watched me absorb our surroundings with a deep calm in his eyes. His hands were still on me, and they cocooned me further, circling me like bars to a cage of a willing prisoner. Like he’d been thinking of me all day, he pulled me close and kissed my burning lips with his, angling his neck down so our mouths could meet.

A rush of excitement and desire hit me hard like a sword against a shield. Every moment we were apart was spent in angst, waiting for us to be reunited, for the return

of peace and joy that only he could bring me. I'd never had a lover I missed when he was gone. Never had a lover I missed before he even left.

He carried me into the little hut he'd built with his bare hands, a sight I would have loved to have watched from the shade of a palm tree, sweat trickling down his back and arms. When I felt my back hit the straw mattress, I yanked his bottoms off like it was our first time or our last, when it was neither.

He undressed quickly then removed my clothing before he dominated me, folding me into a ball underneath him before he sheathed his big dick in my wet channel, wet because I'd been thinking of him all day.

His body was tight and firm over mine as he fucked me hard, one hand finding its way into my hair, his other gripping the back of my thigh as he gave me his dick like he'd never given it to me before.

“Wrath...”

His hand moved to my throat and held it.

I moaned because I liked it. I liked being possessed by a man I should fear with every fiber of my being. Liked knowing he could crush my spine or steal my soul with a flick of his wrist. And I also liked knowing he would never do any of those things—at least, not to me.

He suddenly rolled me onto my stomach and moved back over me, his dick returning to my slickness much easier now that his flesh was soaked. He entered me hard, his pelvis against my ass, and he ground me into the sheets, making my clit feel the pressure of his weight and the power of his thrust. He fisted my hair and tugged it back like it was reins and I was his horse.

“Oh fuck...” My hands automatically clutched the sheets on either side of me.

He pounded into me from behind, his mouth near my ear, his slightly labored breaths audible and sexy.

He already felt too big to handle, but at this angle, it nearly felt like too much.

But there was no such thing as too much dick, and I came around him with a moan that sounded more like a whine and a cry, the tears streaking down like the rivers of veins along his neck and arms.

He thrust into me harder when he heard me come, pounding to the finish line so he could fill me with the load he'd reserved just for me. His thrusts suddenly became abrupt and uneven, and his breaths were mixed with the moan that escaped his throat. He slowed until he stilled, his hand coming free of my hair that he left in tangles.

He slowly removed himself, making me wince because it was still a tree trunk whether it was full or not. He lay back on one of the pillows and pulled me into his chest, wanting me even if it was warm and he was covered in sweat.

He kissed me again, cupped my face and kissed me like what we'd just had wasn't enough.

But it wasn't enough for me either.

I moved on top of him, straddling a mighty oak, and kissed him with my ass in the air, his seed trailing down the inside of my thigh. He must have felt it drip down onto his flesh because he gave a moan, gripped my hips, and tugged me down to him.

His dick was already hard again, probably because it'd never fully softened, and I sank onto his length with ease, the arousal between our flesh so potent, we were slick

like rain on the rooftop. I dropped as far as my body would allow.

He looked up at me like I was the sunrise after a storm. Like I was the first flower of spring. Like I was all he ever wanted. He propped himself up on one arm and grabbed my hip with the other, guiding me up and down his length at the pace he wanted—nice and slow.

I moaned for him like he hadn't already made me come, because the dick of a god was the best I'd ever had. I rose and fell, sheathing him with more cream, watching him fall into the endless depths of desire that had already taken me.

“Xivin...” His skin was blotted red with the desire that burned deep in his flesh. He'd just blown my mind and my body with the way he'd taken me, and it was so enjoyable to do the same to him, to make him weak because it felt so damn good. “Fuck.”

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We lay in the darkness of the hut, the moonlight and starlight bouncing off the surface of the water and giving us some illumination. Nothing was said as we relaxed there together, my fingers gently grazing over his chest, my body on fire from the intensity of his stare.

The flames of desire between us should have been extinguished long ago, but every night, a new log was tossed onto the fire and the blaze burned hotter than it did before. My heart beat for a man who didn't have a heart at all. I longed for his stare and his touch, and I felt comforted knowing he was watching me even when I couldn't see him. I'd be a slave to a Barbarian right now if he hadn't used his command of the dead to ensure I lived.

"What are your thoughts?" he said quietly.

My eyes lifted to his, realizing that was one thing he couldn't take from me. He could watch me without being seen, but he couldn't hear the thoughts inside my mind. "What are yours?"

His hand moved over mine, and he placed it where his heart should be. There was nothing there, no beat or thud, a silent graveyard where life had once been. "My heart beats when I'm with you. And it beats true."

This road we'd traveled had been filled with the beauty of wild jasmine and the excitement of lit braziers. A moment ago, it had felt endless, but now it felt completed. Barren sand stretched out as far as the eye could see. There was nothing but death.

My hand suddenly weakened in his, and I pulled it away.

His eyes had been calm and enigmatic, but they sharpened at my sudden movements.

I sat up in bed when the anxiety took hold, when I was suddenly scared out of my mind. I hugged the bedding to my chest and noticed him sit upright from the corner of my eye. A moment ago, I'd been so comfortable I could have drifted off to sleep, but now, I wanted to run. "This is over."

Instead of challenging my statement with his refusal or confusion, he only stared at me.

I waited for the litany of questions, the scorching interrogation, but it never came.

After a minute of pained silence became several, I turned to look at him.

With the same intensity he wore whenever he looked at me, he stared at me now, making me feel smothered by him even when we were a foot apart. "I didn't foresee this either. Hundreds of years spent in darkness had numbed me to the world. My past had numbed me to myself. When you came to my shores, I felt a magnetism that was stronger than the forces of Xian and the Realm of Caelum. I should have fought the hold, but I let it pull me to you. I followed this river to a cliff, a cliff that will kill any who topple over, but I let it pull me to the edge anyway."

I wanted to look away, but he was just as magnetic to me as I was to him.

"I loved a woman before, a long time ago. I didn't expect it to happen again."

I sucked in a rushed breath and dropped my stare.

"You already know this, Xivin."

I swallowed, feeling my flesh carved down to the bone.

“This is presumptuous, but I think that feeling is reciprocated.”

My heart was racing harder than a speeding horse. Faster than the flapping wings of a heavy dragon trying to take flight.

“An open secret between us...”

I tightened the blankets around me when I felt a chill in the air, a frost on a tropical beach. “I—” I’d never been with a man so straightforward and transparent, someone who shared vulnerable thoughts that most men would deny or hide. Hewas unafraid of everything, even himself. “We need to end this before...it’s too late.”

“Xivin, it’s already too late.”

I turned to look at him once more.

With a calmness, he stared at me with eyes the color of earth filled with flecks of gold. His intensity had waned, but he still radiated strength in the straightness of his spine, in the power of the muscles packed on his limbs and core. When he was mortal, he must have been the most sought-after man who ever lived. Whoever he loved had been the luckiest woman alive. “All you have to do is ask me to leave and never return—and I will honor that wish.”

My sternum cracked from the pain.

“But I don’t want this to end, and neither do you.”

“We have no future, Wrath. I can’t be in a relationship that no one can see. I can’t tell my father that the man I’ve chosen is the God of the Underworld. I can’t explain to

Khazmuda why I've chosen to spend my life with someone who once served the man who killed my father. There is no way this will ever work. Of course, the first time I find someone I want for more than a night happens to be the most unavailable man on the planet."

"I've never been unavailable to you. I've been here with you most nights. I've stood in your presence during the day. I've come to know your world and everyone who matters to you by standing at your side—even if you couldn't see me."

"You know that's not enough." It was enough right now when I pretended this was only an arrangement and nothing more. But the warning in my heart now blared like a horn at the beginning of war. My heart was vulnerable to swords and arrows and death.

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He went quiet, staring at me with thoughts hidden behind his gaze.

I hadn't noticed it right away, but it had become clearer that he was from another time. His mannerisms were different, and his words were always particular and few and far between. He was the strong and silent type, but he also had an unfathomable depth that couldn't be reached with a pickax. He didn't play games like most men I knew. Being hundreds of years old had made him more mature than anyone I knew, besides Khazmuda and the elder dragons.

“We can be together—in the underworld.”

My heart gave a squeeze at the suggestion.

“You would keep your soul.”

“But I would be dead.” My hand absent-mindedly went to my heart and felt it beat like a stampede of hooves.

“To the world above. But you wouldn't feel it below.”

“But I would have to leave behind everyone I've ever known and loved.”

His eyes suddenly softened in sadness.

“I—I can't do that.” I couldn't believe I even entertained the idea enough to reject it.

“I can't do that to my father, not after what he's been through. I can't abandon my kingdom when my father has chosen me to rule. I can't hurt my mother like that, or

Hawk or Zehemoth.”

“You’re right.” His eyes shifted out the double doors to the water. “It was wrong of me to ask.”

“Is there any way you could...be mortal again?”

His eyes stayed outside on the water, a heavy silence accompanying his palpable despair. “No.”

“Have you tried?—”

“Many times.” His neck suddenly looked strained, and the cords became taut like a pulled rope. “I’ve tried to escape my fate many times, but I’ve never been as lucky as your father. I haven’t had a dragon bind itself to my soul. I didn’t have a woman who would never question my loyalty to her and would run to the ends of the earth to get me back. I’m trapped in this forced servitude for all eternity, my soul slowly corroded by the foul deeds I’m forced to complete against my will.”

A layer of tears formed on my bottom eyelids. Warm like the water at the shore, they spilled over the edge and silently flowed down my cheeks. I dropped the sheets and crawled to him on the bed before I hooked my arms around his neck.

He wouldn’t look at me. “Don’t pity me.”

I pressed my face into his cheek, my tears catching his skin and streaking down to his chin.

