



Queen of Mirrors and Madness

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Category: Fantasy, Young Adult

Description: We searched for her,
brought her back into our world.
And our bed.

The princess and future queen.

Except she remembers nothing.

Through touch and taste,
it'll be our honor to bring back her memories,
To remind her of who she is.

But time waits for no man.
And neither does evil.
We will do everything to keep her safe,
assuming Alice doesn't end us first.

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CHAPTER1

ADELAIDE

Whenever I close my eyes, all I see is blood.

The flowing crimson beckons as much as it repels me. The war within my mind is a constant battle, only there is no winner.

I walk into the psychotherapist's office. Immediately, my gaze lands on the delicate fluttering of the doctor's pulse. It presses gently against the woman's ivory skin, a steady cadence that taunts me. I drop my head and brush the length of my hospital gown to distract myself. The cotton material is rough and a pale green that's supposed to soothe, but it's a joke.

There's no serenity to be found in this mental facility.

"Have a seat, Adelaide," Dr. Hall says with a wave of the hand. "We can start in just a minute."

These sessions with her make up the majority of my human interactions. They leave much to be desired. Dinah is a kind woman, and her motivations appear genuine, but I hate wasting my time here. She'll ask questions about my past, and I'll frustrate her by not responding.

Because I can't remember anything.

Dinah opens her desk drawer. “How are you today?”

I head over to the armchair reserved for patients. The leather elicits a tiny squeak of protest when I lower myself onto the seat as though it wishes for me to leave. I would, but these visits are mandatory.

Once I’m comfortable, I take a moment to think about the question. It’s simple, a benign inquiry, but I find that it’s hard to answer. How am I?

Physically, I’m healthy.

Mentally, I’m a lost cause, or I wouldn’t have been committed, although I’m much improved now that my nightmares have settled into the dark recesses of my mind. It’s taken me several years to cage them there, but the effort’s paid off.

I refuse to think about what would happen to my fragile mind if they ever escaped.

All that remains is an assessment of my emotional state. This is the most difficult to contend with because I long for things that can never be. I’m a danger to everyone, including myself.

Therefore, emotionally, I’m fucked.

“I’m fine,” I say. I bring my attention to Dinah, running my gaze over her cream silk blouse and black pencil skirt. It’s a little more risqué than usual with the black bra underneath, and her heels are taller as well. A new boyfriend, perhaps? “How are you?”

As soon as the question leaves my mouth, the pangs of regret ram against my chest. The woman swings her gaze to me with hope shining in its depths, and her blood rushes faster through her veins. I never engage, never cared enough to, but my

curiosity has gotten the best of me.

As it usually does.

I drop my head and thread my fingers in my lap, retreating into myself. Dinah's gaze bores into me, and my skin prickles. Silently, I curse myself for indulging in a moment of weakness. Human connection is what I crave.

And fear the most.

"Saturday was nice," she says slowly, as if I'm a skittish deer, ready to bolt into oncoming traffic. The idea has merit on occasion. "I met someone, and it was fun."

I remain silent in an effort to discourage any further conversation. Dinah is quick to get the hint. She picks up the pen and legal pad she retrieved from the drawer and takes her seat across from me.

"I have a lunch date, so I'll be cutting our session short today." At my nod, she continues. "Are you ready?"

"Yes."

"When you first came to us, you mentioned there was someone out to get you. We haven't discussed him in a while, and I think it's safe to try again. What can you tell me about him?"

I shrug. "Not much. The only thing I remember about him is his gray eyes. I feel like he's watching me all the time, waiting for my vigilance to wane."

She scribbles on her notepad, the scratching noise from the pen grating on my nerves. "Why is he looking for you?" she asks.

“I don’t know.”

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More notes. My irritability increases. It doesn't take much to set me off, not when the mysterious man is the subject matter.

"Why are you afraid of him?" The doctor tilts her head, scrutinizing me. "Do you think he'll harm you?"

"I don't know."

Her lips thin. Now we're both aggravated. Fine by me. Maybe this meeting will end faster than originally planned.

"Is he here at Green Oaks?" she asks. When I shake my head, the woman nods. "Then why do you think you're not safe here?"

My sigh is noiseless, but in my head it's loud and bothersome. Like Dinah's questions. There's no way to explain to her that he's searching for me using a portal of some kind. I've already been deemed insane, and sharing that tidbit won't make my situation any worse. I hate talking about it. I'm not superstitious, but I swear he can hear me.

When I don't respond, Dinah stares at me. The silence descends on the room like a thick blanket, suffocating and uncomfortable. She's the first to break.

The doctor returns to her desk and rummages through a designer purse. She checks her cell phone, and a secret smile plays about her lips. Envy burns in my chest and sends my thoughts careening. What would it be like to be intimate with someone without the fear of killing them?

During my musings, the woman retrieves a compact. From beneath my lashes, I watch as she pops it open to reapply her lipstick, similar to a red rose.

Paint the roses red...

The jarring thought rids me of my jealousy, and my entire body freezes.

The mirror is close.

Tooclose.

I lift my head, my stare drilling into her. As though she holds a bomb, I watch her handle the item, my eyes straining to find hints of anything unusual. The reflective surface isn't facing me, but that doesn't lessen my panic.

Hecould find me.

Whoever he is.

"I'm meeting my date from Saturday night for lunch today," she says, completely oblivious to my increasing terror. For a person who specializes in reading people, Dinah isn't doing a very good job right now.

I need her to get rid of the compact. Or at least close the fucking thing.

Instead, she does the exact opposite. The woman lays the object on her desk to put away her lipstick, only it's facing me this time. "I think he might be a keeper."

Everything around me fades as my focus stays locked on the mirror. Thankfully, I can't see my reflection. If I can't see myself, then he can't see me.

A buzzing sound tickles my ears as a glow appears around the circumference of the mirror. It's faint, barely noticeable. I try to convince myself that it's only a figment of my imagination. That it's not a portal and there's not someone looking for me with the desire to take me back into their world.

The strange light surrounding the compact pulses, right before growing brighter

Dinah's small talk is drowned out by the pounding of my heart and the blood roaring in my ears. My veins flood with adrenaline, fueled by an indescribable fear, and in the blink of an eye I'm out of the chair.

I grab the nearest object, a lamp on the end table next to me, and rip the electrical cord from the wall. Then I move. Dinah's head jerks up as I approach the desk and her eyes widen when I bring the base of the light fixture crashing down on her compact. Again and again.

The glass shatters.

The eerie light disappears.

My relief is instant but short-lived.

A pair of silver eyes meets mine through the shards of glass. It's only for a second. But that's long enough to confirm my greatest fears.

He's found me.

And I'm not as insane as I hoped.

CHAPTER2

ADELAIDE

“How are you doing, Ally?”

I stifle a groan. Considering the incident with the shrink earlier, I looked forward to being alone. Solitude, one of the few perks of being in a mental facility.

After laying down my playing cards, I tilt my head to look at the nurse dressed in a white crisp uniform. The scrubs look comfortable but do little to compliment her figure. She’s a young woman with long legs, blonde hair, and eyes that are a stunning shade of blue. Our coloring and features are so similar, Lorina could be a relative of mine.

“I’m fine.”

“Are you?” Her brows snap together. “That’s not what I heard.”

She does a quick assessment of the room before turning back to me. I don’t blame her for being alert. It’s her job, and there are other patients mulling about. Lost in a world of their own, most of them are harmless.

I am anything but.

I pick up the deck of playing cards and shuffle it. As much as I hoped she wouldn’t mention my “mental break” during my session, the staff at Green Oaks Mental Health

aren't neglectful. Not one of the perks to being here.

Lorina's gaze darts around the day room once again before she pulls out the chair next to me and sits. The lead doctor prefers that the staff not get too involved with the patients, but she has always taken the time to chat with me here and there.

It's one of the few times I feel normal.

"What happened?" Her voice is a whisper. "Did Dr. Hall say something that upset you?"

I look her in the eyes. "No. It's not a big deal, Lorie."

"It is a big deal."

She leans closer, and the blood underneath the skin of her cheeks rises into a flush. I tear my gaze away from the enticing sight, but it doesn't stop the sound of her pulse from ringing in my ears. Her forearm next to mine on the tabletop only adds to my discomfort.

I'm not attracted to Lorina, but to what flows with every beat of her heart.

"You haven't had an episode like that in a long time. I wanted to make sure that you're okay," she says.

"I'll never be okay. Not in the way you mean."

How do I tell her that I'm certain I killed someone? That the guilt is missing, yet my rage is not? It doesn't matter that the crime lab couldn't trace the blood found on my clothing back to anyone. It doesn't matter that I confessed.

Nothing matters.

I'm a risk to everyone. At least here, they have security measures in place for it. I don't want to hurt anyone that's innocent. Justice isn't justice if it isn't warranted.

I may not remember his identity, but I know in my soul the person I killed deserved to die.

"Stop worrying about me," I say. I deal the cards, setting up a game of Solitaire. "It's not worth the effort."

Lorina sighs, the sound full of frustration and defeat. It's the same way Dinah is after my weekly sessions with her. I've grown used to the disappointment I bring out in others.

It's easier for them to expect nothing than it is to expect more than I'm willing to give.

"Here." The nurse sets a tiny velvet bag on the table none too gently. "I brought this to see if anything inside will help you."

I pause, my hands suspended in the air with a two of spades between my fingers. "How so?"

She shrugs. "It's a small collection of items that were in your pocket before you came here."

The time when I was found in a deserted alley clutching a battle ax to my chest, covered in someone else's blood while mumbling nonsensical words.

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“Anyway, I thought you might want to see them,” she says. “Maybe they’ll help jog your memory. And no, there isn’t a mirror in there because it’s against protocol for patients to have glass. But even if that weren’t the case, I wouldn’t do that to you after the incident in the bathroom.”

Another episode that involved me screaming and cowering in a corner until the staff hauled me out of there. If I could’ve broken the steel mirrors, I would’ve. Even if it meant slamming myself against them until I passed out.

“Thanks.”

I don’t reach for the bag. Lorina frowns when I place the card down with a snap, signaling the end of our conversation. Reacquainting myself with my possessions is not something I want to do in front of an audience. I might not feel anything. But what if I do?

“Well, I’d better get back to work,” she says, her voice threaded with resignation.

I nod.

“You have another twenty minutes, Ally.”

“What are you doing, Mrs. Brown?”

Lorina and I jerk towards the sound of Dr. Gunner’s voice. The lead physician of the facility stands on the other side of the table, the windows of the day room directly behind him, causing the sunlight to temporarily blind me.

I blink away the dots in my vision while Lorina gets to her feet. “I was checking on Adelaide, sir,” she says.

He crosses his arms, and the movement causes the edges of his white coat to flutter, as if they’re nervous by his presence. Most people are.

Except me, of course.

I’m a murderer, so he should be wary of me, not the other way around.

“You know better than to engage the patients in an unprofessional manner.” The doctor flicks his cold gaze to me, looking down his nose. I return his stare with a scowl. “You’re not here to be their friend, Mrs. Brown. If you can’t draw the lines between casual and professional, then maybe you should consider updating your resume.”

The blood in his veins rushes with wicked delight, while Lorina pales and her heart stutters within her ribcage. The perverse pleasure Dr. Gunner receives from the nurse’s reaction to his threat makes my pulse quicken. I will it to slow down, and like an obedient child, it calms.

Or maybe my imagination is strong enough to control my body, affording me the control I desperately seek out since I have none. I suppose I have been listening to Dinah more than I realized.

I break the heavy silence by gathering and then shuffling the deck of cards. The noise is obnoxious in the quiet, and it draws the doctor’s attention. The cards leave my hands with an efficiency that showcases how many times I’ve sat in this room.

Once I have the King of Hearts in hand, I turn the card toward the man. “The suicide king,” I say, taking on a bored tone. “Do you ever think that his death was made to

look like a suicide? Maybe someone didn't like his lofty attitude and decided to take justice into their own hands. I know I have. At least once."

I place the card on the table with a firm snap, and the doctor's eyes widen infinitesimally as my threat registers. "Just because someone is in a place of authority doesn't mean they should abuse the power they have," I say. With my gaze locked on his, I continue, lowering my voice to just above a whisper. "I wouldn't mess with karma. That bitch will fuck you in the ass right before killing you."

Dr. Gunner takes a step back, working his throat as he swallows. "Mrs. Brown, see to it that the patients return to their rooms. That will be all."

He spins on his heel, white coat flapping behind him like a pair of wings, and walks away. Lorina turns to me, eyes wide, and I shrug.

"Serves him right," I say.

The nurse shakes her head in disbelief. "You are cr—" She slaps a hand on her mouth. "You've got nerve."

"I know I'm crazy," I say. "It's all right for you to say it. I'm in a mental institution, for fuck's sake."

"That's exactly why it's not okay to say the word." Lorina drops her arm to place a hand on her hip. She stares at me until I meet her gaze. Once I do, it softens. "Thank you," she says. "I can't afford to lose this job."

"If Doctor dickhead knows what's best, he'll leave you alone. It's not as though you were hurting anyone."

She looks over her shoulder in the direction of the door Dr. Gunner disappeared

through. “That may be, but he’s right about me keeping the professional lines in place.” She grins down at me. “Only that doesn’t apply to you because we’re friends.”