“Don’t.” He spoke quietly. “I understood the terms when I made my choice.”

My fingers moved into his hair as I rested my lips against his warm flesh, silently

crying as I held him, when what I really wanted was for him to hold me, to comfort me when my soul was free and his wasn't.

I cupped his cheek and brought his lips to mine, but at first, he resisted. He didn't want my comfort or affection. He didn't want my sympathy. As always, he wanted to carry this burden alone. The way he'd done these last three hundred and seventy-seven years.

I brought him to me again, and this time, he stayed. He let me kiss him, and after the feel of my desperate lips coated in salt, he kissed me back. Kissed me slowly and hard, his hand digging into my hair.

I moved into his lap as my arms circled his neck, kissing him with more passion than I'd ever felt before. The fire between us erupted into an inferno, but it wasn't fueled by lust for the flesh. It was fed by the bond between our hearts, the magnetism that pulled us together and didn't let go.

PROLOGUE VI

WRATH

I was in the grand hall when I felt it.

The paramount shift in my being, the silent bells that tolled only in my mind. If I had a beating heart, it would thud against my ribs with adrenaline. Not only did someone approach my dead island, but they approached with the blood of an unpaid debt.

They approached with Rothschild blood.

Within the blink of an eye, I was on the surface, standing in the dead garden of stone trees, feeling a massive presence touch my sands. It had the strength of a king, a

powerhouse so brutal and profound that I knew it could be none other than Talon Rothschild—to finish what he'd started.

I reappeared closer to shore, seeing the galleon crashed on the rocks from the storm that rose from the east. One of the masts had collapsed, and there was noticeable damage to the hull of the ship.

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The presence changed, so potent in strength, but the masculinity I had detected was actually feminine energy...like the jasmine that had grown up the side of my home in Dambridge. Instead of reaching for my sword to do battle, I focused my thoughts, trying to understand what I couldn't see.

It took a moment, pulling the energy into myself and letting it simmer, before I realized it wasn't Talon Rothschild who came to my shores, but the blood of Talon Rothschild. Not his son, Hawk Rothschild.

But his daughter, Lily.

I felt her mind with more distinction, felt a presence so fierce it felt more dragon than human. That kind of power was only felt from men, from kings or generals, but hers was indistinguishable from theirs. Without ever seeing her face, I knew I faced a queen of the Southern Isles, a woman who could rub salt in her wounds and laugh. Lily Rothschild. Even as I spoke her name in my mind, I felt her power reverberate back at me. Felt a woman stronger than most men who came to these shores. Come to me.

I faded from sight and watched.

She appeared at the top of the tilted galleon, wearing the same armor that her father wore as king. Black with the dragon crest in the center, accents of red on the chest plate. She wore no cape, and her sword was hooked around her back because she wielded a blade like a man.

And she was beautiful.

With dark hair like her mother, thick like a bounty of wheat, and eyes green like emeralds that dark creatures mined deep in the mountains, she was a sorcerer who could entrance her foes with a single look. She held herself with a strength that exceeded the weight of her armor, and she looked deep into my island, not with fear, but with only a hint of reservation.

Then she climbed to the bottom of the ship and proceeded forth, heading right for me without knowledge of where I stood.

I watched her pass through the trees that had been dead for so long they had hardened into stone. She glanced at the ornaments made of desiccated wood that hung from the trees, gifts from the demon occult that worshipped me and the underworld. I rejected their passage into the underworld, but they continued to revere me anyway.

Closer, she came, so close I could smell her.

Like a predator that waited for just the right moment to launch at their prey, I was still like the trees, quiet like the earth, afraid that she was powerful enough to discern my presence with just her intuition.

She came closer, almost brushing my shoulder with her cheek, and carried on.

I turned and watched her go, stared at the thick hair that reached down her back and covered the scabbard of her heavy blade. A dagger was tucked at her hip. Even through her armor, I could determine the definition of muscle plump under the flesh. But her strength didn't undermine the feminine appeal of her body, the swell of her womanly tits, the hips that shook despite her controlled steps, the slender neckline that ached for a kiss.

I appeared before her, several feet away, so my presence wouldn't tumble her to the ground.

She stilled but gave no gasp or outburst. Her features were soft, her eyes almond-shaped and brilliant, her lips shaped like a bow, her skin fair and iridescent as glass. But everything hardened when she looked upon me as a foe. Anyone else would have screamed at the sight of me, the magic I obviously wielded, but not Lily Rothschild. “How do you know my name?”

I watched her soak in my features, pulling in the details to memorize my face and report back to her father. She was tall for a woman, but she was still a valley to my mountain. Nearly a foot taller than her and with a hundred pounds more of muscle that she couldn’t possibly battle even with that heavy blade, I would defeat her within seconds.

But I didn’t want to.

“Because I’m the God of the Underworld—and I know everything.”

Her eyes shifted back and forth between mine, sheathing her panic and choosing to toughen her resolve instead.

I felt the strain in my eyes as I gazed upon her, realizing I hadn’t blinked since I’d seen her countenance. There was no look long enough for me to understand what I saw, to understand there was such a woman who was equally as strong as she was beautiful, who possessed the presence to command a room without an order. Never in my life had I encountered such a woman. “Daughter of Talon Rothschild, King of Dragons and the Southern Isles, a man who doesn’t pay his debts.” I didn’t know her purpose in my lands, but whatever it might be, this was a mistake. “You shouldn’t have come here.”

“My ship got caught in a storm?—”

“And was blown off course far to the west and into my domain.” I should have

assumed this was a mistake, because a woman so obviously intelligent wouldn't have landed here otherwise. "Your father came here intentionally—and you mistakenly. But nonetheless, you're here. And now you're mine." My wife and sons had been taken from me, my reputation burned to the ground, while Talon Rothschild had moved on with his life and had children of his own. And not just any daughter—but a daughter with a ferocity I would want my own to have.

"You're the one who's mistaken." Her temper blazed hotter than the flames in the underworld. Her nostrils flared slightly like an angry bull about to charge me down. "Because I don't belong to any man."

I didn't need to draw breath, but I did anyway, slapped by an invisible palm that made my skin burn. I hated her father, and I hated him more that he had raised a daughter who commanded my respect within the first minute of our meeting. "You're arrogant—just like your father."

"I take that as a compliment," she snapped back.

I felt my eyes narrow as my respect deepened against my will. Alone, she faced a god—and she did so with a straight spine and sharp teeth. "If Talon Rothschild won't honor the debt of my predecessor, then I will make him honor that debt—through you."

"You won't make me do a damn thing, asshole."

I felt my body tighten when her words echoed in my mind. Men either kneeled before me—or fled. Not once had someone provoked my anger so aggressively. Not once had anyone looked upon me without fear.

But Lily Rothschild burned me to the ground.

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She turned her back on me, not the least bit concerned about facing away from an enemy, and walked away.

I watched as it took a day for Lily to repair the ship with her crew. From my observations, I determined she was their leader—the captain of the ship. Instead of ordering everyone around while she sat on her ass, she helped them fell trees and repair the ship. She got her hands dirty, pulled out the splinters without complaint, and got the ship back in shape.

Invisible to mortals, I just watched. Mesmerized by this woman.

They slept through the night, and when they woke up the next morning, Lily gave the order.

“Prepare the masts. We head northeast until we reach the Southern Isles.”

The Barbarians were due to cross my island on their trek to the southwest. If she and her crew left now, it was all but certain they would cross paths. One look at Lily and they would want her for themselves. To imprison her and make her a slave—and probably a wife to birth their daughters because of her beauty and fire.

It wasn't my place to intervene with the living. I should let this happen and leave her to her doom. Perhaps it was what Talon deserved after he'd cheated death and eternal suffering. But an ache formed over my heart at the thought, that a woman with so much promise would never meet her potential. Chained to a wall and held down by a group of men, she would endure a fate no woman should ever know.

I should let this happen.

It wasn't my place to intervene.

She wasn't my concern.

"Wait a day before you depart."

She noticeably stilled when she heard my voice, recognizing it right away. Her head turned to look at me, trepidation on her face because she assumed she wasn't the only one who could see me. Her crew was about to panic.

"I reveal myself only to you." I knew I wasn't supposed to interfere with the living, not when my domain was the dead. But I broke that vow, whatever the consequences would be. "A dangerous armada approaches. Leave the island now, and you'll cross their path."

Just the look in her eyes alone told me that she didn't believe a word I said. That she would never trust me, not when I'd already told her that her father had betrayed his oath and she would pay for it. I wished I could take back the threats that increased the distance between us, before she was able to put herself in harm's way.

"I do not deceive you, Lily Rothschild."

"You just want to keep me here?—"

"I don't need to keep you here to get what I want," I said. "The bond is broken by blood."

The sails were dropped, and the masts were turned. The tide had risen, and gradually, the galleon began its slow progress over the incoming waves as it headed out to sea,

the moonlight the only illumination, the stars their only company.

“Drop anchor.” I would never beg, let alone a stranger. But the plea escaped my lips because whatever happened to her happened to me, inexplicably. “Heed my warning before it’s too late.”

The galleon continued to inch farther out to sea, leaving the safety of the shore and moving to open water—and she ignored me. “Lighten the ship. Drop our supplies. We need to reach the Southern Isles at breakneck speed.” So, she believed me, but only slightly, not enough to stay on my shores.

No one questioned her command. It was clear they all revered her, even though a woman on a ship was said to be bad luck. “Aye, Captain Rothschild.”

But I couldn’t be impressed for long, not when I knew the battle that awaited her at sea. The Barbarians were ruthless anarchists. Men who didn’t live by a code. Men who believed women were inferior, whose only purpose was to birth sons and cook. Lily would defy them—and they would break her spirit. “Speed will not save you?—”

“Be gone.”

I watched her command that ship like a seasoned captain. Navigate the heavy galleon like it was the size of a sloop. Watched her tell her men to fire at the enemy ships while evading hits of their own. I watched her fight a man nearly three times her size and kill him with a ruthlessness I’d never seen a woman show before. Watched her try to save her crew when they were already dead.

I’d never seen a woman like her.

I’d encountered powerful men in life and in death, but I’d never encountered anyone

like her before. The blood of kings screamed in her veins. Not a single tear was shed even when all seemed hopeless. Grown men would have begged and pleaded at the sight of those monsters, but she insulted them.

When they took her captive on the ship, I knew I should return to the underworld and forget it happened. I'd already intervened once when I told her not to set sail, and it wasn't my fault she didn't listen. She wasn't my responsibility, regardless of what happened to her.

But fuck, I couldn't let this happen to her.

I didn't know why I cared, didn't know why it mattered. I'd known her for a single day, but that was enough for her to leave her mark on my heart. She scarred me with her presence, and I knew whether I intervened or not, I would never forget her as long as I existed.

If I'd met her as a mortal man, I would have pursued her relentlessly until she was mine.

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I couldn't have her now—but I still wanted her to win.

I appeared in her cell, seeing her sitting on the floor against the wall, a mixture of irritation and hopelessness in her eyes. Her hair was a tangled mess from the sea wind, and she looked fatigued, but she was somehow still the most breathtaking woman I'd ever seen. "You should have listened to me."

Her eyes flicked to me with the speed of a fired arrow. "I don't usually take a demon at their word." She rubbed her temple with her fingertips like she had a headache, but she didn't once complain about it.

"I'm not a demon. I'm Wrath, God of the Underworld, King of the Dead—and you will address me as such."

"Or what?" she challenged with her signature fire I'd already become acquainted with. "My luck can't get much worse."

I looked out the bars and listened to the voices up above that she couldn't hear. I hated seeing the bars, knowing she was trapped behind them. Didn't like seeing her sitting on the floor when she deserved to sit on a throne. "But it can get better."

"I won't sell my soul for freedom. I'd rather die."

I turned to her when I heard what she said, when I heard her contradict what all my victims had done. What I had done. She was smarter than the rest of us, possessing a moral integrity with an ironclad attachment to her principles. "What he wants to do to you is much worse than death."

Her eyes immediately flicked away to reject the notion, to pretend the idea had never entered her head—even though it was probably already there. “The answer is still no.”

I’d wanted to take her soul when I first saw her, but now she had the last soul I would ever take. Even if she offered to pay her father’s debt with an eternity in the underworld, my answer would still be no. Because she was too good for that. Because she deserved better. “There’s a small sailboat attached to the rear of their ship. Can you sail it alone?”

Her eyes stayed on the bars for a second before she looked at me again, not understanding the nature of the question. “What?” She seemed bewildered by the situation—that I was going to help her get out of there.

“Can you sail it alone?” I repeated.

“I can sail anything,” I said. “But what does that matter?—”

“Just be ready.”

“Ready for what?”

I broke my oath and intervened with the living—and would pay the consequences later.

I raised a kraken from the seafloor, a pile of bones deep in the abyss, and it rose to the surface and wrapped its tentacles around the ship before it jostled it, sending men flying overboard into the waves.

I ordered him not to sink the ship, not when Lily was still beneath that deck.

Once all but one of the men were dead, I sent the lone survivor below deck to unlock the door, knowing it would be the last thing he did.

Lily looked at me in horror, like she finally understood who she was dealing with. Understood the power I had over this world and the next. She remained against the wall like she would be my next victim, when I'd defied my orders and purpose to save her.

"Go."

"What is happening?—"

"Go. You don't have much time." The other ships would come back eventually to check on the crew. The gold they had stored underneath was too important to be abandoned. It was more important than their lives.

Lily finally got to her feet and darted out of the cell. She stepped over the dead on deck and headed to the rear of the ship where the small sailboat was hoisted. She knew how to use the ropes and the rungs to get it into the water, and she climbed down and sat in the boat, still wearing her armor.

It was dark, but she managed to get the sail up and use the compass to steer the ship in the right direction. She was but a leaf on the surface of the water, a pin drop compared to the other ships, and she should be able to sail by without being detected.

She breathed hard, like the adrenaline was too much for her, but she commandeered the ship like it was second nature. When others would sob at what they had escaped and the enormous task before them, she sailed straight into it without fear, like she knew she was strong enough to survive it.

I appeared across from her on the only other bench in the boat, seeing the drops of

water that splashed onto her face, her long hair that was stuck to the side of her neck.

She stared at me as she continued to grip the rudder. She showed no fear now, but something far deeper. The climactic moment had united us in an unspoken bond, and I knew she felt it too.

“It’s a four-day journey from here—assuming all goes well.” She wouldn’t be able to sleep. There were no supplies on the boat, no food or water, so she’d have to survive that long without or hope for rain. Most men would die, but I believed she would make it. “You can do this.”

Then she said something I would never forget, uttered words that no one else would have the nerve to say. Her words formed a permanent echo in my mind, a loop that continued indefinitely. They were beautiful in their confidence, even more beautiful in her vulnerability. “I know I can.”

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The words sat on my heart then slowly dissolved into it. A woman I'd known for just a day suddenly felt like an integral part of me. I'd been numb for over three hundred years, and now I suddenly felt emotion to such an intense degree that my dead body wasn't capable of it. My existence had been unremarkable for centuries, and now, I felt like a new life had begun. Begun with this woman who had captured my heart the second our paths crossed. "There is no bravery without fear—and you're the bravest woman I've ever met."

13

WRATH

I stepped upon the dais and approached the Covenant, the five demons who ruled this underworld and all the underlings in it—including me. They accepted my audience when I'd asked for it because I was the one who fed their precious funnel.

"You seek our counsel," Raul said, in the center throne, his talons resting on both armrests like he was a person rather than the physical manifestation of evil. "Here we are."

I was pursuing the answer I wanted, knowing I would get the answer I detested. But I tried anyway because I'd touched joy and wanted more of it, all of it. "I've fulfilled my debt. My wife has been dead hundreds of years. My sons are gone." It still hurt to say those words, to know they died not remembering anything about me except I was a coward who abandoned them. "Only my distant descendants walk this earth. For hundreds of years among mortals, I have served you. I ask to be pardoned so I can live a mortal life until age takes me."

Silence echoed in the darkness. Demons were similar to dragons in the sense that they didn't have expressions. Their hard skin constrained their features into place. None of them spoke to each other, and Raul continued to look at me like I would have more to say. "You made this deal with Bahamut, not us."

"But you were his ruler then. You're my ruler now. You have the power to pardon me."

"There is none to replace you?—"

"I will find a replacement better than me."

Raul still didn't look at the others. "The deal you made with Bahamut was specific. It was eternal servitude, not four hundred years. The deal is binding—and you, above all else, should know this."

"The debt has been paid?—"

"But the service has not been completed. Is there anything else?"

There was nothing I could do. My sword was no match for five demons. My power was no match to challenge the underworld. I was trapped below in a sea of darkness to spare my wife, who'd forgotten about me in less than a year. And now there was a woman who had crossed my path and made my dead heart sing. A woman who provoked me so potently it changed my entire being. A woman who felt...meant for me. "Please..." I wasn't the kind of man to beg, but I would beg for a chance of happiness after the eternity of despair I'd survived.

Raul was unfazed by my display of emotion. If anything, he seemed pleased by it. "Back to work, Wrath."

LILY

The moment Wrath returned me to my villa, I felt Zehemoth's voice in my head.

Where were you?

I halted in the center of my living room. I had only been gone for a night and didn't think anyone would notice my absence. But the panic in his voice told me he'd noticed for good reason. Has something happened, Zehemoth?

Where were you? There was a thud outside, like he'd landed in the grass. Your mind wasn't present, and then all of a sudden, it was back with a speed I can't explain.

Wrath studied my face, somehow knowing I was in the middle of a conversation just by the shift of my eyes and the movement of my body. Zehemoth?—

The horn blew—the horn I'd never heard sound.

The horn of war.

I gave a gasp before I looked at Wrath.

His eyes widened like he understood what that meant.

I headed straight to the door and ran across the lawn to the cobblestone path. Zehemoth watched me go, his snout following me. Where were you?

“We don't have time for this!” I sprinted through the trees in the courtyard and spotted the dragon covered in storm-cloud scales. Enormous and powerful, with an

elf in armor on the ground beside him.

I skidded to a halt. “What news do you bring from the north?” I was out of breath from how hard I had run to the castle from my villa, but no need for air would stop me from demanding news.

The elf was dressed in the black and deep-green armor of his people. I remembered their well-crafted clothing and their elegant presence. When I was a little girl, I used to be one of them, graceful, quick, and powerful. My great-aunt, Queen Eldinar, still reminded me of a sunrise, with her beautiful blond hair and iridescent eyes. “Princess Rothschild, an army of men and orcs marches for our forest, ten thousand strong. They’re undeterred by Macabre and the others. Their armor is thick and resistant to fire. And there are so many that they won’t be stopped before they breach the forest. I’m certain the war rages on in front of the Great Tree as we speak.”

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Horrified by the news, all I could do was stare at him, lost for words.

Wrath appeared beside me, suddenly dressed in his uniform and armor like he was about to report for battle himself.

At that moment, my father emerged from the castle, fully dressed for war with his sword across his back. Just like in the memory Wrath had shown me, my father's face was contorted in a deep shade of rage. His general walked beside him, and he made a list of orders so fast, spit flew out of his mouth.

“Roooooaaaaarrrrr!”

I recognized Khazmuda's voice from up above. A moment later, I felt the vibrations of the cliff when he landed with a thud, ready to take my father across the sea to raise his sword for people who had raised their swords for us in the past.