I drop my gaze as a warmth in my chest ignites, becoming unbearable. She has no idea the gift she’s given me with that statement. It’s far better than whatever items sit next to me in that bag. “Now who’s crazy?” I mumble.

Lorina chuckles. “I think everyone is, even if it’s only a little. You have five more minutes before I round everyone up.”

“Okay.”

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My fingers twitch with the need to see what she brought me. It won't be anything harmful since the staff had to approve it before it was allowed inside, but I'm still curious.

Curiouser and curiouser.

Somehow, I manage to wait until the time for recreation ends and we're all escorted back to our rooms. I sit on my bed and place the bag down in front of me. Then I stare at it with apprehension.

"Stop being a pussy and just open the damn thing," I mutter.

I push back the lid to reveal the contents, and a smile tugs at my lips.

Nestled within the faded blue velvet is a ring. It's gaudy. The ruby is huge, a ridiculous size that would be worth millions if it were real. Despite the darkening of the room brought on by the setting sun, the facets of the gem reflect the light. It winks at me like that of a lover, beckoning me.

I slip on the gold band and wiggle my fingers in a girlish manner. My giddiness magnifies. The other item is a thimble. I pluck the silver object from the bag and place it on my index finger, studying it as though it holds the meaning to life. My memories have yet to return, and I don't feel anything when looking at these things. There's no hint of remembrance, no tug on the synapses threaded through my brain.

With a disappointed huff, I return the thimble back to the bag. The gold ring is heavy on my finger, the foreign sensation pleasant, making me hesitant to remove it. I

indulge for a moment more and promise myself that I'll take it off soon.

That's when the face of the ruby begins to glow.

CHAPTER3

DARIUS

"So fucking close."

I slam my fist against the table. My untouched cup of tea rattles in its saucer as the wood underneath creaks from the force of the blow. My hand throbs, a bruise already forming, but I dismiss it.

I saw her. And she saw me.

Without a flicker of recognition.

The ticking of my watch, an ever-present noise to the soundtrack of my life, demands my attention. I take out the golden item and scrutinize it like I didn't just peer at it a moment ago.

"I'm running out of time," I mutter. "I'm going to be late. That is unacceptable."

With a shaking hand, I return the object to my waistcoat pocket and smooth out the material. This business of locating and securing the woman is tricky enough without the deadline attached to it. But the kingdom is in peril.

Madness lies in the shadows.

The Red Queen grows in power.

I shudder. Something must be done.

Snatching the nearby teacup, causing the liquid to spill over the sides, I down the remaining contents. It sends a jolt through me, and my heart races, taking on the quick pace of my thoughts. Another attempt must be made.

With Alice blocking me, the chance for failure is greater.

Anxiety wraps itself around me like a boa snake restricts its victim. Before stealing its life. I slap a hand to my chest, my fingers digging into my skin. The pain grounds me.

I must try again.

Once the haze of panic lifts from my vision, I walk over to the floor-length mirror and take a deep breath. Searching for her has never been the issue. Extracting her is.

I press my hand to the glass and grit my teeth against the warmth that travels along the fresh cut in the middle of my palm. The ability to seek and find is not without a cost. Wonderland has imbued all of its residences with magic, and that includes its objects as well.

The mirror hums with energy as it accepts my offering of blood, a portion of my life force. After unlocking the portal between realms, the surface of the glass morphs into a glowing green light. It crackles and glisters, tossing sparks onto my rug. Cheeky thing.

I take a deep breath and center my attention on the woman. Picturing her golden hair and blue eyes isn't a hard endeavor. She has always been beautiful to me.

The genteel slopes of her cheeks, the fullness of her rosebud lips, and the daintiness

of her slim fingers are details I've never forgotten. However, she's changed in her time away.

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Curves ripe for a man's touch.

Skin readied to be pink with a firm slap.

A mouth begging to be fucked.

Oh yes, the young woman has blossomed.

The energy around me grows, strengthened by my desperation and incited lust. I search for her while grasping a strip of ribbon in my free hand. Its pale blue has faded, closer to white than the color of the sky. It matters not. This belonged to her, and it's the only item of hers I possess.

I wade through the different reflective surfaces in the realm beyond, using Alice's aura as a beacon. It calls to me. As before, finding her is never the problem. This has enabled me to watch over her ever since her disappearance.

There is no glass nearby to be found, but I'm not looking for that this time. She has figured out the workings of the portal, and it'll do me no good to try and reach her from it.

"There you are," I whisper. "You cannot hide from me, dearest one."

She peers down at me, at whatever object is in her hands. No, not being held. She's wearing it.

I don't hesitate. Using every bit of magic I possess, I hurl it at her like a rope. It coils

around her, squeezing, similar to the way my heart feels when I see her. She gasps at the contact. Her eyes widening excites me, helps me channel more unseen force in her direction.

The feel of her breath and the smoothness of her skin tingles just beneath my grasp. I clench my jaw at her resistance. The struggle continues with her accelerated breathing and my increasing determination.

“Come here,” I grit out. “You’re not getting away from me, even if I have to follow you into your world.”

The moment my fingertips brush against her wrist, elation floods me. So close now. Her scream is nothing more than a gurgle in her throat the second I wrap my hand around her neck.

“I’ve got you now.”

Pain, the likes of which I’ve never experienced, assaults me. As though my blood has been ignited with flame, I burn from the inside out.

My grip on her loosens. If I hadn’t endured torture from the Red Queen, this would wreck me.

Currents of suffering continue to flood my body. I transfer the ribbon, my connection to Alice, to my mouth and utilize both hands to grip her securely. They tremble with the effort it takes to battle the pain and still hold onto her.

With a roar and a burst of strength, I yank her to me.

Her body collides with mine. We fall onto the floor in a heap, with her stretched across my chest and me still gripping her arm. My other hand, now dislodged from

her throat, rises to encircle her waist.

Her form is motionless while mine quakes. The intensity of the transfer, the magic expended, and the fight she gave all hit me at once. At least the pain from her touch has subsided.

“Alice?” Even my voice trembles. Or is that due to whom I’m addressing? “Are you all right?”

A soft moan sweeps past my ears and heads straight to my cock. The woman on top of me has yet to move or even speak, and I’m eager to fuck her. It’s fortunate for her that I am incapacitated, or I might try.

Foolish thoughts for a foolish man, for I can’t indulge.

“Alice?”

The woman lifts her head. Our gazes collide in a clash of silver and cerulean. She blinks at me several times, and I wait. For what, I’m not sure. Recognition? Relief? Joy?

I watch, drinking her in while I lie there. I’m not a person who is considered calm, and I certainly never stay still for long. However, a foreign and unexpected serenity washes over me.

Her presence dulls my compulsive need to check the time and my worry about being late to my duties as the queen’s messenger. How is this possible? Perhaps it’s not because of Alice but due to my near-death experience. I can’t discern which.

“Who are you?” Her words float over me like a cloud, compounding my confusion at her effect on me. “Where am I?”

“Darius, at your service, my lady. You are in Wonderland, of course.”

“Wonderland,” she repeats.

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The word is barely above a whisper, as though she's scared that giving it a voice will make it real. She scans the room of my home, and when she brings her gaze back to mine, it's churning with questions.

I rub my thumb on her arm in soothing strokes. "Ask me whatever you like."

She shakes her head. "I don't want to know."

"You can't escape reality."

"Reality is only what my mind perceives it to be."

My brow furrows. I lift my hand to touch her face, and she rears back. Changing my approach, I grab hold of her neck. With my thumb directly over her windpipe, she stiffens.

"Has the madness claimed you as well?" I ask. "Even in the realm beyond?"

"None of what just happened makes any sense, so I must be crazy."

"Perhaps," I say. She jerks back, and I tighten my grip, pressing my fingers into her skin. "Regardless of how you interpret the events from a moment ago, I am very real. That, I can assure you."

With my hand splayed across the small of her back, I thrust upward, into the softness of her, the apex of her thighs cradling me like a lover's embrace. My cock strains against my breeches, more than when she first landed on me.

The blue of her gaze turns wintry, as cold and sharp as an icicle. “Don’t do that again,” she says. Her voice takes on a husky quality that contradicts her warning. Unlike her cool stare, the warmth of her body rises, bringing a pink hue to her cheeks.

It’s quick to disappear. Odd.

“Or what?” I ask, drawing circles on her throat.

She swallows as my subtle threat registers. “I think we got off on the wrong foot.”

“I haven’t gotten off at all, so I beg to differ. My cock still aches, my seed ready to be spilt, and that has nothing to do with my foot.”

Her lips thin. “How do you know me?”

A prick of disappointment stabs me, and I’m quick to dismiss it. I’ve always known that I could never have Alice. However, that was while I was under the Queen’s roof and her watchful eye.

The monarch isn’t here to stop me.

Even so, I can’t give into my desires. It would bring about my demise.

“You truly don’t recognize me?” I ask.

The woman shakes her head. “Should I?”

Yes. “Not necessarily, but given your reaction to me and your surroundings, I’m inclined to think you don’t remember much of anything. Isn’t that right, Alice?”

She frowns. “That’s not my name.”

I search her face, scrutinizing it for any telltale signs of a falsehood. My expression mirrors her when there is none to be found. Either she's telling the truth and doesn't realize she's wrong, or she's good at playacting.

Given the deceitful games played at Court, I'm well-versed in the conception and execution of lies, as well as the detection of. Yet this girl is very convincing. Considering her upbringing, I shouldn't be surprised.

"What is your name then, dearest one?"

The woman's lips part on a gasp, drawing my attention to her lips. It's a pity I only have enough strength to choke her, not fuck her. I doubt she's aware of the fact.

"Adelaide."

"Hmm. That is lovely. As are you."

She searches my gaze, the blue of it mesmerizing me, putting me further under her spell; one that she casted many years ago. "Why are you saying things like that?" she asks, now avoiding my stare. "I'm no one to you, and we just met."

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What would she think if I told her that I've watched over her every day of her life? That I would kill any threat to her? That I'd die for her?

That conversation is best for another time. Perhaps when I'm completely free to indulge in her.

"You are very important to Wonderland," I say. "You have no idea just how much."

CHAPTER4

ADELAIDE

"That's insane," I whisper.

Everything here is.

Darius with his familiarity and the magic that brought me to him. My reaction to this man and the way my body warms with him near. But most of all, the desire stirring in my blood, making it sing. There weren't exactly a lot of choices for male company in the mental facility, but the pull I have toward Darius supersedes anything I've ever felt.

"You have a lot to learn, dearest one, but that will come in time. Unfortunately, we're running out of that commodity." He exhales, and the frustration within flows over me. "Right now, we need to figure out why you don't remember anything."

I bite my bottom lip, gnawing the soft skin, feeling the blood rising to the surface.

“Maybe I don’t want to.”

Warmth brushes my cheek a second before his palm does. “You don’t need to be afraid. You’re safe with me. I won’t let anything harm you.”

Darius doesn’t need to know he’s my main source of anxiety at this moment. The affability pouring from him is enough to make me run away and hide. At the same time, it speaks of a connection that I’ve longed for since I first woke up, covered in blood. As much as I’d love to know our past, I can’t take the risk that it has anything to do with my nightmares.

Unlocking those might push me to a point of no return.

“Thanks,” I mumble, “but there’s a reason I don’t remember anything. It’s my mind’s way of protecting me.”

“Time will tell. Speaking of...”

His fingers, flush to my face, flex as though he wants to grab me. My heart rate increases, and I will my cheeks not to flush. The warmth from the blood recedes like a wave returning to the ocean.

“We need to leave,” he says. “If I release you, will you promise not to run?”

My mouth quirks up. “Where would I go?”

“Not far. That I can assure you.”

He removes his hands from me, and the sense of loss is immediate. I school my features, not wanting him to notice. What is wrong with me? Other than the usual repressed trauma, of course.

“I’ll behave,” I say.

With a low groan, he closes his eyes. “You’ll be the death of me. Now, up you go.”

I flatten my hands against the plush rug underneath us and push up, lifting my body from his. Darius stares up at me without reservation. The silver of his eyes pierces me like the edge of a dagger, conjuring feelings of danger as well as tingles of excitement. I might not know this man, but I don’t want him to look at me any differently.

Right now, he watches me as if I’m his entire world.

In the mental institution, I was happy to be ignored. Preferred it, even. But Darius isn’t dismissing me. He acts enthralled, and I can’t deny that I’m enjoying it while being freaked the fuck out.

I get to my feet and watch him spring up with an athleticism that’s to be envied. He brushes his waistcoat and pants with sharp movements that snag my attention, keeping it fixed on him. Although it would be regardless. His pure white hair falls over his ebony brows, and my fingers twitch to brush away the strands. I want to feel the texture of his hair. Just once.

“It’s getting late.” He removes a pocket watch and stares at it intently, his lips thinning. “I must get back soon.”

I spread my arms. “What am I supposed to do?”

He makes a soothing noise and wraps his long, elegant fingers around the back of my neck. With a gentle tug, he brings me close, and the rushing within his veins crescendos. I fight the urge to lower my lashes and drink in the sound. It’s alluring.

Darius is even more so.

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“I’m taking you to someone who can help,” he says. “Without your memories, you can’t begin to claim your birthright. Baxter will know what to do.”