My mother left the castle doors and hurried to catch up with my father. It was the first time I'd seen him ignore her.

“Dad, what's happening?”

He even ignored me, looking at Khazmuda as if they were engaged in deep conversation.

“Dad.”

He finally snapped out of the connection and looked at me. “Riviana Star is under

attack, and I must defend it. All the dragons who have volunteered will take as many soldiers as they can carry across the Great Sea. It'll only amount to an additional hundred soldiers, but perhaps the dragons can help us in this fight. Hawk and I will go while you stay here with your mother."

"Stay here?" I asked in disbelief.

He stepped around me to head to Khazmuda. "Lily, I don't have time to argue. Every moment we waste is another tree that burns." His cape billowed behind him, and the hilt of his blade gleamed in the sunlight.

I chased after him. "Dad."

"Don't go."

I stilled and tried not to make it obvious that I was staring at someone who wasn't there.

"Even if you prevail, the Barbarians will know the Southern Isles has a horde of dragons like gold coins in a vault. They will come for you next. Tell your father to abandon Riviana Star to its fate."

My eyes widened as I looked upon his face. I couldn't say all the things I wanted, not without looking like I'd lost my mind.

"Don't go," Wrath repeated. Just as he'd asked me not to depart from his island and cross the path of those monsters, he pleaded with me once again. This time, I should listen.

But I couldn't. "Dad." He was checking his supplies hooked to Khazmuda's saddle, and I grabbed his shoulder and forced him to turn around. "I'm going?—"

“I said, I don’t have time for this, Lily. It’s too dangerous, and you’re still staying here.”

“Too dangerous?” I asked incredulously. “You choose me as your successor, choose me to rule the Southern Isles in your stead, but you don’t expect me to raise my sword for my allies? For the people I love? I’m a damn good fighter, and you know it.”

“Which is why you need to stay here?—”

“You know that’s not the reason. You can’t have it both ways, Dad. You can’t insist that I’m destined to be queen if you won’t let me risk my life the way you’re allowed to risk yours. I love that forest and its people. I love my aunt and uncle. I’m an adult, and if it’s my desire to fight for them, then you can’t stop me.”

Wrath stood a short distance away, listening to the exchange with an intense gaze.

I saw so much anger in my father’s eyes, but the heat slowly died down the longer he stared.

“I want to fight.” My hand tightened into a fist and moved to the center of my chest. The Barbarians had killed my entire crew, and now they wanted to do the same to the elves. This was personal—on every level.

“Lily.” He lowered his voice and stepped toward me. All sense of urgency vanished. “You’ve never been in a battle like this. I can’t protect you. I can’t look after you. I must focus on my enemy. I must protect the tree.”

“I understand, Dad.”

His eyes flicked back and forth between mine.

“I would never be the kind of queen that sends men to win my wars and bring me trophies. I would fight alongside my men, just as you’ve done. I wouldn’t be worthy as your successor if I stayed behind. I would be a disgrace to the Southern Isles if I were trained by the best swordsman who ever lived and chose not to use that skill when it mattered most. I understand this is hard for you...but this is what I want.”

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My father's breathing had picked up noticeably, his eyes sharp and focused as he battled the pain that raged inside him. He eventually dipped his chin and looked at the ground for a moment before he raised his gaze once more.

My mother appeared behind my shoulder.

He stared at her, a silent conversation passing between the two of them.

"I don't need your permission to serve my people." I could take Zehemoth and fly away. I knew exactly where to go. "But I hope I earn your acceptance."

My father continued to stare at my mother.

She finally gave a nod.

He turned his back on me. "Hawk will remain here with your mother. Don your battle armor, not the set we train in, and prepare to depart."

My mother immediately hugged me, squeezed me tightly like this might be the last time. "Please be careful."

I stilled as I felt her grip me like a viper, and then I reciprocated her affection. I could feel her fear, feel her terror. Letting me go was probably the hardest thing she'd ever done. "I will, Mom."

"I love you." She pulled away and cupped my cheeks.

“I love you too.”

“You’re your father’s daughter,” she said. “And I’m so proud of you.”

I retrieved my armor from the villa and began to fasten it together.

There were clips in the back I couldn’t reach, but Wrath appeared and snapped them into place. “You denied your father, so I imagine you’ll deny me as well.” He appeared before me, looking like a soldier in the beautiful blue fabric and the black steel that protected a body that was already impervious to injury.

“I won’t leave Riviana Star to its fate. The elves risked everything when they fought for the Southern Isles before my birth. I would never insult that sacrifice by abandoning them now, by convincing my father to let them fend for themselves. And what’s more, the Realm of Caelum is housed in the Great Tree. Perhaps that’s what the Barbarians seek, or it’s a mere coincidence they’ll discover later. Either way, they must be stopped.”

Wrath suddenly looked apathetic, defeated by my commitment to this cause. He took a moment, releasing a heavy sigh as he stared at one of the corners of the room. His gaze eventually came back to me as his eyes sharpened through the clouds that had fogged his vision. “Remember your footwork. The rest of your body will follow.” He seemed to have accepted my answer.

I moved into him and cupped his cheeks. “I have to go.”

His dark eyes settled on mine and stayed there. It wasn’t the intense stare he showed the other times we were alone together. This one was tinged with far more emotion. “I know you do.”

I rode Zehemoth across the Great Sea. An army of dragons took to the skies with my

father in the lead on the back of Khazmuda. With the dragons flying as fast as they could go, it would take half a day to arrive outside the forest.

Hopefully that would be quick enough.

Wrath didn't join me on the flight. Even if he had, I wouldn't have been able to speak to him, not out loud with Zehemoth listening.

Where were you?

He wasn't going to let this go, was he? "I was asleep."

Don't lie to me. I know how your mind feels when you're asleep. You're still present, just distant. You were absent. But where could you have gone to make your mind disappear, I do not know.

"It's impossible for me to go that distance in the blink of an eye, Zehemoth." I felt a pain in my chest at lying to him, but now wasn't the time to tell him I was bedding the God of the Underworld. We were about to enter battle, a fight we wouldn't be prepared for until we arrived. "We need to focus on what's ahead of us right now."

Zehemoth let the conversation drop, but I knew he would pick it up again at some point. Are you scared?

"Of course I am." But you can't be brave without being scared, right?

I wish I could enter the forest with you. But there are too many trees.

"I know." It would be an easy fight if it were out in the open.

My father says we've been at peace a long time. I wonder who these people are.

Where they come from. What they want.

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“They want what everyone wants—power. But they aren’t getting it.”

I saw the smoke from the fire long before we arrived. It was a black mass in the sunset sky, ominous and heavy with destruction. Whether it was caused by a trail of fire from a dragon or lit by a torch from an enemy was unclear.

Now that we were close, my heart started to pound. The battle was near, and I could smell charred flesh on the air. I’d practiced with my father and some of his other soldiers all my life, but I’d never seen battle. When I’d fought those men on the ship out at sea, that was the closest I’d ever been to bloodshed.

Zehemoth came in for a landing. You don’t have to do this, Lily. You can stay here with me.

My father told my mother to launch the ships across the sea and come to our aid. He deployed dragon riders to seek aid from the Northern Kingdoms as well. But by the time everyone was prepared for war, this battle would already be decided. We could all be dead or prisoners of war. Or we could be the victors, and they need not come in the first place.

I hoped it was the latter.

Zehemoth landed outside the forest with such speed I nearly rolled forward over the horn of the saddle. The world spun for a moment before I found my bearings and climbed down to the ground.

Zehemoth dipped his head so he could look at me. Please be careful, Sunieth. He

rubbed his snout against me.

“I will.” My gloved hand caressed his scales, and I rested my cheek against him for a moment. “I’ll see you soon.” I turned away from Zehemoth, the other soldiers dismounting from their dragons and heading to where my father was in the lead.

“Follow me,” my father ordered, because not all of the men had been to Riviana Star. “We make haste.”

My heart dropped into my stomach. It was like a boulder that broke past my ribs and plummeted to the bottom of my spine. Without even seeing the enemy, I felt frozen to the spot with fear.

Then Wrath appeared beside me, dressed for a battle he couldn’t participate in, a foot taller with the calmness of a river and the strength of a mountain. He turned his head and looked down at me. “I’m here with you.”

It shouldn’t comfort me, not when he couldn’t raise his sword for me, but for some strange reason, it did. Made me feel safe when it didn’t change my circumstances at all.

My father gave an order from the front. “Valik and Gonro, protect the princess.” He regarded two of his lieutenants. “Only leave her side if death takes you.”

“You don’t have to?—”

Wrath’s hand moved to my wrist. “Don’t undermine the king in front of his men.”

In silence, I watched the lieutenants head to me at the back of the line, powerful men who could cut heads from shoulders, whose main purpose was to keep me alive even if it left them dead.

My father took the lead, and we marched forward into the forest, following the path through the trees, the smoke becoming thicker under the tree canopy. It'd been a long day of travel, and by the time we arrived there, we would all be weary.

At least we had the adrenaline.

Wrath walked at my side the entire way, taller than all the soldiers in line, even taller than my father. He marched to war like the rest of us.

An hour later, we heard the screams.

"Their armor is weak around the neck," Wrath said before we entered Riviana Star.

The music I used to hear at the heart of the forest was no longer audible. It was either silent, or the sound of battle drowned out the beauty of the song. The smoke grew thicker, and the rise in temperature was sudden.

My father's voice was audible from the front. "Riviana Star fought for the Southern Isles when we had few allies. Because of them, we found the last free dragons. Because of them, we prevailed in that fight. We are not here to fight someone else's war. We're here to fight our own war."

I could picture my father's face as he spoke, kingly in his armor, his eyes ferocious with blood lust.

"Fight with me."

All the soldiers raised their swords, even Wrath.

I did the same.

Then we moved into Riviana Star, the smoke obscuring the place I'd visited often as a child. The air was so harsh on my lungs, it was difficult to breathe without the desire to cough, but I refused to let it bother me.

“They’re in the clearing,” Wrath said from my side.

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We moved deeper into the forest, one of the trees to our left engulfed in flames like someone had set it ablaze intentionally. Dead bodies were on the sides of the paths, elves clad in regular clothes like they'd been ambushed quicker than they could flee.

We entered the clearing, the sun almost gone from the sky and the battle illuminated by the flames from the trees that surrounded us. It was chaos, monsters in heavy armor that I assumed were orcs, past the height of my father with thick muscles and big teeth protruding from their ugly faces. The men who fought alongside them were different from us—because they hid their faces. A golden plate covered their features, pronounced cheekbones and jawlines molded into the metal with a ring of spikes along the side. The rest of their heads and necks were covered by a dark garment, almost like a scarf. Their armor was black with hints of maroon. The color and design made it clear they were from a faraway place.

I knew it was the same people who had killed my crew because of the accents of gold they wore. Even their swords were made of gold. I'd seen gold with my own eyes, but it was a rare element, rarely used for decoration or armor because it was too precious to be squandered. But they had a bounty of it.

I snapped out of my stare when one of the orcs slayed an elf then turned on me.

“Lily.”

Instinct kicked in, and I caught his blade with my own before I spun it down then kicked him in the knee. The orc clearly underestimated me because I was a woman. He probably would have moved faster otherwise. While he was momentarily distracted by his knee, I stabbed my blade into the small pocket at the front of his

armor near his neck. I inserted it clean inside, severing his spine underneath.

He collapsed, another corpse on the battlefield.

“Your feet.”

“I killed him?—”

“But you could have killed him quicker,” Wrath snapped. “And every drop of energy counts in a battle.”

The two lieutenants stayed with me, but they were too busy fighting their own opponents to notice me speaking to someone who wasn’t there. We remained a trio, our backs facing one another as we felled the orcs and Barbarians who came for us.

When the first Barbarian came for me, I immediately learned he was a more difficult opponent. Smarter. Faster. And he didn’t underestimate me like the orcs did. The fact that I was a woman made no difference to him, and he moved for my throat like he wanted me dead quicker than a roach.

Wrath guided my sight when I needed it. “Block. And block again.” He watched the Barbarian and analyzed his habits quickly before reporting his findings to me. “You won’t be able to find an opening with your sword. You’ll need your dagger at the first opportunity.”

I continued to battle the Barbarian with my sword, the two of us locked in a dance that moved back and forth. When the Barbarian realized my power, he seemed to take my defeat as a challenge and came at me harder and faster, determined to squash me and humiliate me for bothering to fight.

“Wait for him to tire. Block his sword and stab your dagger under his arm when it’s

raised.”

The exchange happened the way he said it would, and when that opening came, I continued to block his sword with mine as I quickly reached for my dagger and stabbed it into the opening between his armor and his shoulder. I stabbed deep, sideways toward his heart.

He screamed before he stumbled.

“Finish him.”

I gripped my sword with both hands and sliced it clean through his neck.

“Yes, Xivin.”

When I looked around, I saw that one of the lieutenants had died. He bled out on the grass a few feet away.

“Your side is outnumbered.” Wrath surveyed the battle like he could see beyond our position. “If you don’t kill more of their kind, you’ll be overrun. Your men may have the power of dragons, but there are just too many of them.”

“Is my father okay?”

He stared into the throng again. “He’s felled more enemies than anyone.”

“Of course he has.”

Wrath came back to me. “I know you’re weary, but you need to fight harder. Fight more efficiently.”

“I’m not tired.” I lied through my teeth, lied so well, I believed it to be true.

Wrath didn’t question me. “Then fight on.”

After what felt like an eternity, I felt the fatigue scream in my muscles. I’d defeated orcs and Barbarians, more than I could count, and the other lieutenant who was supposed to protect me had either died or become separated from me.

I lowered my sword to my side because everyone else was engaged in battle. I had a moment of reprieve, and rather than help a comrade, I needed to take it.

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Wrath's gaze was directed elsewhere, looking over the crowd like he could see something.

I panted as I caught my breath, wanted to wipe the sweat from my forehead with my sleeve, but I couldn't do so in my armor. "What do you see?"

Wrath didn't speak.

My breath quickly returned to normal when a wave of adrenaline surged. "What do you see, Wrath?"

He turned to look at me, and his eyes were heavy.

"Not my father..." An unbearable pain that was far worse than the tiredness of my limbs struck me. I'd only been worried about surviving the battle myself. My father felt invincible to me, immortal like Wrath. I pushed through the others engaged in battle to see.

Wrath grabbed me by the wrist. "You will be killed?—"

I twisted out of his grasp then shoved him hard in the shoulder before I broke free, moving past the next line of fighting closer to the center of the clearing.

My father stood his ground with his sword gripped hard at his side, but chunks of his armor had been cut away by the ruthless assault of a blade. He was bleeding...and he was tired.

His assailants were three Barbarians. But they weren't like the others I'd fought in the battle. They were taller and bigger, and their armor was completely maroon with beautiful accents of gold, crown emblems on their chests like they were the kings or generals of this army.

Queen Eldinar lay on the ground with a sword to her throat, a heavy Barbarian pressing his foot into her chest so she couldn't move.

I quickly realized that my father had intervened to save her life.

After the pause in battle, they came for my father again, and he wielded his sword with Khazmuda's strength, deflecting three blades alone. But the fatigue in his muscles gave way and left an opening he couldn't prevent. One of their blades went deep into his shoulder.

"No!"

My father stumbled back, the golden blade still sticking out because it was so deep in his flesh.

The three halted their advance and stared down at him—like he was offal at their feet.

My father didn't get up again. He lay there then tried to prop himself up on his arm, but something about the wound made it difficult for him to move. He didn't look afraid, just angry that he'd been cut down like this.

I gripped my sword and ran forward.

But Wrath grabbed me with iron strength and held me back.

"Let me go!" I twisted out of his grasp and punched him in the face.

He grabbed me again, but then the world changed.

The battle was frozen in time. The ash that drifted through the air had gone motionless. It was silent, the cheers of the triumphant and the screams of the dying muted. I glanced around quickly to see that everyone had gone stiller than a winter morning, before I looked at Wrath again.

“Listen to me.” He had a naturally intense look about him, but now he looked more focused than he’d ever been, with a hint of ferocity in his hard stare. “I have but a moment.” His hand was so tight on my arm that I could feel him begin to dent the metal. “I can’t fight for you.” He pressed his hand to my chest, on top of the dragon crest that signified my family’s line. “But I can give you my army.”

A rush of heat left his hand and flooded into my body, burning hotter than flames. It made me wince from the pain, but then a blast of coolness followed. The burn continued to singe long after the heat was gone, but the pain was minimal.

His hand remained on my chest, and he looked me in the eye. “And I can give you my strength—the strength of a god.” The heat returned, but this time, it was hotter than it’d been a moment ago, so hot it made me give a quiet scream. “Defeat them.” He pulled his hand away, and before I had the chance to ask exactly what had transpired, the world resumed its chaos.

I was nearly knocked to my feet by the screams and the pandemonium. I looked at my father again, confined to the ground, the massive sword sticking out from his wounded body—and the Barbarians descended.

“The dead are yours to command.”

I didn’t know how I knew what to do. Once the gift had been granted to me, it became instinct and intuition. Rise. All those who had died in the battle suddenly rose,

elves, men, and orcs. Somehow they accepted my thoughts as orders, and those nearest suddenly converged around my father to form a line of defense. There was an orc without a head, an elf whose eyes had been stabbed from his face, a man who had lost one of his legs. Beaten and bloodied from the battle that had claimed their lives, they raised their swords and shields and surrounded my father, protecting him on all sides.

The Barbarians halted their progression.

My father looked around frantically as he watched the dead come to his aid, fight for him even though he had forsaken that power long ago. He looked far more afraid at being saved than he had on the threshold of his execution.

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Screams erupted from the battle, not those of the dying, but those who feared the dead who rose up once again. It changed the tone of the war, the tide quickly shifting back toward the Southern Isles and the elves of Riviana Star.

I grabbed the dagger from my side and threw it across the clearing, hitting the Barbarian in the neck who had Queen Eldinar captive.

He toppled over, and she was free.

She quickly got to her feet and found my eyes with the same look of fear my father wore.

“Help my father,” I ordered. “These assholes are mine.”

There was a moment of hesitation, like she wanted to disagree, but her eyes flicked away, and she did what I asked and rushed to my father, moving through the dead to reach him in the center.

I spun my sword around my wrist and approached the three Barbarians who had set this forest ablaze, who had tried to take the tree that led to the innocent souls on the other side. I’d been exhausted just moments ago, but now I felt more alive than I ever had.

“Lily!” My father’s frantic voice came from behind me, probably restrained by Queen Eldinar as she tried to help him. “No!”

I ignored him and faced my opponents.

He continued to scream. “Lily, run!”

The Barbarians seemed to ignore him too, because they all stared at me from their golden masks. The one on the left tilted his head slightly as he sized me up. The one on the right changed his grip on his sword. It was the one in the center who spoke. “If the little girl wants to play, let her.”

“Lily, please!” Tears were heavy in my father’s voice.

Wrath appeared at my side and stepped forward, his cape billowing in the nonexistent breeze. “These are no ordinary men. They’re swift and cunning. They have no honor in battle, and they’ll cut your eyes from your face just for sport.”

My eyes followed him as he circled the Barbarians.

“This one has an old stab wound on his left thigh.” He stopped behind the one on the right. “Just enough pressure will make him lose his balance.” He moved past the one in the center. “He’ll try to distract you with his words. Don’t let him.” He rounded the one on the left and began his walk back to me.