“I don’t want to go anywhere else. I’m still coming to terms with the fact that I’m here.” I jerk my chin at the floor-length mirror and shudder. “Can’t you send me back?”

His mouth turns down, and his gaze flashes with emotion. I take a retreating step, and he halts it by tightening his hold at the nape of my neck. “I’ve already lost you once, dearest one. That will not happen a second time. When I find the person responsible for your current condition, the devastation that’ll befall them will make the queen’s methods seem generous.”

“Please.”

My plea is weak, pathetic and without clarification. I don’t know what I’m asking him for or what I hope to gain. My emotions are tumultuous, like a ship trying to navigate its way to shore during a tempest.

Only Darius is both the sea wrecking me and the lighthouse offering refuge.

“The lies we tell ourselves are dangerous,” he whispers, slowly lowering his head. “Only the truth will set us free. You need to know yours.”

I shake my head. “I don’t want to.”

“Too many lives depend on it.”

His breath skims my face. I inhale, breathing him in, taking solace in his nearness. Darius frightens me just as much as he intrigues me. But there's something in the way he touches me that pulls me to him. Makes me want to trust him.

I'm an idiot.

"The choice is no longer yours," he says. He rests his forehead to mine, and the silky strands of his hair brush my cheek. "We are powerless against destiny... and our desires."

His mouth finds mine, and I stiffen under the contact. The softness of his lips coaxes me to respond.

And I do.

I lean into him and lay my hands on his chest, wanting to be close. For once in my life, I'm connecting with someone on a physical level. It's strange, but no more than being thrust into another world.

Darius lifts his head, and I chase his lips with mine. He chuckles softly, and my eyes fly open. Our gazes lock. His is bright with lust. I swallow the nerves gathering in my throat. Excitement is there as well, invigorated by the feel of his cock pressing against me and the blood flowing through it, hardening it to perfection.

"I promised myself a sample," he says against my mouth. "Now that I have it, how am I supposed to satisfy my hunger?"

I stare up at him. Threads of desire weave themselves into my ever-present anxiety, creating a tether that attaches to Darius. He is everything I want and fear.

"I don't know. That's my truth."

He nods, and a grim smile tugs at his lips. I trace the shape of them with my eyes, committing the visual to memory. Regardless of who this man is or isn't, I can't deny the beauty of him.

“Agreed.”

He takes my wrist and turns my palm up, the sexual tension in the air thinning. My fingers twitch when his hair falls over his brow once again. He isn't the only one who's starving to touch. And to be touched.

“Who is Baxter?” I ask.

Maintaining a firm grip on my hand, he turns toward a nearby table. I lean to the side to see what he's searching for and yank my hand in a knee-jerk reaction. Darius turns back to me, his fingers curled around the jewel-encrusted handle of a knife. The blood on the blade grew cold some time ago, but I can sense it's his.

Does he think to add mine to it?

I make a fist and attempt to dislodge his hold once again. That earns me a look of reproach. I offer him one in return.

My pulse throbs wildly in my veins and he winces. “Damn it, Alic— Adelaide. I'm not going to murder you. Now hold still. I need a drop of your blood to create the portal. That's all.”

I swallow deep, my gaze zipping between the blade in his hand and the expression on his face. The energy flowing through his bloodstream is determined, not detrimental. My ability to decipher another's intentions isn't without fault, but blood never lies.

People do.

“I’ll kill you if you take one drop more than is necessary,” I say.

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My threat is empty, but my resolve is full. I won't go down without a fight.

He smiles at me, throwing me off-kilter. "I would expect, and hope for, nothing less."

Darius brings the blade to index finger and pierces my skin. A ruby red droplet appears when he squeezes the digit, his gaze fixed on mine the entire time. My blood pounds furiously and rushes to my hands as though wanting to be freed from my body. My face flushes, my breasts grow heavy, and my lips pucker.

The silver of his eyes gleams with desire, and I catch myself leaning toward him before I think better of it. He swallows deeply, working the length of his throat. If my gaze wasn't firmly planted on his, I'd be tempted to stare at the rapid pulsing in his neck.

"The mirror demands an offering," he says, his voice deeper than normal. "We won't travel far, so this will do."

He takes my hand and guides it to the mirror. A green glow appears the instant my finger smears blood on the reflective surface. Darius places his palm beside my hand, and the jade light surrounding the looking glass brightens significantly.

"Don't be afraid," he says.

I frown up at him. "I've been nothing but since I—"

My murderous past is on the tip of my tongue. This man has me out of sorts, to the point I forgot to guard my secret. I'll have to be more mindful going forward if

human connection is the cause for my lack of diligence.

“Since you what?” Darius asks.

When I shake my head and focus on the glowing mirror to avoid his stare, he lifts my hand. At the feel of his lips encircling my finger, I gasp and jerk my head in his direction. He swirls tongue around the tip where the tiny cut throbs, and heat shoots straight to my core.

I press my thighs together at the feel of my blood traveling from his mouth and down his throat, then spreading to be absorbed into his bloodstream. My pussy instantly dampens, and my eyes flutter shut. The moan that crawls up my chest and itches my throat is pulled from me when Darius bites my finger, drawing another droplet onto his tongue.

“Since you what?” he repeats, his lips brushing my ear. “I won’t ask again.”

He nibbles on my finger and I clench my teeth. More of my life force enters his body and the euphoria of it makes me high, puts me into a mental state that’s adrift and far from my current reality.

“Dearest one...”

The low rumble is followed by a sharp bite to my cut. I cry out. Not in pain but in ecstasy. It’s more potent, more intoxicating than the kiss we shared.

I shove my free hand between my thighs, dipping my fingers underneath my hospital gown, and Darius groans. My need for release is all-encompassing. Like a fire, it consumes me, burning away any hint of embarrassment.

The second my fingertips brush my clit, my body tightens with need. Darius sucks on

my index finger and brings his other hand to my hip. He guides me to the nearest wall, pinning me there with his knee between my spread thighs, and his fingers duel with mine. Then they dance alone on my clit as I let my arm fall to the side with a sigh.

He plays me like an instrument, drawing a symphony of moans and gasps from me.

“Please,” I say between labored breaths.

This time, my plea is not without clarity. I know what I want, and that’s for him to make me come. I need the release so much it’d scare me if I wasn’t caught in a tidal wave of lust dragging me under, drowning out my ever-present wariness.

Darius bites my index finger at the same time that he roughly pinches my clit. My orgasm surges, rendering me light-headed, but it’s not enough to stop me from screaming. The rush, the bliss, and the intense heat hit me all at once. My body shakes from the tremors of pleasure. I’d collapse if not for Darius holding me.

I’ve never been more vulnerable than at this moment.

As soon as the rapture begins to subside, my limbs go limp, and I sink toward the floor. Darius is quick to sweep me into his arms. Without an ounce of resistance left in me, my head lulls onto his chest and my eyes close.

But not before I see him stepping into the mirror.

CHAPTER5

ADELAIDE

“Are you all right?”

Darius's voice flows over me like a balm to a wound. That wound would be my pride.

My cheeks heat as my mind sorts through the memories from a moment ago. Me standing there, stroking myself. Darius drinking my blood and it mixing with his. Him touching me until I exploded.

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I swallow past the lump in my throat and remain quiet. My throat is sore from my screams, and I can't speak to him without wanting to disappear.

Instead of saying something I'll regret, I scan the area. The scenery has changed, but not drastically. It's another room, a foyer, with a grand staircase off to the right.

"This timidity from you is surprising," he says when I don't answer.

"You don't know me."

He stops and my scalp prickles from the force of his stare. "Adelaide, I know you better than you know yourself."

That gets my attention.

I swing my gaze to his, and an electrical current runs through me at the connection, making my blood sizzle. "How?"

He leans down, bringing his face close, until his forehead rests against mine. The contact is anything but sexual, yet I want him to kiss me.

I shove the wanton thought aside and focus on his expression. It's both pained and tender.

"I've known you since the day you were born," he says quietly. "I've watched you grow into the woman you are today, and if the fates are kind, I'll see you become what you're destined to be."

My mouth thins. “You speak in riddles.”

He chuckles. The sound sends flutters through my belly. “If you think I’m ambiguous, you’re going to love Baxter’s neighbor, Lucien.”

I press my lips together and refrain from telling him that I have no interest in meeting anyone else. My time spent in solitude was once a safe haven, but now it’s a hindrance. I’m not mentally or emotionally equipped to be exposed to others. Even though I crave human interaction, it’s not meant for me. I’ve indulged enough already with Darius.

He sets me on my feet and wraps an arm around my waist. “Here we are.”

“Where is that, exactly?”

“My brother’s home. He tends to sulk in his study.” Darius knocks on the door and tilts his head. “Baxter?” When there’s no response, he turns toward the staircase and nods in its direction. “Let us try his bedroom.”

“That’s the last place I want to be.”

“You needn’t worry about my brother seducing you,” he says. “Baxter’s interests lie elsewhere. Unlike mine.” Darius smiles at me, and my heart stutters in my chest. “I’ll never deny how much I want you, Adelaide.”

I grip the banister and halt, squeezing my eyes shut. “Please stop. I know what happened between us would lead you to believe that I...”

“You what?”

I slowly open my eyes, keeping them focused on my bare feet. “That I want more, but

that's not true. I'm overwhelmed by everything, and I keep waiting to wake up in the menta—" I clear my throat and turn to look at him. "I'm still not convinced this is really happening."

"Shall I kiss you again, to solidify things?"

I shake my head, though my lips tingle at the very thought and at the way he's watching me, his silver eyes gleaming with desire. "I can't think when you do that."

Much to my surprise, he grins.

"I'm glad to hear it." Darius pulls me to him until our chests are flush and the length of his cock is nestled between my thighs. "When you've claimed your birthright, I'll be sure to distract you until you can't think. Or walk."

My pussy spasms at the thought, and my knees nearly buckle. I take a deep breath to steady myself, but with his body pressed to mine and his lips less than an inch away, it's hard to concentrate on anything that doesn't have to do with him.

"What's my birthright?" I ask on a wheeze, the words a struggle to give voice to.

His smile widens, growing brighter as it does. "You, dearest one, are a princess."

"Ah, fuck."

He makes a clicking sound with his tongue. "There's no need for such vulgarity, but I do understand this information is quite jarring. You can ruminate on that while I locate Baxter."

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Darius steps back from me, and I suck in oxygen, attempting to keep my head from spinning more than it already is. “A princess? That can’t be right.”

“It is. I vow it on my life. Come along.”

With his arm securely wrapped along the small of my back, he leads me up the remaining stairs and down a long, carpeted hallway. My time at the mental facility was composed of white walls, Dinah’s office, and the day room, with more white walls and a few windows. This place is a kaleidoscope of color in comparison.

The walls are adorned with ornate paintings with vivid, bright hues. They depict various seasons draped over an idyllic countryside, while others portray a dense forest. There’s a subtle vibration or movement to the colors, like the heat waves found in a desert. It’s fascinating and draws my attention.

I stop short and Darius turns to look at me. “This is beautiful,” I say, running my gaze along the artwork.

“Yes, it is. Most beautiful.”

At the change in his voice, I blink. His eyes are nowhere near the painting, his focus firmly attached to me.

Nerves skitter along my arms. I duck my head to avoid his intense stare. I’m not arrogant enough to assume he was referring to me, and I don’t understand why he would to begin with. My outward appearance is normal and certainly not attractive enough to inspire such passion or devotion.

Darius studies me for a moment longer before pulling me away from the paintings. Once we reach the door at the end of the hall, he opens it and strides right in. His steps are sure and mine are cautious, but we go inside nonetheless.

“Baxter?” Darius calls.

He stops just inside the opulent room, and I take that opportunity to drink in the luxury of it all. The thick curtains have been pulled back to allow the sunlight to pour through the windows, creating a warm glow on the furniture. The floor is covered with a plush carpet, similar to that of the corridor, but the color scheme is different here. This place is a study of scarlet, orange, and gold, the colors of fire. The walls display rich gold-leafing, as does the large four-poster bed in the center of the room. It’s breathtaking.

Darius steps further inside. “Where are you?”

“I’m here.”

A man steps from an adjacent room, his dark hair wet from a recent shower, wearing nothing but a towel around his hips. His facial characteristics are similar to Darius’s: both of them share the proud jaw, sharp cheekbones, and devastatingly handsome features. However, when the stranger looks at me, the warmth I find in Darius’s gaze is missing.

Instead, there’s a hatred that rages, singeing me where I stand.

“Get that whore out of my house, Darius.”

“For fuck’s sake.” Darius’s gaze narrows to little more than slits. “Show some respect.”

Baxter makes a circling motion with his hand and executes a bow worthy of a man presenting himself at court. “Get that royal whore out of my house.”

Darius goes taut beside me, his arm like stone around my waist. I turn in his embrace and rest my palm against his torso. Underneath my hand, his heart races wildly, the blood pumping through the organ at an alarming rate.

Instinct takes over.

My need to reassure him surges. I press my fingers against his waistcoat, willing him to calm. Immediately, his heartbeat slows to an even cadence, and the crimson in his veins quiets to a steady flow.

I snatch my hand away at the same time Darius’s gaze snaps to mine. “I—” The explanation that coats my tongue turns sour as I consider the impossibility of my thoughts. There’s no way I’m responsible for the immediate biological changes in him.