My father continued to scream in the background. My focus was so sharp I could block it out.

Wrath returned to my side. “This one is missing a toe on his left foot. A good stomp should piss him off.” He stared at the side of my face.

I couldn’t look directly at him, not without appearing distracted or weak. “Defeat them, Lily Rothschild.”

My father still lived, but in his incapacitated state, it was up to me to lead. With the command of the dead and the strength of a god in my veins, I would defeat these

vermin and save everything I held dear.

A fire of blood lust burned white-hot inside me. I'd watched my father take back his kingdom with a rage that could burn the world—and now I felt it too. These fiends had burned our forest and wounded my father, and I was furious. Angry tears scalded my eyes as my hand automatically tightened into a fist, and I slammed it into my chest.

Thud. Thud. Thud.

It was just me in the beginning, the sound drowned out by the chaos of the battle, but the dead joined me, banging their swords to their armored chest plates, slamming their weapons against their shields.

The sound grew in unison, so loud that it brought the entire battle to a momentary halt.

Even my father stopped calling out.

I moved forward and continued to slam my gloved fist into my chest. "You will not take this forest. You will not take my people. And you will not take my father."

Wrath moved ahead of me, stepping to the side as he watched me with a mesmerized stare.

I beat my chest harder, watched the Barbarians hesitate at my ferocity, clearly not expecting a rage hotter than the flames they'd released onto this forest. Instead of attacking me right away, they seemed paralyzed by the cacophony of drums from the dead I commanded, all of them rising and turning the tide against them.

Wrath continued to stare, wearing the same pride my father wore whenever he looked

at me. “All hail the Death Queen.”

I lowered my fist from my chest—and the world went silent. “Let’s go.”

Only the one in the middle seemed unaffected by my display of strength. Perhaps his ego was wounded. Perhaps he was furious that a woman was the one to topple his siege to the ground. He stepped forward first and did a maneuver with his blade, flicking it around his wrist and then crossing his body for another dance, showing a speed I could barely discern. Then he came to a halt. “Ladies first.”

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“What a gentleman.” I lunged forward, and that was when the assault began. The other two converged on me and I was surrounded on all sides, but I could move my blade far faster than I ever had, even on my best day, even after the greatest night of sleep I’d ever had. Not only did I have speed, but whenever my hits landed, they landed hard.

Like I had the strength of a man six and a half feet tall.

Wrath circled us and watched. “Dagger from the right.”

I ducked and kicked the Barbarian hard in the chest before I raised my sword and blocked the blade from the man in the center. I could process movements now quicker than I could before, blocking hits and then doing damage within the same second.

“Your left.”

I ducked then slammed my boot down on my opponent’s left foot. I hit the spot perfectly because he stumbled back and screamed.

“Quick.” Wrath came forward. “Slay him.”

I ducked the blade coming for my head and kicked him in the chest until he landed on his back. Then I stabbed the tip of my blade right down the center of his neck.

“Behind.”

I left the blade there and rolled out of the way.

The blade meant for me went down on his ally, and he grunted and died with a loud gurgle as more blood poured from the mortal wound in his neck.

I got back to my feet and grabbed the blade before I dodged the next attack.

The one in the center grabbed the other by the arm and tugged him back.

I flicked my sword around my wrist and then did an elaborate routine similar to the one he had done, only able to perform it because I had the strength of a powerful man inside me coupled with my own strength. I wished I could see their expressions, wished I could see the fear in their eyes that they must feel. “Who’s the little girl now, asshole?”

They must have said something to one another because the leader released his hold and stepped back. They seemed to be retreating. One made a hand gesture to someone in the crowd, and then a horn was blown—a white flag.

I moved forward with my blade at the ready. “And you think I’m just going to let you leave?” I asked with a maniacal laugh. “You think I’m going to let you walk out of here after what you did to my father? I’m going to cut you down, and then I’m going to burn you alive.”

The battle fell apart. The enemy began to flee, escaping through any opening they could find in the forest. Some of the elves tried to pursue them, but most of the survivors were too tired and relieved to do anything.

But I wasn’t letting these brutes leave with their heads on their shoulders. They turned to the edge of the trees and began to run.

Wrath suddenly appeared before me, both hands on my shoulders. “Let them go.”

I shoved him in the chest. “I will not?—”

“Your father.” He grabbed me again and held me back, his eyes showing concern rather than anger.

So lost in my fury, I’d forgotten the reason I was so livid in the first place.

“He needs you.”

It was the only thing that could snap me out of my rage—the thought that this might be the last time I ever got to speak to him. I didn’t know his condition, didn’t know if he was still alive.

The look in Wrath’s eyes told me the situation wasn’t good.

I turned away from him and sheathed my blade.

Queen Eldinar had removed the blade from his body, and she applied pressure with the cloth she’d ripped from her own clothing. She secured it in multiple places to stanch the flow of blood. Uncle Ezra ran over, bloody himself but not nearly as bad.

I hurried over and kneeled at my father’s side.

His eyes were already glazed over, but when he looked at me, they sharpened just a bit. His hand took a moment to rise from his heart, weak and barely able to move, but he found mine and gave it the faintest squeeze. “You promised me…” His breaths were deep and labored, breathing through the pain and the weakness.

The guilt that flowed over me pounded harder than a waterfall. When he’d seen the

army of the dead, he'd known it could only come from one place—a deal with an evil god. “It's not what it seems...”

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His breathing lessened like he was slipping away. “Lead our people, Queen Lily Rothschild.”

“Dad, you’re going to be okay.” Tears spilled over my eyes and splashed onto his face. “You’re going to be okay.” I looked at Aunt Eldinar. “He’s going to be okay, right? He’s going to be okay...”

Blood was smeared all over her face, but it wasn’t hers. “The bleeding won’t stop, and I do not know why.”

Uncle Ezra examined the golden blade that had pierced my father before he tossed it aside. “It’s something to do with the blade.”

I turned back to my father, the tears suddenly more potent.

“Zunieth, it’s okay...” His voice was weaker now. “We protected the Great Tree...and you’re safe...and that’s all I care about.”

“Dad...no.”

His eyes took me in for a long moment, studying my face like he wanted to treasure it in his last moments. “I’m so proud of you...”

“No...” I started to sob.

“Not because you saved this forest...not because you protected our people...but because you’re my daughter.”

“Dad...” I gripped his hand and sobbed, splashing tears all over him.

He suddenly went weak and closed his eyes, and he grew still.

“No!” I felt his hand go limp in mine, felt the life leave his body. “No. No, this can’t be happening.”

Queen Eldinar closed her eyes and bowed her head, as if saying a prayer.

I dropped his hand and got to my feet, my eyes frantically searching for Wrath and finding him a moment later.

He gave me a look of sympathy so deep it was as if he’d lost his own father.

“Please help me.”

“There’s nothing I can do?—”

“Spare him, and you can take my soul.”

After a long stare, he gave a slight shake of his head.

“My soul is unworthy to you.”

“Your soul is too worthy,” he whispered.

“Please—”

“No.”

“I will be in the underworld with you.”

“Your father would never want that. I won’t do it, Lily.”

I didn’t care that I was talking to someone no one could see. I didn’t care if everyone thought I was a lunatic. “Help me.Please.” The tears were so heavy that my vision blurred.

His eyes dropped to the ground like he didn’t want to watch me suffer anymore.

“Please.” I dropped to my knees in front of him and sobbed.

Wrath let me cry.

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My face moved into my palms, and my body shook from the despair. My father was invincible, but I'd watched him die before my eyes. It was too much. He'd come here to save someone else and lost his life in the process. If I'd been quicker, if Wrath had given me this power sooner, everything could have been different.

"I have an idea."

"What?" I sucked in a harsh breath then dropped my palms from my face. "What—what do you mean?" I left my knees and rose to my feet, stumbling forward because I was weak with sorrow.

"We need to move quickly."

"Okay—okay. What do I do?" Was there hope that I could stop this? "I'll do anything."

"Your father defeated Bahamut with the power of the dragons. A single fuse that had the power to defeat a god. That same power might be enough to save him long enough to heal. Tell Khazmuda. He'll know what to do."

My heart raced at the chance to save my father's life, at the chance to reverse this horrible fate. I stepped away and pushed my mind out to Khazmuda, but by the time I felt his mind, he was already overhead, knowing what had happened to his best friend.

"Roooooaaaaaarrrr!" He landed with a thud, and his nostrils flared with flames.

“I know how we can save him.” I rushed up to Khazmuda and blocked his path.
“Listen to me. We don’t have time.”

He sucked in a harsh breath, and he started to shake, making noises so strange I couldn’t figure out what they were. A tremble and then a grunt. What is your idea, Zunieth?

“The power of all dragons given to him. An immense strength that could keep him alive long enough to heal. A fuse of all dragons, like you did when he defeated Bahamut. Do it. Quickly. Now.”

Khazmuda closed his eyes, focusing on conversing with all the dragons outside the forest, somehow organizing the effort with just his mind.

I stepped aside and watched him, feeling Wrath’s arm when he appeared close to me.
“Please work... Come on... Please work.”

His hand snaked around mine, and he grabbed it, interlocking our fingers.

Khazmuda opened his eyes and moved forward, Queen Eldinar and Uncle Ezra stepping out of the way so he could reach my father. Everyone else stood by and watched, waited to see if their king would rise once more.

Khazmuda lowered his snout to my father’s chest and rested it there.

Seconds turned into minutes. And those minutes started to feel like hours. There was nothing but the sound of burning trees, the aftermath and destruction of war. Khazmuda kept his snout in place, his eyes closed.

My tears had run dry because I couldn’t even breathe right now. I just waited, clung to hope.

And then Khazmuda pulled away, and my father took a breath.

My hand left Wrath's, and I ran forward and immediately fell to my knees at my father's side. "Dad..." My hand reached for his, and I felt his pulse, weak and distant. He was cold to the touch.

It is not what it seems.

I looked to Khazmuda.

With the power of the dragons, I'm able to keep him alive. But I can't get him to heal.

"What—what does that mean?"

Their blades are either cursed or the properties of the gold prevent the human body from healing. Or it slows it so dramatically that the body doesn't have a chance to recuperate before it loses blood.

I knew there had to be a reason my father was unable to rise again. Because a single stab wasn't enough to mortally wound someone of such immense strength. "What does that mean, Khazmuda?"

It means we can keep him stable, but if he doesn't heal, then he'll be in this state forever.

"Can you talk to him?"

Not right now. But I can feel his mind. It's weak.

But at least he's alive...

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We will wait and see. And if he doesn't heal on his own, we'll need to find a way to make him heal. An antidote to the gold. A medicine we don't have in these lands.

I relayed Khazmuda's words to everyone else. "Aunt Eldinar, do you know of anything that can counteract the gold or the curse or whatever properties this metal contains?"

She shook her head. "I've never heard of such magic. But I assure you we will figure it out. King Talon of the Southern Isles will rise again." She came to my side and placed her hand upon my shoulder. "I promise."

My hand went to hers on my shoulder, and I squeezed it, on the verge of tears again. "Thank you."

15

WRATH

Talon Rothschild was placed on a carrier with vines secured to the wooden frame and transported from the battle to the infirmary, where the healers would care for him through the night. Lily went with them, her eyes still wet as she walked at his side.

I kept my distance to give her space to grieve her father's incapacitation. Right now, she was broken, and the shards of her broken heart had landed in the soil. Her tears would water those seeds, and then revenge would grow from the vines. Even if the Barbarians never challenged the Southern Isles directly, I knew the Death Queen would punish them for what they'd done.

The others who remained helped those who had been injured. The dead were left to rot because the fires the Barbarians had lit continued to incinerate the trees and fill the dark sky with smoke.

My eyes moved to the Great Tree, protected during the battle by many elves who gave their lives to defend it. The outline of the door was faded but still visible from where I stood. A stage had been built around the trunk, as if they had performances or speeches in this meadow.

I blinked—and then she was there.

With bright-red hair and a distinct glow around her aura, she shone like the sun when it was highest in the sky, when the days were long and the nights were short. Her green eyes were brilliant like freshly forged steel and just as sharp as a new weapon. “You may be invisible to the world, but you’re never invisible to me. We’ve never met, but I know who you are by the darkness you possess, Wrath, God of the Underworld, successor to Bahamut. This is the land of the living, and the bringer of death has no place here.”

No one was aware of the conversation that took place, not when they could not see or hear either of us.

Her hair flowed in a wind that didn’t exist. Her eyes burned hotter than the flames that were reflected in her gaze. She inhaled a breath and gently let it out, and suddenly, a wind swept through the forest and extinguished the fire that torched the trees. “I have no ill will toward you or your forest. I have another purpose.”

“Yes, Lily Lena Rothschild. She came to these woods as a soldier and a princess, but she will leave as the Death Queen. Word will spread like wildfire that catches on the air. The world will know of her power just the way the world knew of the Death King before. Just as the innocence of a child dies upon adulthood, her soul will spoil.”

“I grant her these gifts freely. Her soul will remain untouched.”

“Freely?” Her eyes narrowed. “Is that word in your vocabulary?”

“It is for Lily.”

The suspicion slowly faded. “So you granted her the power to win this battle and save Riviana Star simply because you wanted her to win.”

It wasn’t a question, but I answered it as if it were. “Yes.”

Silence heavier than winter mist settled between us. The wind through her hair waned slightly, and the luminance in her eyes brightened.

“And I wanted her to live.” If she died, she would travel to the Realm of Caelum with her ancestors. We would be parted forever, and losing my only joy was too much to bear. I felt the sun on my face in the underworld simply because of her presence in my heart.

The silence was deafening, Riviana’s shrewd mind working to dissect the little information I’d given her. “In all the years of my eternal servitude to the afterlife, I’ve never encountered a love such as this.” Her hair suddenly lightened in color, almost turning the color of copper. “A servant to the Covenant, a man with a hollow heart, to love a mortal with a soul that will pass into my realm when her time comes.”

“My heart is not hollow. It is full...and the reason I came to be in that horrible place.”

She studied me. “You sold your soul for a price. What was that price?”

Despite the centuries that had passed, the wound was still raw. Sometimes I questioned whether I’d made the right decision. I hadn’t wanted Anya to die, but my

sons were the ones who truly paid the price for my decision. How different would their lives have been otherwise? If they hadn't had to carry the baggage I left as their inheritance. "My wife was sick..."

"And you sold your soul to spare her."

"A sickness destroyed her lungs, a sickness that wouldn't have affected me if I'd been there."

She gave a slight nod. "One man can't be responsible for everyone else."

"But a husband should be responsible for his wife—and I failed her." And I'd failed my boys too. They would have had both parents if I'd just been there to care for Tiberius.

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“You are very different from your predecessor.”

“I was forced into this position. I take no delight in it. When victims seek my services, most of the time, I try to dissuade them.”

“Most of the time?”

“Some of them are evil...and deserve what comes to them.”

The world continued on around us, the living mourning the dead, oblivious to the two gods who spoke in their vicinity. Now, smoke replaced the flames, billowing up to the sky and being carried away on the air. Riviana stood before me, her anger toward me significantly diminished the longer we spoke. “I’m sure the Covenant will come to regret their decision.”

“My debt has been paid, and I’ve asked to be released...but they refuse.” I needed to accept there was no escape from this existence, that I would do this job forevermore because eternity had no end or no beginning. But every time I looked at Lily, it just became harder. Harder not to imagine another chance at life. Harder not to imagine being her husband and the father of her children...living in that villa near the oak tree.

Riviana said nothing to that for a while. “Do you regret it?”

“My wife was married to my brother in less than a year. She believed I was leaving her for someone else so easily. It makes me wonder if there were feelings between them all along.”

“I hope that wasn’t the case.”

“I let my sons believe I didn’t love them. I regret that every single day of my life.” It had been an impossible decision to make, and perhaps I had chosen wrong.

“Bahamut was vile. The memory of him still makes my skin crawl.”

“He got what he deserved in the end...thanks to Talon Rothschild.” I resented his freedom and the full life he lived, but I still respected him for the man and king he was. I didn’t just try to spare his life for Lily’s sake—but because I wanted him to live.

“Talon Rothschild is a good man. And I think you are as well, Callum Riverside.”

My eyes hardened on her face. “No one has called me that in a long time.”

“That’s who you truly are. Who you’ve always been. Perhaps it’s time that Lily knows it too.”

16

LILY

I sat in the grand hall at the wooden table with my great-aunt and uncle, still in my uniform and armor, dead tired but so devastated I couldn’t sleep or eat. Survivors of the battle attended to the wounded or put out the fires. No one chased the Barbarians in their retreat, leaving the dragons to burn them on their journey back to their ships.

Queen Eldinar stared at me, her once-pristine white armor now marked with soot and my father’s blood. “Our minds are not connected, but I feel your sadness like they are.”

My eyes had been on the corner of the table, examining the etching in the wood. “I’m worried about him.”

“With the protection of the dragons, he’ll remain on this side of the veil. Perhaps he’ll heal on his own over a long period. Or perhaps we’ll find something to aid his recovery. I assure you, your father will return to you.”

I lifted my chin and looked at her then at my great-uncle across the table from her. “I need to bring him back to the Southern Isles.”

“It’s probably best if he stays in Riviana Star?—”

“I won’t leave him behind. My mother will want to be with him, but she will be bound by her duty to us and remain behind. The tension will break her neck. I can’t do that to her. Also, the dragons live in the Southern Isles. I can’t have them all stay behind and remain separated from their families.”

She gave a nod. “I suppose you’re right.”

“I’ll have to send him by ship.” He couldn’t fly, and if a rope binding him to Khazmuda snapped, he would drown in the sea.

“That’s probably for the best. Have the voyage guarded by dragons. His finest men will volunteer to ensure he returns to his throne.” A flower crown rested on the table, but she didn’t wear it again. The flowers were far too pretty for her war-torn appearance. “I suspect that’s not the last we’ll see of those creatures that align themselves with orcs.”

“They’re called Barbarians.”

“How do you know this?”

“Because I encountered them on my sea journey. Their ships are covered in gold, but somehow they don’t sink.”

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“Macabre tells me they’ve pursued them to the sea, but their ships don’t hold flames. Only their masts burn, but that’s not enough to stop their progression across the sea. They’ve killed many—but not enough.”

My heart had been dead in my chest for the last hour, but it started to pound once more. “What did they want?”

“The forest or the Realm of Caelum, I’m not sure which.” She watched me with that intelligent and shrewd stare, about to ascend to the hilltop of a new dawn. “I’m sorry that the responsibility of your kingdom now rests upon you, Queen Rothschild. But I have no doubt that you will lead your people as well as your father has.”

It was a responsibility I’d agreed to, but now that I had it, I didn’t want it. “That’s nice of you to say.”

“I mean it.” She gave me a gentle smile.

My eyes flicked away.

Silence ensued, and the longer it lasted, the heavier it felt. A new tension rose, and it was so palpable I could feel her words before she spoke them aloud.

“I’ve seen the dead rise before—by your father’s hand.”

My eyes remained averted, having known this would come to pass.

“The command of the dead is not hereditary, Lily.”

I knew my father would never sidestep an interrogation by looking away. I was a queen now, and I shouldn't either. My eyes found the strength to match hers again.

"No amount of power is worth your soul."

"It's not what it seems..."