“What did you do?” he whispers.

My lungs collapse. Does he suspect I’m the cause? And was it actually me?

“What’s wrong?” Baxter takes a step toward us. “What’s going on?”

Darius waves his brother off and takes my chin in hand. “I know it was you,” he whispers.

I bite the inside of my cheek, struggling to come up with a response. “How would I—”

Baxter coming to stand beside us has me clamping my lips together. He looks from

me to his brother and back again, a vein on the side of his neck pulsing violently, snagging my attention. With him this close, I'm able to make out the leafy green of his eyes and the copper streaks in his dark hair. As well as the deep lines of his scowl.

“‘Tis nothing,” Darius murmurs.

He pulls me flush to his side, and I melt into him, relief coating me like a dense fog. This man might be a stranger, but while in a strange world, I'd rather have an ally than not. He tightens his arm around me, as if acknowledging my reliance on him.

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“This is Adelaide,” he says, tilting his head in my direction. “She doesn’t know who she is or anything about Wonderland. I brought the princess to you so you can help her remember.”

Baxter folds his arms across his honed chest, his muscles flexing enticingly. “Why would I do that? You know I have no love for the Queen of Hearts or her progeny.”

“I understand, but she’s the key to your revenge, brother. Adelaide is the only one who has magic similar to the queen, and being her daughter will allow her to get close.”

“Close enough to do what?” I ask.

Both of the men look at me, their faces similar and their expressions anything but. Darius gazes at me as though I’m his salvation. Baxter views me as though I’m his damnation.

Darius drops his arm from me and takes out his gold pocket watch. His brow furrows, and he’s quick to shove the timepiece back into his waistcoat. He blows out a sharp breath and nods to himself, causing tendrils of his white hair to fall across his forehead. This time, I give in to the urge gnawing at me.

I brush away the strands from his face. He jerks his head up, and the side of my mouth lifts in a half-smile. I can’t explain my need to touch him, not when I don’t understand it myself.

“He wants you to kill the Queen,” Baxter says, his voice flat.

Darius blinks as though coming out of trance and frowns at his brother. “I want her to figure out the queen’s vulnerability. It’s not the same thing.”

“Do you deny you’d encourage her to kill the madwoman, if given the chance?” Baxter shakes his head while clicking his tongue. “Let us not tell lies. You want that bitch dead, just as much as I do.”

Darius nods slowly. “This is true.”

“What about me?” I ask. “Why should I help you two? I don’t know her, and she’s never done anything to me.”

The brothers share a look that chills the marrow in my bones. Baxter scoffs and when he opens his mouth, Darius waves a hand, silencing him. He takes hold of my upper arms and stares down at me with such intensity that I brace myself for whatever he’s about to say.

“The queen treated you the worst of all,” Darius says quietly, his voice underlined with sorrow. “She used you for her own gains, forcing you to sleep with members of the court to ensure their cooperation and loyalty.”

I exhale. “But I don’t recall any of this. None of it is real to me.”

“When Baxter helps you retrieve your memories, it’ll all be clear. My only regret is I won’t be here to comfort you when you do.” Darius presses his lips to my forehead, letting the kiss go on longer than necessary. There’s a pain in his eyes when he pulls away. “Promise me that you won’t fight your mind. You regaining your identity is the key to unlocking your potential.”

“What if I can’t?” I ask. “What if you’re wrong about me?”

Baxter steps up to us, so close now that I can smell the fragrance of his soap. I inhale deeply, and he raises a brow in question. My cheeks begin to heat with embarrassment before I force the warmth away.

I can't dig too deeply into how that's possible, or I'll end up rocking in a corner like I did in the mental facility. Actually, I still might.

"He's not wrong," Baxter says. "My brother is a lot of things, but he's never uncertain when it comes to you. Never has been."

Darius clears his throat, and a telltale skip of his heartbeat brushes my ear. "All will be well, Adelaide. Trust me on this."

He releases me and tilts his head at his brother. "You will give me your word not to harm her. I mean it, Baxter. If I find out that you've willingly done something to put her life in jeopardy, I'll fucking kill you."

"I see the bonds of family can be traded for the softness of a cunt." Baxter glares at me. "Aloosecunt at that." When Darius takes a threatening step forward, the man rolls his eyes. "Very well. I'll keep the whore safe."

Darius gives him a curt nod.

"However, I can't guarantee she won't want to slit her wrists when she recalls her past. It's nothing worth remembering."

"That's not for you to decide." Darius pats his pocket where the timepiece rests, his fingers twitching. "Now, I must be off before my absence piques the queen's interest."

"Wait." I step into his path, causing him to halt. My hands tremble when I reach for

his shirt and I curl my fingers into the quality material, wrinkling it with minute remorse. “Don’t leave. Please.”

Darius’s silver gaze softens, and I grip him harder in response, unable to conceal my desperation. His lips lift in the most beautiful smile I’ve ever seen on a person, and my heart feels lighter. It’s only for a moment, but it’s one I’ll never forget.

If I believed in the impossible, I’d think he loved me.

“Adelaide, everything I do is for you. Whenever I leave you behind or entrust you in my brother’s care, it’s to keep you safe.” He exhales, and I breathe deeply, knowing it’s the last of him I’ll experience for a while. “There’s only one time that I acted selfishly when it concerned you.”

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I search his gaze for the answer, to understand what he's alluding to, but I can't locate it. "What?"

"When I kissed you, that was for me," he says.

"Oh."

Darius wraps his arms around me in a crushing hold, and his mouth slams against mine. Before I can react, his tongue spears my lips. He doesn't explore, doesn't seduce.

This time, he conquers me.

I sag in his embrace, rubbing against the hardness of him, my entire body coming to life. My thighs are coated with the effects of my arousal, and my core pulses with a need that borders on insanity. I want him.

I've never felt this way about anyone.

Darius rips his mouth away, breaking the kiss with such abruptness that I'd fall over if he weren't holding me so tightly. I stare up at him with my lips parted, my chest heaving, and my mind dazed.

"That was also for me," he says, the infectious smile from before returning.

He looks to Baxter, and the movement dispels the fog of lust surrounding me. I glance over and stiffen at the disdain etched in his features. If that were the only thing

I could see, I'd freeze over. But the blood running hotly through him, flowing downward and hardening his cock, makes me flush.

We lock eyes. His flash with emotions so intense they sear me, and I drop my gaze. Darius clears his throat and releases me to walk over to the mirror hung on the far wall.

“Remember your vow to me,” he says to Baxter. He drags his nail over the cut in his palm and slaps it against the reflective surface. The telltale green glow bursts to life around the object and I shudder.

“Until the next time, Adelaide.”

With that he disappears, leaving me bereft.

And with his devil of a brother.

CHAPTER6

ADELAIDE

“Get out.”

I jerk my head to Baxter, who glares at me with his nostrils flaring. He makes a slashing motion with his hand, and I flinch. My feet trip over themselves in my haste to leave the room.

“Don't try to escape,” he calls after me. “You'll regret it.”

The sound of his voice is nothing but an echo as I race down the hallway leading to the staircase. I don't give a shit that the queen is a possible threat to my well-being.

Baxter is more of an immediate one.

I descend the stairs. and my heartbeat pounds in my ears, synchronized to the pounding of my feet against the marble tile in the foyer. My grip on the doorknob leading outside is tenuous, and I take a moment to steady my nerves so I can twist the damn thing. The hinges remain silent as I swing the wooden door open and dart forward.

Straight into a wall.

I bounce off of the object blocking my path and flail, tossing my arms out to remain upright. The feel of someone grabbing me around the waist has my chest filling with a scream. Only it never leaves my mouth, having been interrupted by a hand clutching the underside of my jaw and forcefully lifting my head.

“What do we have here?” The man’s voice is light and playful, yet the gleam in his kohl-lined eyes is anything but. “Well, hello there, little bird. Trying to escape the nest, are we?”

My gaze bounces from the stranger’s icy blue gaze to the smirk on his full lips to the blue-black of his hair. Atop his dark strands sits a gray top hat that still carries a sales tag. It’s at odds with the finery of his clothing and the walking stick he twirls in his left hand.

I plant my hands on his chest and shove with all my might. The man doesn’t budge. Instead, he chuckles merrily as though I’ve told him a joke, his laughter making nerves zip along my spine.

“Let go of me,” I grit out.

“Where’s the fun in that?”

He spins me so quickly that my head whirls. The slamming of the door reaches me a second before the hardness of the wood presses against my back. The man releases my waist to bring the walking stick to my throat, pinning me in place. The golden lion's head on the end winks at me. My eyes widen as my fear amplifies.

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“Are you one of Baxter’s experiments?” The man leans down until his breath skims the bridge of my nose. “A new toy, perhaps?”

Indecision wars within me, but I settle on the truth. “No. He hates me.”

The man’s smirk spreads into a grin. “Excellent. Then you’re all mine.”

My blood, fueled by my panic, roars in my ears. The sound blends with the rushing of his, brought on by the man’s excitement. I cover his hand holding the cane lodged against my throat and use the other to grab his wrist as his fingers trail along my ribcage.

A burst of energy floods me.

The man hisses in pain and halts all movement. Except for his eyes. They scrutinize me, traveling over every inch of my face.

“What delightful torture is this?” he whispers. His grin turns manic, and the gleam in his gaze begins to sparkle. “A magical sadist? Dare I say my dreams have come true?”

He shoves the cane against my neck, bruising the tender skin there and forcing a cough from me. I wheeze, fighting the crushing of my airways while trying to remain standing. My flight-or-fight response from before intensifies at the waning oxygen, and I dig my nails into his skin.

“Yes,” he hisses, his eyelids fluttering closed. “More.”

I focus on my need to survive, to be free of him. The blood coursing through his body calls to me, every drop a soldier ready to receive and execute my command. I give the order.

The man's hold on me loosens at the same time he grunts. The sound is a mixture of ecstasy and agony. It stirs something within me.

Something I can't and won't give voice to.

"So fucking good," he groans. He thrusts his hips into mine, his cock pressing against my belly. "Make it hurt, little bird."

My blood sings.

My nipples harden.

My pussy flutters.

The man grinds into me as I hold onto his hand and wrist, his movements growing in speed and ferocity. I'm taking us to the precipice, to the edge of somewhere I've never been. He's more than eager to jump, but I'm teetering, my fear attempting to stay me.

A gentle breeze in the wrong direction would be my undoing.

"Lucien, at least take her upstairs if you plan to fuck her. And why does everyone think they can just show up at my house uninvited?"

Baxter's voice freezes me like being dropped into the arctic, but Lucien only slows the gyration of his hips. He continues to swivel them, stroking me with the length of his cock while I peer around him, looking to Baxter for help.

It's a wasted effort.

His gaze finds mine, and the hatred burns brighter than before. Now it's an inferno. I can't hear the cadence of his heart, not with mine beating crazily and Lucien's filling my ears. However, I'd bet it's racing with his anger.

"Hello there, Baxter," Lucien says without turning around. "Care to join us?"

With our gazes fused, Baxter isn't able to shield me from seeing his response to the sexual invitation. He blinks twice, right before sucking in a breath. I drop my focus to the bulge in his pants and bite my lip at the way his cock strains against the material.

He wants to say yes.

Verybadly.

"No." Baxter shakes his head. Whether that's to enforce his decision or to convince himself, I'm not sure. All I know is that he's lying to himself and us. "What I want is for you to release her, Lucien. I promised my brother to help the woman retrieve her memories, and I can't do that while you hump her against my front door."

Lucien looks at Baxter over his shoulder with a smirk. "So you say. Very well." The raven-haired man swings his gaze to me, the weight of his stare pinning me in place just as effectively as his cane at my throat. "Don't fly away, little bird. I have much in store for you."

He steps back, and my knees buckle. I slam my palms against the wood to keep from disgracing myself and falling to the floor. Lucien watches me, his head tilted and his lips twitching.

"You are such a delicate thing," he whispers.

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I bring a hand to my throat and massage the skin there. “And you’re an asshole.”

Lucien chuckles as Baxter strides over. Standing side-by-side, the two of them create an imposing force. And a striking visual. Now that Baxter’s hair is dry, it’s light brown and makes up a warm earthy palette when paired with his green eyes. While Lucien’s icy blue gaze is a stark contrast to the midnight black of his hair, giving him a cold, harsh appearance.

Separate, they are attractive.

Together, they are irresistible.

I squint up at both of them, conveying my displeasure for different reasons. It doesn’t have any effect on either man. Baxter rolls his eyes and walks up to me, taking my upper arm.

“Hopefully, this will not take long, and I can be rid of you.”

“Oh! Then she’s all mine,” Lucien says.

I make a face at both of them, right before Baxter drags me down the hallway with Lucien close on my heels.

“Poor grumpy bastard,” the man says with a nod at Baxter. “He doesn’t know how to have fun. We should teach him, eh?”

When I turn to view him over my shoulder, I shoot him an incredulous look in lieu of

speaking. He laughs again, and I go back to facing forward with a huff. I'm not sure which of them is worse.

Or more dangerous.

* * *

"Lie down here," Baxter says.

He gestures to a fainting couch that could've been stolen from a history museum. It's the only piece of furniture that doesn't match the rest of the room, making it stand out in an awkward way. It's similar to Lucien's ratty hat when compared to the rest of his fancy clothes.

"What are you going to do?" I ask.

He gives me a dirty look, and I hurry over to sit down but remain upright. I clasp my fingers in my lap to hide my fidgeting. Not that it helps. I'm pretty certain both men can tell I'm nervous.

Baxter's annoyance is opposite to Lucien's amusement at my demeanor.

The brunette exhales a breath of frustration. "I'm going to help you recover your memories."

"I know, but how?"

Lucien walks over to sit beside me. I frown up at him and scoot over, putting distance between us. He follows me until our outer thighs are pressed together once more.

My frown morphs into a glare. "What are you doing?"

“Making sure Baxter doesn’t kill you.”

“Oh.” The air whooshes from my lungs, and I slowly lean to the side, resting against the curved edge of the couch. “I didn’t realize it would be dangerous.”

Baxter nods. “For you and me both.”

“Which makes it so exciting,” Lucien says.

He smiles at me, and my palm itches with the urge to slap his handsome face. I lace my fingers again to refrain from giving in to the impulse. Given his penchant for pain, he might enjoy it.

I shake my head at him. “You’re crazy.”

“Crazy is a subjective term,” he says. “I prefer to think of myself as lacking boundaries.”

Baxter grunts. “As was showcased by your invasion of my home earlier.” He shifts his attention to me, and my breathing becomes shallow. “Lie on your back with your head draped across the armchair.”

I do as Baxter says, noting the licentious gleam in Lucien’s eye. He doesn’t come closer, but there’s no relief to be found in that since he’s unstable. At least with Baxter, I’m pretty certain he won’t do anything to me. With Lucien, all bets are off. He exemplified his “lack of boundaries” by accosting me at the door.

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If only I could say I was completely terrified instead of aroused.

Baxter walks over to place himself directly over me. He peers down, our gazes clashing—his full of determination and mine full of disquiet.

“What should I expect?” I ask, my voice barely a whisper. “Will there be pain?”

“Expect some discomfort when I probe your mind, but no pain. Unless you fight me.” He flicks his eyes to Lucien. “Hold her down.”

“With pleasure.”

I jackknife off the armrest and throw out my hands. “Wait.”

Lucien is there, his fingers encircling both of my wrists like manacles. “You know I like it when you try to fly away, little bird. Don’t tempt me to misbehave.”

My body reacts to the fear skittering through me, as well as to the tingles of sexual awareness. The pulsing of my core returns, timing itself to the rapid cadence of my heart, submerging me into confusion.

Baxter exhales a second before his fingers skim my throat. He takes a hold of my head and roughly guides it back into place. I stare up at him, not bothering to hide my fear. It’s pointless. I’m overpowered physically.

And I’m about to be overpowered mentally.

Resignation covers me like a shield, and something inside me shifts. Or strengthens. I can't discern which. "Do what the fuck you need to, so I can get the hell out of this place."

The man's eyes widen, and Lucien chuckles. Baxter's mouth thins, but I swear I catch his lips twitching. "For once," he says, palming the sides of my skull, "you and I are in agreement."

I squeeze my eyes shut, and Lucien brings my arms flush to my chest. His fingertips press into my breasts, his thumbs positioned directly over my nipples. He scoots closer until his hips are next to me on the wide seat. The heat of his body seeps into mine, and his cologne fills my senses, overwhelming me.

"I don't care if she screams," Baxter says from above me, "just make sure she doesn't move."

My heart thrashes within my ribcage, and the speed of my pulse ratchets up when Baxter's hands warm, heating my face where he holds me. A dense pressure slams against my head, and my eyes fly open. I look at Baxter, trying to make sense of what's happening, and the furrow of his brow sends me into a tailspin.

Then everything goes black.

CHAPTER7

LUCIEN

The little bird has encountered a viper in Baxter.

And now he's biting her.

Oh, how I wish I could do the same. She's such a delectable morsel, this one. The most succulent female I've encountered since... Hmm... Perhaps she's the most enticing woman I've ever come across.

I watch her endure Baxter's ministrations, soak in how his magic invades her body in the way I want to. It enters her mind a second later, and she arches her back as though to be rid of him. My fingers, now pressed against her tits, tremble with the need to fondle her. I would, too, if Baxter didn't have to concentrate.

Damn precarious magic. So fucking troublesome.

"Let me in, princess," Baxter says between clenched teeth. "That's it."

The queen's daughter, home at last... I thought I recognized her.

Well, now my cock is hard. Erm, harder. As it has been since I first laid eyes on the woman. Alice came flying at me like the little bird she is, and I should've devoured her then.

I'd bet my treasured hat collection that her pussy tastes like royalty.

Baxter releases a string of muttered curses, and Alice writhes in my hold, her head whipping from side to side. The golden tresses of her hair spread across the armchair, and her lips part in a silent scream. She is definitely fighting him.

This does not bode well for her.

However, it's an opportunity for me. And she won't mind, not since she's slept with half of the kingdom.

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I sweep my thumbs over her nipples and along the curves of her breasts in gentle, soothing strokes. Her body responds beautifully to my touch. She halts the erratic thrashing to arch into my hands, and I reward her with a few more sweeps of my fingers before leaning over her prone form. This close, I can make out the sprinkle of light freckles across the bridge of her dainty, pointed nose.

Do they taste like anything?

My mouth waters at the thought, and I drag my tongue over the slope of her cheek and downward until I reach her lips. Her skin is similar to the softness of a peach and smells just as sweet. I groan with the effort it takes to keep from shoving aside the hem of her garment and tasting her cunt.

After darting my gaze to Baxter and finding him still, his brow furrowed with concentration, I go back to tasting my little bird. Beginning with her lips. Her breaths are faint puffs that skim my face and make me smile with anticipation. Hopefully, when Alice wakes, she'll set my blood on fire like she did in the foyer.

I nearly came from the intensity of the pleasure that was born from the pain.

Her tongue greets mine without the timidity I witnessed from her prior. Deep in a magical trance, she boldly seeks out my mouth, and I fuse it to hers, drinking her in. My groan transfers to her through the kiss. If this is how she responds when she's eager, then I'll be fucking her on this settee before the sun disappears.

Given her promiscuous past, the chances are all but guaranteed.

Baxter's sharp inhale has me jerking back and my head snapping up. His entire complexion has paled to a sickly shade of white. The slack jaw, paired with the blank stare... sets off a clanging in my mind.

Something's terribly wrong.

"Baxter?" I call out. When he doesn't answer, I shift my hands to the woman's throat. "I'm sorry, little bird. I'm going to enjoy this more than I should."

My grip on her neck gradually increases in pressure. Her first struggled gasp makes my cock leak, and I nearly come when she digs her nails into my hands. "Shh, my dear," I whisper in her ear. "I want you to fight me, not Baxter. You understand?"

I lessen my hold on her airways, and she sucks in a large breath at the same time Baxter staggers back. He slams against the bookcase, his eyes cloudy, his expression dazed. I jump to my feet.

"Are you all right?"

He shakes his head as though to clear it. "I'm fine. Adelaide?"

Adelaide? That's peculiar.

I glance down at the woman who slumbers peacefully as if I hadn't been choking her a moment ago. "She's fine," I say with a shrug. "What happened?"

Baxter brings a shaking hand to his mouth, scrubbing his jaw. "It's nothing."

"Queen's cunt, it's nothing."

"Nothing I wish to discuss."

I grin at him, earning a scowl. "I guess the little bird has sharp teeth, hmm? Personally, I find that delightful."

"You would." He scoffs. "Is there a lover you haven't tried to kill yet?"

"No. Where's the fun in that?"

He shoots me a look that's full of disbelief. And something else. Too bad my warped mind doesn't care enough to make sense of anything, or I'd dive into that.

"If you want to have a turn with me, I won't object," I say, tapping my temple. "Perhaps you could tell me my darkest desires, hmm?"

He pales further. "That's not necessary."

"Why is everyone such a bore?" I gesture to him and then the woman. "The two of you need to learn to have fun."

"Our ideas of what constitutes enjoyment differ more than I can say." His tone, melancholy a second ago, hardens like steel. "Take her upstairs and lock the door. Don't fuck with her, Lucien. I mean it, no illusions. I need her sane when I go into her mind, or I won't be able to discern fantasy from memory."

I wave him off. "You needn't worry. I know how to wait so I can savor something at the appropriate time."

"In all the years I've known you, you've never been appropriate. Save your lies for the princess. She's the only one who might be susceptible to them."

"Let us hope so."

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Baxter pushes away from the wall of books and strides across the room, his gait slightly unsteady. I call no attention to it and turn to look down at my charge. The woman slumbers peacefully with the hint of a smile on her mouth. My cock jumps at the memory of kissing her.

If that was enjoyable, then how will fucking her be? I cannot fathom.

Sliding my arms underneath her body, I pull her to my chest, cradling her delicate frame. She turns her head toward me and burrows her face into my shirt. A small sigh of pleasure leaves her parted lips.

The unexpected act of trust catches me off-guard, and I wrinkle my brow. I've never been a man that women seek out for comfort. Sex, danger, and mystery? Yes. Those things I can provide ad nauseam. But security and comfort? That is not a game I'm familiar with.

My frown stays in place the entire way to the guest room upstairs. Having been to Baxter's house more times than I can count, it's as familiar to me as my own, which sits just across the road. His strange behavior at my arrival earlier can be explained by the soft bundle in my arms.

The question is: why?

I don't give a flying unicorn's ass that this woman is the Princess of Hearts. She might have a royal cunt, but if the rumors are to be believed, it's been royally fucked. Her lack of memory—or playacting—explains why she was hesitant to engage with me.

Does Baxter find her station in life intimidating? With the madness spreading throughout Wonderland, no one will care about much here soon. Even so, as the brother to the Royal Messenger, Baxter should be used to the upper echelon. Or would've been, before he was exiled from Court.

Perhaps the woman in my arms is a painful reminder of that.

Maybe even had something to do with it.

I walk over the large bed and halt just beside it. Alice's hesitation earlier must've tainted me because I'm loath to put her down. I can't recall the last time I held a woman for the simple pleasure of it. My mind rebels, dredging up memories to counteract my musings.

An image I've buried to the deepest, darkest corners of my psyche rises. It's brief, but the agony it brings lingers, even after I shove it away. My chest heaves with breath, and my hands shake. The weakened state of my body propels me to lay the woman down on the mattress.

I step back and fold my arms over my chest to still the trembling. And to refrain from snatching her back to me. Instead, I run my gaze over her, taking in every detail until my heart rate steadies.

Little birds are not dangerous. No, they are in danger. At all times. Especially this one, who's flightless and unable to defend herself.

Or is she...?

Baxter needs to disclose what he saw that upset him so. If he won't do it willingly, then he and I will have a serious disagreement. One that could end with an altercation.

Now wouldn't that be fun?

CHAPTER 8

ADELAIDE

“Hello, little bird. Did you sleep well?”

My eyelids feel as though someone laid weights on top of them. It's a struggle to open my eyes, but once I do, I'm immediately alert.

Lucien smirks at me from where he sits in the chair located across the room. His outfit is different than before. It's a mix of black and white, like a chessboard. Along with a solid ebony coat, he's wearing a pair of matching pants, but his dress shirt underneath is a crisp white. The top hat from before is still present, sitting off-center on his head and giving him a roguish look. Under the brim is a pair of expensive-looking glasses covering his kohl-lined eyes.

“Tell me, what did you dream of?” he asks in a seductive whisper. “Do you remember anything?”

I get into a sitting position and quickly scan the area. The guest bedroom is a decent size, but the bed and armoire take up most of the space. A cushioned stool sits opposite of Lucien's tufted chair, and a pile of books and papers are stacked on top. The walls are bare except for two scenery paintings. The only imposing thing in here is the man staring at me with an impish sparkle lighting up his blue gaze.

“What happened?” I ask.

He leans forward, placing his forearms on the tops of his thighs. “You tell me.”

“I have no idea. The last thing I remember is Baxter ordering me not to fight him.”

“Based on his reaction, I’d say you did more than that.”

My lips pull to the side in a frown. “What do you mean?”

“After the man was inside your head, he came away looking shook up. Baxter does not rattle easily, so tell me what you did.”

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“Nothing. I swear.”

Lucien eyes me, his gaze scrutinizing. “We will see. Are you hungry? Dinner will be served momentarily. I, for one, am starving.”

His tone and the smirk he wears tell me of things he’s left for me to interpret. I might find him attractive—albeit disconcerting—but getting out of Wonderland is my sole focus.

No matter how many times Lucien tries to distract me with tempting thoughts.

“How long was I asleep?” I ask.

“Several hours. You must be famished by now.”

I make a face at him. “Don’t act as though you care for my welfare, but yes, I could use something to eat.”

He mimics my facial expression. “Idocare. I can’t fuck you if you’re dead. For shame, Alice, get a clue.”

“My name isn’t Alice. It’s Adelaide. And we’re not having sex.” My pussy dampens, mocking my refusal of him. “Where’s Baxter?”

“Still sulking in his room, no doubt.”

“Okay,” I say, elongating the word. “Whatever that means, I don’t care.”