"To me, it appears exactly as it seems." The empathy in her voice slowly faded away. "You traveled to the Dead Island on your journey and propositioned the God of the Underworld. There's only one currency a ghoul like him understands, and that price was too much to pay?—"

"I did not offer my soul in exchange. The gift was given freely." If my father weren't incapacitated right now, he would come at me so hard. I knew he had been angry earlier, but he'd chosen to spend his final moments loving me instead of hating me.

"A gift?"

"Yes."

Her ruthless eyes bored into mine with the demand of a queen. "How is that so?"

I didn't know where to start, didn't know if I wanted to start at all. To share the most intimate and complicated relationship of my life with anyone. "My soul is not forfeited and remains in my full possession. That's all you need to know."

She didn't pursue me like she would if I were her own daughter. She was forced to let it lie. "Tread carefully, Lily. The God of the Underworld is like a viper in your garden. He'll rot your fruit and say it was you who didn't water it enough. He'll manipulate you to get what he wants and cackle when he reaps the rewards."

Not Wrath. Not the man I knew.

“He granted you more than the command of the dead. A surge of strength and speed unlike anything I’ve ever seen. Even on my best day, battling three of those hooded swordsmen would have come at great cost.”

I wanted no more of this interrogation, didn’t want to try to explain something I couldn’t even explain to myself. “I have a long journey back to the Southern Isles tomorrow, and I’m quite weary.” My eyes flicked away in cowardice.

There was an angry pause, but my aunt let it be. “Of course. Thank you for answering our call for aid.”

“The Southern Isles will always answer the call of Riviana Star.”

I stripped off my armor and bathed in the tub. Instead of being granted a tree house like I had on my previous visits, I was given the royal chambers connected to where Queen Eldinar resided. It was an additional building that had been constructed in the last decade, and it was where my parents stayed on their visits as king and queen.

But now, I was the queen.

Even when the dirt and grime were washed away, I continued to soak in the warm water, feeling the temperature slowly fade from my body. With arms crossed over my chest and an emptiness in my stomach, I stared at the opposite side of the basin, just where my toe popped out of the water.

I wasn’t sure how long I lay there, but once the water had gone cold, I finally got out.

I dried off and ran a comb through my wet hair before I found something to wear in one of the drawers. Clean clothes made by the elves had been placed inside, and I

grabbed a sage-colored dress and put it on, the material stopping at my thighs.

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I sat on the stool at the edge of the bed and stared at the rug on the floor.

That was when I felt it.

A presence so profound it was like a forest fire. But it was also so warm...like the bath I'd just taken. I was in a different place across the Great Sea, but it suddenly felt like home when he was there.

He took a seat beside me, fully dressed in his armor and uniform. His hands rested on his thighs, and he seemed to stare at the rug or the window because I didn't feel his eyes burn a hole through my face.

"Thank you."

He didn't reach for me, didn't acknowledge what I said.

"You saved my people. You saved Riviana Star and the Realm of Caelum. You saved my father."

"I can't take credit for all of that," he said quietly. "I granted you my powers, but you were the one who used them." He turned his head and looked at me, the same pride in his eyes as he'd worn earlier. "And you used them well."

My eyes flicked away back to the rug.

"Your father will live, Xivin."

“But when will he return?” I said with a shaky voice. “Because I don’t think I can do this...”

“You’re already doing it.” His hand moved to mine, where it rested on my lap. “Your father would have been killed if you hadn’t been there to fight the Barbarians. Even the greatest swordsmen would have feared their blades. You did not.”

“Because I had your strength?—”

“You did not have my strength when you asked your father to come here. When you offered your sword to your allies and this forest. All you had was yourself, and you still had the bravery to come here.” His fingers linked with mine and gave a gentle squeeze.

“I fear the Barbarians will return and challenge the Southern Isles.”

“And you will protect your people if that comes to pass.”

“I’m not my father?—”

“Just as good as.” He leaned forward slightly, catching my stare and forcing me to meet his. “There is no doubt in my mind or heart that you can do this. I will be here with you always. My army is still yours.”

“How—how can you just give that to me? Unless I’ve agreed to something without realizing it...?”

His eyes hardened slightly. “What are you asking?”

“I just don’t understand.”

“I will never take your soul, Lily Rothschild. For any reason whatsoever. I’ve said that more than once, and I’ve proven it more than twice.”

“But you said you can’t interfere with the living.”

He turned quiet.

“But yet you continue to intervene for me. How?”

It seemed like there would be no answer. “That’s my business and doesn’t concern you.”

I looked at the walls he’d put up in his eyes, the stone that I would never penetrate.

“I can’t protect you in the flesh, but I will protect you in any other way I can manage.” His fingers tightened on mine. “I will be the eyes in the back of your head. The strength in your limbs. The army that fights from the grave. You are not alone, Lily Rothschild. Not when you have me.”

17

WRATH

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I felt the tug on my throat, the heft of the chains that were locked tightly around my flesh. For someone who was not of the mortal world, I could still feel things like I was just as alive as the trees and the rivers.

I appeared on the deck of the ship, the wind making the sails flap in the breeze that drove the mighty galleon across the sea. The salt was heavy in the air because the water was frigid in this part of the sea.

He stood before me in the gold mask with carved cheekbones and false teeth, spikes sticking out in all directions that would cut the fingers of anyone who tried to remove it. Black fabric was wrapped around his head, neck, and shoulders, every inch of his skin hidden from view by the maroon armor with gold accents.

His hand slowly reached for the mask that obscured his face, and he pulled it free. One eye was a different color from the other, ice-blue, while the other was green like a meadow in spring. His face was mostly bone, the skin so tight over his muscles and neck. He was a normal man, but the distinctive features made him look like something else, part monster. He raised his hand to move his mask to the side, and one of his inferiors took it without question.

He stepped forward, squaring off with me like this conversation would be exchanged with words rather than fists. “I asked for victory—and you gave me defeat.”

My cape flapped in the breeze, and my sword weighed upon my shoulders, along with the heavy armor that I didn’t need. “You asked for an army, and I gave you one.” He’d requested powerful allies to help him conquer Riviana Star, and I’d informed him of the orcs in the mountains to the northwest. “I did not guarantee the

outcome of the battle?—”

“She commanded the dead. An ability that none other than the God of the Underworld wields.” He came closer, his boots heavy against the planks of the deck.

“You should have known that Riviana Star would have allies.”

“Why does she have command of the dead and I have smelly orcs?—”

“My affairs with other mortals are not your concern. You asked for an army, and I gave it to you.”

“I want to command the dead.”

“That’s not possible since someone else has already claimed that power. The orcs were the next best thing.”

“Dragons would have been the next best thing.”

“I told you the location of the orcs to proposition them. They’re an inherently violent race, far more likely to take your offer simply for sport. Dragons are complex creatures that feel deeper than most humans. They are not interested in conquering the world—but everlasting peace. Any negotiation with them would have left you burned to ash.”

“You know you gave that cunt more and me less.”

My impulse was to defend her, but the second I showed my anger, it would be her downfall. They would know there was a deeper connection there, and simply out of spite, they might come for her. “You asked for an army in exchange for your soul—and I gave you one.”

“Bullshit. I want the equivalent of her army. She wielded an entire army with a single blade, and that is not possible for any swordsman. There was trickery there as well. In exchange for her soul, you gave her a chest of jewels, and in exchange for mine, you granted me a single gold coin.”

“Then you should have been more specific in your terms.”

“You knew what I faced when I arrived in Riviana Star, and you intentionally worked against me.”

“I did not. You failed to account for the fact that most kingdoms have allies. You underestimated your foes. Choose another place to call home because the Southern Isles are defended by the Death Queen.”

“The Death Queen...” He sucked the inside of his cheek, each of his eyes looking livid in unique ways, in different shades of color. “A beautiful queen who commands the dead and has the loyalty of dragons and elves. Sounds like the perfect wife to me.”

It took all my strength to maintain my stoicism. To pretend I didn’t have a dog in this fight.

“I will take her lands. I will take her dragons. And her command of the dead will serve me.”

“You’re no match for her.”

“Which is why you will give me more.”

“The deal has already been struck?—”

“And it’s nullified in light of what you’ve given another. Take me to the underworld, and I will inform your superiors of your deception, of your favoritism of a woman because of her beauty and the softness between her legs. My soul is equal to hers, and I deserve equal payment.”

“Trust me, they aren’t equal.” I’d felt the power of her soul when she encroached on my lands. She dwarfed all others, both living and dead, a behemoth hidden deep inside soft flesh. “And command of the dead can only be given to one?—”

“Then I request something else. Not smelly orcs.”

I knew the payment was not fair after what he’d seen Lily possess. And if he descended into the underworld and told the Covenant how grossly I’d interfered with the living, there would be even more dire consequences. “What do you seek?”

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He paused, thinking over his request as the galleon rocked in the waves. His eyes were open and endless in depth, as if he imagined his future as he gazed upon the God of the Underworld. “Vampires.”

“I can’t give you an army of vampires.”

“I want us to be vampires.”

“I’m only taking one soul, so I can only grant this boon to you.”

“Fine. Then I’ll turn everyone else. I’ll make my own army.”

I’d warned Lily not to come to Riviana Star, and she’d proceeded anyway. She’d ignored my warning twice in a row, and now I was in the situation I’d been desperate to avoid. Kennt would have taken Riviana Star, but the Southern Isles would have been spared. He was unaware of the Realm of Caelum, had no idea that it was located inside the ancient tree. I’d agreed to this deal before I’d met Lily. If she’d come to my shores before him, I never would have negotiated with him when I knew it would come at her expense.

Now, I was trapped in deceit. Lying to the woman who burned inside my heart.

Her father had been mortally stabbed because of me. Riviana Star had burned because of me. Elves and men had died because of me.

She would never forgive me for that.

And she shouldn't.