Lucien gets to his feet and walks over to the bed. I cross my arms over my chest, concealing my breasts. The material of the gown is thin, hardly a barrier for his gaze. It doesn't stop him from looking.

He chuckles. "I'm sure your tits are lovely. They certainly felt like it." When I make a choking sound, his laughter increases. "Do you know how amusing it is to see the renowned princess, who supposedly slept with every noble at Court, act like a shy virgin? Very delightful."

I glare at him and rip the covers from my body. After sliding from the bed on the opposite side to keep distance between us, I lift my chin.

"Even if all of that is true, I don't remember any of it. To me, you're speaking about someone else, a complete stranger. It's no use trying to convince me that her past is mine. I won't believe it."

"Until your memories return," he says. "I can't wait for Baxter to finish what he started, so you and I can begin."

I sigh, my vexation a front for my nerves. If Lucien wanted me, there'd be nothing and no one to stop him. Pushing him into anger is not ideal, but neither is allowing him to think he's going to screw me.

"There's nothing between us," I say with a pointed look.

Lucien winks at me. "I cannot speak for Baxter, but I would like to see you out of those clothes. And into something pretty."

I paste a caustic smile on my face and dip into the most exaggerated curtsy while batting my lashes. "If it pleases you, my lord, yet I have nothing to wear." I straighten, erasing all traces of humor from my face. "Unlike you, I don't have any

other clothes, and I'm not taking this off."

The man laughs at me, and for once it's not full of mockery. It's light and airy with a sensuality that sinks into my belly and warms me all over.

"Have no fear, my lady. I have brought you something, and it's certainly better than the rags you're currently wearing."

"Anything would be an improvement. Thank you. Where is it?"

"Right here." He holds out his hands. "Don't you see it?"

I scrunch my face at him and shake my head slowly. The man is truly insane. Well, more so than I originally thought.

Lucien purses his lips. "Hmm, I could've sworn..."

He flicks his wrists in a benign, circular movement as though flicking water from his hands. From one blink to the next, a dress appears draped over his forearms. My gasp is loud in the quiet.

"How did you...?" I press a hand to my mouth, my eyes wide. "What just happened?"

He grins at me. "Magic, of course. Everyone born in Wonderland has an ability of sorts, some stronger than others."

"And yours is?"

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“I, little bird, am a master of illusions.”

I huff. “I think you meandelusions.”

His laughter fills the room. And my chest cavity with butterflies. Despite my best effort to keep it at bay, a smile appears. Lucien winks at me again, and I duck my head as self-consciousness seeps into my skin.

“It’s very beautiful,” I say quietly. “Whether or not it’s a fabrication of my mind or yours, I appreciate it.”

At the sound of the material rustling, I look up—only to find Lucien towering over me, less than a foot away. He peers down at me with an expression that lacks the playfulness from earlier. However, the glimmer of madness that’s ever-present remains.

“It’s my honor to present this to you, your highness.”

I run my gaze over the garment, taking in the sea-green dress. It has an empire waist, with lace crafted onto the sleeves and along the neckline—it being décolleté is no surprise. A nice green sash ties at the waist to create a feminine silhouette, and below that are layers upon layers of material.

This is fit for a queen.

He extends his arms in offering, and I remove the garment from his hold, cradling it to my chest. “Thank you,” I whisper. “This is the finest gift I’ve ever received.

Unless it disappears, of course.”

“If it does, it won’t be until after you’re dressed. That way I can see you naked.” He waggles his brows. “I won’t deny that my goal is to get you underneath me.”

“Lucien...”

“And on top of me,” he says, leaning forward. His breath, a slight twist of cinnamon and peppermint, wafts over me, pleasing my senses. “I’ll take you in any way I can get you.”

I press a hand against his chest, desperate to maintain the little bit of space between us. “Friendship is all I can offer you.”

“I might be the master of illusions, but you are the mistress of lies.”

He covers my hand with his. The beating of his heart thrums harder against my palm, and the singing of his blood is a melody to my ears. I jerk my arm back, needing distance, and he tightens his hold to keep me in place.

“Tell me you don’t want me, and I’ll leave you be,” he says.

I inhale a fortifying breath. “I don’t want you.”

He takes my hand and brings it to his mouth, kissing my knuckles. “You don’t want to want me. There’s a difference.”

“Not that I can see.” I yank my arm back with all my strength, and he releases me. “I should probably get dressed. Alone.”

He shoots me a disgruntled look before walking toward the door. “You’re just like

Baxter: no fun at all,” he tosses over his shoulder.

“Good thing my aspiration in life isn’t to entertain you.”

“No, it’s to fuck me.”

I glare at him as he shuts the door in my face.

CHAPTER9

ADELAIDE

The dining room is far grander than I expect, and it momentarily steals my breath.

The table is lined with items meant for tea and dining, the silver and gold of the dishes and cutlery glinting in the candlelight, giving the space a romantic ambience. There are a dozen types of tea, and each one is in a porcelain teapot with matching cups, saucers, and sugar bowls. A frilly, white tablecloth covers the mahogany surface, like a tight-fitting gown covers a woman’s figure and enhances the shape. The dining set has low chairs, a soft fabric covering the seats.

“It’s too pretty to disturb,” I whisper to Lucien.

He pats my arm, tucked in his. “There are far grander displays in the palace.”

I bite my tongue to keep from responding that I’ve never been, according to what I remember. My lack of memory is not something the men of Wonderland are readily accepting, and it frustrates me that they can’t see I have no desire to regain the thoughts of my former self. They’re not giving me a choice in the matter, either.

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Lucien leads me to the head of the table and pulls out the chair just beside it. I give him a smile of gratitude and take my seat. My skirts drape over my legs to pool on the floor and hide my matching ballet flats.

He settles next to me and reaches for the nearest tea pot. “Something to drink?” At my nod, he pours the steaming liquid into my cup. “Might I recommend the passion tea flavor? It’s delightful.”

“Which is that?”

He points to a tea bag filled with pink and yellow leaves and takes it in hand. “Here.”

“Does this contain an aphrodisiac or some other mischievous component?”

“Little bird, you are the only aphrodisiac in the room.”

An unbidden blush rises to my cheeks. “Thank you,” I mumble. “I wish you’d stop saying such things.”

He shrugs. “And I wish you’d suck my cock, but we all have unfulfilled dreams.”

I avert my gaze, centering my focus on the teacup in front of me. The water turns a rosy pink the second I dip the bag inside the water, and I study the swirls of red painting the liquid a deeper hue. It reminds me of blood.

A pressure behind my eyes has me wrinkling my forehead, and I blink to be rid of it, but that does nothing to alleviate the sensation. Instead, it grows until my vision blurs

and the sounds Lucien makes with his spoon are muffled.

A crystal-clear image bombards me like a torrential rain of arrows on a battlefield, leaving me nowhere to run, no shelter to be had. The scenery around me changes, placing me in a bedroom with luxurious furniture and drapery, the entire ensemble a deep cranberry laced with gold.

“Let me have a drink,” comes a male’s voice from behind me. A moment later, a pair of arms envelops my waist. “I’m thirsty, Alice.”

As though I have no control over my body, I turn in the man’s embrace to face him. He wears a trimmed beard and mustache, his dark brown hair well-groomed and combed to the side. His skin is tanned, but not displaying harsh lines brought on by too much sun exposure, and he bears a scar just under his left eye.

“Are you, indeed, Lord Tyson? Well, you shall thirst for a little while longer.”

“It’s not tea I wish to soothe my parched mouth with. It’s the dew of your royal lips.”

I take a sip of my cup, the flavor of the passion tea coating my tongue. “Hmm... Is that so?”

“Yes,” he groans. “Not the lips of your mouth, but those of your cunt.”

A knowing smile settles on my features. “Very well, then.”

I set down my cup on the nearby table and extricate myself from the man’s hold. After grabbing fistfuls of my skirt, I climb on top of the surface with Tyson’s gaze glued to me. He grabs his hardened cock outside of his breeches as I slowly spread my legs. Having no undergarments, I’ve exposed myself to him completely.

“Wonders of Wonderland,” he says, his voice hoarse. “You might’ve been with many men, but I have no qualms joining their ranks this night.”

A sharp pain streaks through my chest, yet I keep my sultry expression in place, knowing I can’t let him out of the room without securing his cooperation first. My mother’s torture extends to royalty, where blood and family are of no consequence or consideration.

I almost didn’t survive my last encounter with her, after having disappointed her by refusing Lord Tyson. So tonight, I will suck whatever cock and fuck whatever man necessary to ensure I live another day.

“Consider yourself fortunate, I’ve chosen you to be my lover for the evening,” I say. “This might be a single invitation, unless you change my mind.”

The man licks his lips and offers me a crooked smile that has my stomach churning. “You will favor me above the rest.”

With that, he dives between my legs, covering my clit with his mouth and—

“Adelaide?”

Startled by the feel of someone shaking me, I blink in rapid succession. Lucien looms over my chair with his fingers digging into the skin of my upper arms and his gaze bright with concern.

“Answer me, little bird, or I shall truly throttle you this time.”

The desperation in his voice is like a slap to the face. I clear my throat. “I’m fine.”

“That might be the biggest lie you’ve told to date.”

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“What happened?”

He sinks down until we are eye-level but maintains his hold on me. “You tell me.”

I groan in frustration. “Can’t you just answer the damn question instead of throwing it back at me?”

“I will when you don’t go as still as death,” he says, his tone carrying a sharp edge. “When you don’t inhale deeply and release a scream loud enough to wake the dead or shove them further into their graves. Now tell me what the fuck just happened.”

We stare at one another, with me in shock and him enraged. His heart pounds crazily, matching the insane gleam in his eyes. I flinch when he leans closer, and his gaze narrows infinitesimally. I’m not scared by his forcefulness, yet I can’t explain why it affects me.

Similar to how I can’t explain why I’m more attracted to him with each passing moment.

“I don’t know what happened,” I whisper. “One second I’m fixing tea, and the next I’m somewhere else.”

“Where?”

“A bedroom with gold and garnet decorations. There was a man there.” I scrunch my face in concentration. “Lord Tyson, I think was his name.”

Is he the person I killed? If it was his blood found splattered against my clothing, then that would explain why it couldn't be linked to anyone in the other realm. My feelings toward the man didn't include rage, but I have no idea what transpired afterwards. Anything is possible.

Lucien leans closer, his gaze no less angry. In fact, it might be more so. "What did you see? What transpired?"

"I—" I drop my head, avoiding his probing stare. "It was nothing."

"If you lie to me again, I'll take you over my knee until your ass matches the pretty pink hue of your cheeks." His fingers twitch where they grip me as though he's tempted to, regardless of whether or not I tell him the truth. "I'm not a patient man, and I certainly don't have an unhealthy relationship with time like the Queen's Messenger, so be quick with your answer."

My thighs grow damp at the idea of Lucien spanking me, and I squirm in my chair. He arches a brow, and my pussy weeps all the more.

"I can't talk when you speak to me like that," I say, keeping my focus on my lap. "It makes me uncomfortable."

"Or does it make you uncomfortable because you're aroused?" he asks.

At the feel of his fingers gripping my chin, my gaze zips to his. "Both."

"Finally, the truth." Lucien's kohl-rimmed eyes stare back at me, making my heart race. "Now, back to the matter at hand. What did you see, concerning Lord Tyson?"

When I don't immediately answer, Lucien's grip tightens painfully. I squeeze my thighs together to stifle the ache growing in my core, brought on by his ferocity, but

there's no relief to be found. Unless I finish what he started in the foyer earlier today. The thought is tempting. Very much so.

Maybe I am a whore.

Is that really such a bad thing?

"I was intimate with Lord Tyson in my vision," I say. Lucien licks his lips, drawing my attention to his mouth. It's beautiful, like the rest of his face. "It stopped when I heard you calling my name."

"Is that all?"

My brows snap together. "Isn't that enough?"

He gives me a smile, full of sympathy and something else. Something more gentle, perhaps even affectionate. "Adelaide, taking pleasure for one's self is not something I judge to be in the wrong. In fact, I make it a point to indulge in every opportunity made available to me."

"I've noticed," I mutter under my breath.

Lucien releases my chin to skim his knuckles over the side of my face. "I don't understand why you're distraught over the idea of having a string of lovers."

"I... I don't know. I guess it's because I've been told it's wrong and immoral not to commit to a single partner."

"Your mother has had no issues with that." He scoffs. "I believe she is one of the few people who has outperformed you on the number of lovers taken. It's no secret she invites a fair amount of people to her bed."

“Were you one of them?”

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He shakes his head. “I declined her majesty’s offer. Although that didn’t do me any favors. She doesn’t take kindly to rejection.”

“I see.” I blow out a breath and lace my fingers in my lap, studying them with abject fascination. The relief that hits me at Lucien’s answer is unwarranted. What do I care if he slept with another woman, someone I don’t even remember? I just met him. His past is not something I should concern myself with.

Yet, I do care.

“By the by, I never liked Lord Tyson,” Lucien says. “He’s such a twat, always dribbling about some new item he purchased or piece of land he secured. It’s a bore really. If he’s the one you envisioned, then you needn’t worry about not remembering him. You’re not missing anything.”

I gnaw on the inside of my cheek, debating on whether or not to ask about the queen. My mother. The woman who, according to my vision—or was it a memory?—tortured me, forcing me to have sex with numerous people.

“Little bird, what is it?”

Lucien interrupts my sour musings by plucking me out of my chair. Before I can utter a shriek, he settles me on his lap and wraps his arms around my waist.

“That’s better,” he whispers in my ear. “Now tell me what you were thinking of just now. It pained you.”

The scent of him hits my nose, and I greedily inhale, pulling his essence into my lungs. Although unpredictable and wild, Lucien is the only man here who I can trust to tell me the truth. And not judge mine.

“I think what I saw was a memory,” I say, my voice the same low volume as Lucien’s. “If that’s true, then the queen is not someone I want to remember. That’s to say nothing of the king.”

“Can’t say that I blame you. And the king is dead, so there’s that.”

I turn in his embrace, nearly brushing his lips with mine. He grins down at me when I flush. “If you want a kiss, little bird, you don’t need to ask. Just take what you want.”

Silence descends on us, and my mind drifts like a boat at sea. What do I want?

The answer is simple: to love and be loved in return, without accidentally hurting or killing my partner. However, the execution of this desire is not so simple.

“I only know what I don’t want, and that’s the return of my memories,” I say. “No good can come from them.”

Lucien tilts his head. “Don’t you want to remember who you are? Our experiences mold us into the people we are today. They’re the core of our identity. We can’t escape them, no matter how hard we try.”

With us being so close, I can make out the pain that briefly turns his blue gaze sharp and glacial. Something tugs at my heart and I place my hands on his cheeks, cradling his face. It’s warm and smooth underneath my palms, inviting me to explore more of his skin, but I refrain.

“I’m sorry, Lucien.”

“Whatever for?”

I shrug. “Because of what hurt you. I can also recognize pain. Just know you’re not alone in your suffering.”

He studies me as though he’s never laid eyes on me before. Then his smile appears, lighting up the room. And my soul. Regardless of his unpredictability that makes me uneasy, I’m beginning to really like Lucien. There’s a depth to him that he hides underneath mirth and outlandish remarks.

“You are right,” he says after a time. “Maybe it’s best if you don’t regain your memories.”

“Why the sudden change of heart?”

He winces at the last word. Or I imagine it. Either way, his newfound opinion boggles my mind.

“I never interacted with you, despite my numerous appearances at Court,” he says, “but you’re nothing like the woman described to me. I rather like that, and I don’t want you to be anything different than who you are at this moment.”

My chest expands with a happiness that’s foreign to me. The warmth of emotion spreads, invading my skin, my blood, and possibly my heart.

I press my forehead to his. “Thank you.”

“I’d like to dine, if that’s all right with the two of you.”

I snatch my hands away from Lucien and whip my head around to find Baxter standing in the doorway. He wears a light green waistcoat that’s almost the same

shade as his eyes, making them more pronounced. His tan breeches pair nicely with his silk brown shirt, which has a row of silver buttons down the middle. He's quite dapper dressed like this, and I find myself leisurely taking in the sight of him.

Unfortunately, his expression holds nothing but mild irritation. Upon closer inspection, his gaze is afire. With what, I can't discern. Hatred is most likely. It causes me to turn away.

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“As I said before,” Lucien says, waving a hand, “you’re welcome to join us.”

The innuendo brings a heat to my face, and Baxter clenches his jaw. “Perhaps another time,” he says, his tone sharp.

“Usually, he’s quick to decline,” Lucien whispers in my ear, “so that’s an improvement.”

“I’m not sure it is.”

Baxter walks across the room to seat himself at the head of the table. Being positioned between him and Lucien brings back all of the nervousness I’ve felt throughout the day. It hits me in a rush, causing my pulse to spike.

“Now, why don’t we discuss these memories of yours, hmm?” Baxter asks.

CHAPTER10

BAXTER

Afew hours earlier...

The shaking of my hands takes a long while to cease.

“Get it together, Baxter.”

I splash water on my face, but the chilly liquid cooling my skin does little to help me.

Not after what I witnessed in the princess's mind. Her nightmares—no, memories—were enough to bring me to my knees.

How is she still standing?

Begrudgingly, I admire the fortitude of the woman whose visions I saw.

Adelaide doesn't remember anything, but when she does, it could wreck her to recall it all at once. That's why I only broke through a few of the shields covering her mind. It was both for that reason and because I was hesitant to do more, inadvertently exposing myself further to the darkness.

I'm going to kill my brother when I see him again. That fucker, having lived most of his life at Court, had to have known what kind of shit I'd come across. My magic might allow me to see a person's memories, but it doesn't prevent them from seeping into my brain as if they were my own. It's one of the main reasons I don't use my ability often.

I walk over to the window and stare out at the grounds, leaning heavily on the windowsill. The manicured lawn and the greenhouse full of flowers stare up at me. As soon as my mood turned dark, the plants inside the glass building started singing in an attempt to cheer me. Those blossoms are the only creatures I allow on my property because of their kind nature.

Not all of Wonderland is wonderful.

Like madness, evil is everywhere. And spreading.

Adelaide's presence in my home has reminded me of this, exacerbating my temper. But how I envy the princess's lack of memory. What would it feel like not to be burdened with the past and all the pain it brings?

Now that I know more about the woman's history, I find myself sympathizing with her while hating myself for it. Adelaide has no idea how her behavior affected everyone in the palace. Just as she has no idea that every man at Court vied for her attention.

Except me. I'll never be one of the many lovers she fucks and casts aside.

Regardless of how tempting she is now.

Before, the woman known as Alice, disgusted me with her conquests, never taking the time to genuinely care for anyone but herself. But Adelaide is different. She has a gentle and kind demeanor. Her shyness, and how she's quick to flush over anything sexual in nature, is so unlike the person I knew at Court.

It maddens me.

I silently chastise myself as I dress for dinner, knowing I have to confront the princess with the knowledge I gleaned in her mind while remaining unsusceptible to her innocent persona. A part of me believes that she's lying, that the whole thing is an act. But the things I saw tell a different story.

It's not enough to clear her of the past transgressions, yet it's not enough to convict her either.

This wouldn't be such a challenge if she wasn't so alluring.

Damn her.

And fuck me.

Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 8:57 am

I leave the peaceful solitude of my bedroom and make my way down the hall toward the stairs. The faint whispers of conversation reach me when I descend. As expected, the princess and Lucien are in deep conversation.

It's preferable to them fucking.

Or is it...?

My mind conjures a vision of Lucien pinning Adelaide to the door, but he's facing me, his gaze burning with lust. His invitation to join their sexual interlude still echoes in my skull. The sound of his voice beckoning me makes my cock hard, and I halt just outside the dining room, suspended between reality and fantasy. I lean against the wall and grip my erection as the daydream continues.

Adelaide peers around Lucien and expresses how much she desires me. Her pretty mouth speaks of the sensual promises she wishes to perform, ranging from sucking my cock to wanting me to watch her with Lucien.

I nearly groan, announcing my presence to the pair of them in the other room. If I could fuck myself here and now with their voices caressing my psyche, I'd stroke myself. Fortunately, my anger towards the princess is enough to keep me from doing so.

She isn't worthy of my desire. The woman represents everything I detest. Not to mention she shares blood with the Queen of Hearts.

And my loyalty belongs to another.

In all my fantasies, Alice was never present, never even a consideration. Now I find myself thinking of her memories with previous lovers where she was being fucked and her not enjoying it at all. I know I could change that for Adelaide.

The fact that I think this, want to prove it, infuriates me further.

And increases my guilt.

I release my cock and take a deep breath before walking into the room, stopping just inside. Adelaide sits on Lucien's lap, gazing up at him with such compassion that it cools a large portion of my anger. He, in turn, looks at her as though she's an enigma, one of his riddles that holds no answer and makes no sense.

The couple are bewitched with each other at this moment. My envy rises to the surface, ridding me of the final vestiges of lust. Only to be replaced with longing... and agony.

Shoving all of my thoughts aside, I'm about to interrupt when Lucien speaks. "You are right," he says to her. "Maybe it's best if you don't regain your memories."

Adelaide purses her lips. "Why the sudden change of heart?"

"I never interacted with you, despite my numerous appearances at Court," he says, "but you're nothing like the woman described to me. I rather like that, and I don't want you to be anything different than who you are at this moment."

She leans forward, closing the small gap between them to rest her forehead against his. "Thank you."

"I'd like to dine, if that's all right with the two of you," I say, careful to school my features into some semblance of control. Hearing Lucien admit that he fancies

Adelaide because she's nothing like her former self is jarring.

I'm not the only one who sees the difference.

At my intrusion, both of them swing their gazes to me. The princess flushes with guilt, and Lucien meets my eyes with a twinkle shining in his. My closest friend is such a bastard.

"As I said before," Lucien says, waving a hand, "you're welcome to join us."

I stop short, my muscles seizing up as I assert control over my features. "Perhaps another time," I say.

Lucien whispers something to Adelaide, and my ire grows at the camaraderie between them. Not because I don't want them together. It's due to the fact that I'm not partaking in it.

I've never experienced confusion to this degree until the princess walked into my home.

I take my seat at the head of the table and lean back in the chair with my spine straight. "Now, why don't we discuss these memories of yours, hmm?"

After a quick scan of the dishware, I clap my hands once. The servant appears. Dressed in his finery, he quickly and efficiently serves us the evening meal before leaving us to our privacy. All the while, Adelaide is like a shrinking violet, languishing in Lucien's hold, her wide gaze full of embarrassment.

"We have things to address," I say, taking hold of my fork. "We can talk whilst we eat to expedite the process. I find myself eager to be done with deliberating over the events from earlier."

Adelaide hops down from Lucien's lap and lowers herself into the chair next to me. She nods in agreement, yet turmoil swirls within the depths of her blue eyes like a whirlpool. I make no attempt to hide the fact that I'm watching her. With her nervous, she's more likely to slip up and reveal something.

I need to know what the hell is going on with her.

If she's putting my brother in danger, I won't hesitate to kill her.

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I've already lost one person I love to the royal family and I'll be damned before I let it happen again.

"What did you see?" Lucien asks me.

He picks up his tea cup and sips at the contents. However, the princess moves her cup as far from her as possible. Interesting...

"I saw a great number of things," I say.

Adelaide pales, and her bottom lip trembles. When she pulls it between her teeth to stop the nervous movement, I imagine what it'd be like to do that to her. If I can get through this meal without stroking my cock because of her, it'll be a wonder.

"Stop fucking about, Baxter, and tell us what you saw." He motions to Adelaide with his teacup. "She's already beginning to recall some things, so your magic worked."

I scoff. "Of course it did. Tell me, princess, what do you know of blood-bending?"

CHAPTER 11

ADELAIDE

"What?"

My voice is high-pitched, giving away my anxiety at the question. I expected Baxter to tell me about my sexual escapades, the queen, or maybe the reason he hates me so

much. What I wasn't ready for is the subject of blood.

He butters a scone with lazy strokes. "You heard me, princess. Now answer the question."

"I don't know anything about blood-bending," I say. I slide my gaze to Lucien, who sips from his cup, his focus on Baxter. "What is that?"

"Not what I expected." Baxter sets down his half-eaten pastry and steeples his fingers. "I believe you have the ability to control another's life force, through manipulating their blood."

Mine drains from my face, and not because I will it to. I have always known my obsession with the crimson liquid was strange, but I've never told anyone. I'd hoped the fascination would fade with time.

However, from when I first awoke without my memories up until now, it's only grown.

Whether or not I like what Baxter has to say, he holds the answers to the questions that have plagued my mind for years. Hopefully, they'll bring me peace.

If not, then Lucien and I can be insane together.

I clear my throat and take a deep breath. "How is that possible?"

"All of Wonderland's residents carry magic," Baxter says. "Some are stronger than others. Everyone's abilities are different, but usually family members share similar traits."

I frown. "The queen is also a blood-bender?"

Baxter shakes his head. “No, but her power does originate from the same place as yours: the heart. Her magic centers around the manipulation of it in an emotional way, while yours is physical. Two sides of the same coin, as it were.”

“What does she do?” I ask. My curiosity unfurls with every answer Baxter gives. I lean on the table, daring to get closer to him as my fascination with the subject increases. “How does she do it?”

His emerald eyes briefly shoot to Lucien before returning to me. Within the green hues, the flecks of gold sparkle with emotion, a depth that I’m not used to seeing. He shutters his gaze and sets his jaw.

“The queen knows the deepest desires of your heart, which is how she obtained the title of The Queen of Hearts. As to how she does it, that’s a simple matter. One touch. That’s all it takes to reveal your secrets to her.”

“That’s not as disastrous as you led me to believe,” I say. “I’d rather have that, than the ability to kill someone.”

I shudder and reach for the crystal carafe filled with wine. After pouring it into the teacup next to me, I sip on the contents. My mouth bursts with flavors, all of them pleasant, and warmth floods my belly.

“Her ability is detrimental,” Baxter says, his voice like a whip. I start at the violence coating his tone and lean back into my chair. He follows me with his murderous glare but doesn’t come any closer. “The Red Queen can see through lies, expose a person’s greatest fears as well as their desires, all because she can gain access to what lives in your heart. She doesn’t have to kill you. When she exposes your secrets, you’ll do it to yourself.”

Lucien nods. “She’s done that to many of her subjects. If they didn’t kill themselves,

she ordered someone from the Royal Guard to carry out her orders. Her magic is the reason no one's ever rebelled or tried to remove her from the throne. She's able to detect your intentions and then murder you for it." He gives me a sad smile. "I consider myself an exceptional liar when the situation calls for it, and I wasn't able to conceal myself from her."

My curiosity turns morbid.

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I want to know everything concerning this horrific monarch and her actions against these men, but I doubt Baxter will readily share. Lucien might. However, the pain in his eyes is enough to silence me. This subject is agonizing for the two of them. It's hard not to assume there are others who share their plight.

The only way for me to find out is through my memories.

“What else did you see in my mind?” I ask Baxter.

He squints at me, suspicion coating his features. “Episodes with your lovers, as expected.”

“Anything else?”

“What else is there?”

His flippant tone grates on my nerves, and I down the contents of my cup, hoping the alcohol will calm me. Baxter always picks a fight with me, and I can't engage, not when he has the information I need. Without knowing his backstory or how it's related to me and the queen, I still don't understand his hostility toward me.

Even so, I don't condone it.

It's unfair, and I know how far I'm willing to go to correct a wrong that's been done to me.

“Did you see anything else?” I repeat, keeping my voice even. “Maybe something

that involved an ax?”

Lucien grabs my upper arm and swings me around in my chair to face him. “Little bird, what have you been up to? I highly doubt it has anything to do with wood.” He sticks out his lip in a pout. “At least, not mine. My cock is still hard.”

“You’re right, it doesn’t,” I say, feeling Baxter’s stare bore into the back of my head.

I bite my lip as indecision wars within me. I’m not sure if I should tell them about the murder since I have no idea how they’ll react. If Lucien’s past behavior is any indication, he’ll love it. Baxter is the wild card, and I don’t know how he’ll play out.

After turning back to face Baxter, I lock my gaze on his face. “I need to know about any events concerning a battle ax.”

His brows gather. “Is there something you’re trying to tell me, princess?”

“Honestly, I’m not sure. I only have evidence but no actual memory of what occurred.” I shake my head, and the room tilts for a moment. That wine is dangerous after a single glass. Duly noted. “Never mind that,” I say. “Tell me more about the Queen of Hearts and what you want me to do for you.”

“It’s not for me.” Baxter leans back into his chair, regarding me with a stoic expression. “My brother thinks you’re the key to our freedom. He’s searched for you since you went missing all those years ago.”

“How long have I been gone?”

“Five years,” Lucien says.

I slump in my chair. “Oh. I don’t even know how old I am, so I don’t know why I

asked.” I squeeze my eyes shut and massage the center of my forehead. Maybe I should drink some more in order to forget what little I do remember. “I don’t even know my birthday.”

Baxter lifts his cup in a mocking salute. “A very merry unbirthday to you, princess.” He watches me from behind the rim, swallowing a healthy dose of tea. “If you were to throw a party, I’m sure the number of male attendees would be astronomical.”

My heart pounds, each beat heralding my anger like thunder does a storm. I lift my chin and narrow my gaze. “I’ve had enough of your insults. I didn’t ask for you to unlock my memories. And even if I’m a whore like I’ve been told, what does it matter to you?”

“Unlike Darius,” he says, slowly lowering his cup, “I don’t consort with whores. Royalty or not.”

“Oh, Baxter.” Lucien clicks his tongue. “You are indeed foolish to provoke someone who could kill you.”

“She has yet to admit her powers,” Baxter says. He gives me a pointed look. “Or are you going to deny them like you do everything else?”

I fill my glass with more wine and down the entire thing. It’s going to take a lot of alcohol to deal with him. Baxter will never like me, and it’s not my job to make him.

But I refuse to put up with his shit.

Maybe my acceptance of this place and my magic could give me the courage I’m lacking. I’ve been here too long, experienced too many things to tell myself that I’m dreaming. If this is truly the world I’m from, then it’s time for me to embrace that, along with my abilities.

And my inner whore.

It might be my greatest asset.

CHAPTER12

ADELAIDE

I don't answer Baxter with words.

Instead, I tilt my head, seeking out the cadence of his heart. His blood begins to rush at my unwavering gaze, traveling throughout his limbs like unseen, crimson rivers. I concentrate on one in particular and infuse it with the heat of my anger.

Baxter hisses and jerks in his seat.

"Little bird..." Lucien's voice whispers in my ear, but it's soft compared to the thrumming of Baxter's blood. "Be careful, my dear."

I scoff. "As if he's ever been careful with me."

The vein in Baxter's groin answers my call with a surge, right before I send blood rushing to his cock. He groans and grabs his length, hunching over. Lucien straightens beside me like a soldier at attention. From my peripheral vision I catch him looking at me with unconcealed fascination.

And at Baxter with envy.

Lucien doesn't want me to... does he?

"Stop it," Baxter says through gritted teeth.

In response, I make it so his cock is engorged and painfully hard. He glares at me, the underlying hatred now burning bright for all to see. Good, now we're both pissed.

"You better—"

"I better what, Baxter?" I ask. "You're not in a position to demand anything. Now, if you want to beg for forgiveness, then that's a different matter entirely. But I doubt it. You can't stand the sight of me."

I twirl my index finger, keeping the blood in his cocking moving. "I haven't denied anything I know to be true. Thanks to your hostile attitude toward me, I'm ready to admit everything so you can't use it against me. Starting with this blood-bending ability. I confess it's true. So, how does it feel, knowing I can control you?"

His nostrils flare. "I'm not surprised at this behavior. Of course a whore would go straight for a man's cock. You're showing your true colors, princess," he says, spitting the word.

I shrug off his insult, despite the stabbing sensation in my chest. Being labeled isn't fair. But he's not playing by the rules, and neither am I.

I'm playing to win.

When I get to my feet, Lucien does the same. I stay him with a raised hand while keeping the other in motion so that Baxter remains incapacitated. "Don't interfere," I say to the hatter. "This has nothing to do with you."

Lucien smirks. "What if I want to?"

I search his gaze. It's brighter than the daytime sky, shining with desire. He steps closer and runs his lips down the skin of my neck. I shiver, and I swear I hear Baxter

stifle a moan.

“What if I want to interfere?” Lucien murmurs.

“I don’t want to hurt you.”

“But I’ll like it, little bird.”

I shake my head. “Just stop.”

Yanking on all the streams of his life force, I set them on fire, a low burn that has Lucien sinking into his chair. His eyes roll back, and he grabs his cock with his lips parted.

The sight of him, overcome with pleasure that I’ve given him, makes my legs tremble. He is the true aphrodisiac. One I won’t be able to ignore for much longer.

I release Lucien and turn to Baxter, eager to finish this lesson in humility. And to forge respect between us, through fire if necessary.

Because now I’m the one who stands over him in a position of authority and power.

“I may not be able to extract your secrets like the queen, but there’s always another way to get what I want,” I say. Keeping him firmly in place by using my magic, I crawl onto his lap, the material of my skirts bunching around my thighs. “Tell me, Baxter, why is my being a whore such a problem for you? Did I reject you, toss you from my bed? Sleep with your brother? What is it?”

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He rubs the heel of his hand over his cock, and I find myself watching. The act brings a heat to my core, and I nearly grind against him. He's devastatingly handsome when he's pissed. Now that he's aroused, it's hard for me to concentrate on my goal to teach him a lesson.

"You're just like your mother," he says, "always bending people to your will, despite their objections. You disgust me."

"Is that so?"

I drop my hold on him and he sags in the chair. After removing myself from his lap, I turn and sweep my arm across the table, sending porcelain dishes flying. The crashing sound is forgotten as I climb on the table directly in front of Baxter. With my legs open, I reach under my skirts and dip my fingers into my pussy.

They come away drenched.

I angrily stroke myself while maintaining eye contact with Baxter the entire time. He threw down a gauntlet and I picked it up with the intention to slap him. Only it's through sexual enticement. If he isn't aroused by me, without my manipulation of his blood, then I'll know.

"Tell me, Baxter," I say on a purr, "if I disgust you, then what or who do you desire?"

"Fuck, I know what I want."

Lucien undoes the fastenings of his trousers and takes his cock in hand. From my

position on the table, I can clearly see the length of him and the way he jerks it with rough strokes. It makes my breath hitch. And my fingers move faster.

“Move your skirts, little bird. I want to see you play with that pretty pussy. For the record, you don’t disgust me one bit.”

Baxter’s gaze darts back and forth between me and Lucien and the telltale rapid pulse in his neck increases with speed. He brings his attention back to me when I toss my skirts aside, bearing myself to them. The pleasure I get from his shocked expression and Lucien’s guttural moan almost makes me come.

At this point, there is no lesson to be learned. Unless it’s how to please myself through exhibitionism.

I concentrate on Baxter’s life force with difficulty as my orgasm builds to a crest. He has yet to look at Lucien again, keeping his gaze solely fixed on me. More accurately, my entrance. I would’ve sworn my seduction tactic would’ve caused him to turn away, but the opposite has happened.

I’m full of surprise at this unexpected development.

My lips beg to be kissed.

My skin aches to be touched.

My pussy cries to be fucked.

“Baxter,” I say on a moan. “Tell me you don’t want me.”

He all but strangles his cock, his gaze piercing. But his blood flows downward nonetheless. Triumph soars through me, right before my orgasm does.

“I knew it.” My breaths are nothing but pants of air, uneven and causing the rise and fall of my breasts. I spiral into a sea of ecstasy and the world around me disappears. Except for the beautiful tethers I can feel through the men’s blood.

“Oh, fuck.” Lucien snatches an empty cup and spills into it as he comes.

The sight of him, veins engorged on the sides of his neck, while he strokes his large cock is a memory I never want to forget. It magnifies my pleasure. I rise and fall again into rapture, the walls of my core fluttering like my lashes as my eyes roll back.

Baxter grunts, but I know he has yet to release. He’s fighting it.

“Well,” Lucien says as I collapse on the wooden surface, “this was the most enjoyable tea party I’ve ever attended. I look forward to the next one.”

I sit up and a smile spreads on my lips. “That’s to be expected while in the company of a whore.” I turn to Baxter. “Now that everything’s on the table—” A giggle escapes me, and I clear my throat to start over. “Perhaps you’ll realize that I’m not someone to fuck with.”

He glowers at me as I slide down and straighten my skirts. After grabbing the teapot and filling Lucien’s cup, I down the contents, making the latter suck in a breath. Baxter blinks at me with wide eyes.

“Best tea I’ve ever had,” I say. “Thank you for inviting me to the party.”

With an air worthy of a queen, I walk away, leaving the two men to gape in my wake.

CHAPTER13

ADELAIDE

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I'll never drink again.

In a daze, I start up at the ceiling while lying on the bed in the guest room. What in the fuck possessed me to act the way I did? I could blame it on the alcohol, but that excuse is weak. Yes, it helped lower my inhibitions, however, it was my temper and curiosity that got the best of me.

I had to know who Baxter was into.

Turns out it's me.

My skin flushes at the thought of them. The two men aroused, their cocks hard while watching me. Because of me.

It's the biggest high I've ever experienced, an unparalleled euphoria. Even now, several hours later I'm still in shock.

And turned on.

I slide my hand under my skirts and gather the dampness at my entrance to circle my clit. My breath hitches as pleasure assaults me. Despite having orgasmed earlier, I'm inundated with sexual frustration. My body wants to be filled in a way that can't be done alone.

Picturing both men touching and kissing me everywhere brings me closer to release. I shouldn't imagine Baxter considering the way he's treated me since we met, but now I'm wondering if he's acted that way because he's attracted to me. Like Lucien said

earlier: you don't want to want me.

He's right. I believe that line of thinking is Baxter's mindset when it comes to me. His resistance only makes me want him more. Lucien and I are more alike than I thought, lusting after people who resist us.

I come with a tiny gasp. Ecstasy shoots through my blood, warming me all over as my core pulses, every beat a testament to my desire for Baxter and Lucien. If only one of them would fuck me. That'd be the way to reach true fulfillment.

So what's holding me back in spite of my newfound sexual liberation?

I rid myself of all thought that doesn't pertain to getting off. More daydreams concerning the two men parade through my mind's eye, only I'm quick to add Darius. With the three men starring in my fantasies, I come hard. My body writhes on the bed as currents of pleasure take hold of me.

What if the things I dreamt were reality...?

With my body spent, I let my arm fall to my side and close my eyes. Sleep is there to embrace me, and I cling to it for once. There's nothing I can do if my nightmares attack me, and I'm so tired of fighting them.

Maybe I am going mad.

Or I'm ready to succumb to it.

Wonderland at night is a strange place. Bits of song reach me, pulling me from slumber. I don't open my eyes. Instead, I lie there without the concept of time dictating what I do next.

Whether I've slept for five minutes or five hours, I'm not sure. What I do know is the melody drifting to my bedroom is lovely.

I take a deep breath and concentrate on the musical notes. It's nothing I've heard before, but the beauty of it calls to me, however melancholy.

"Wonderland's wonder will soon wane.

Wonderland's madness will soon maim.

Wonderland's queen will quake.

Wonderland's princess will take.

Her reign will restore.

Her glory forevermore."

The words, sung in a deep baritone, send chills along my arms and have my eyes snapping open. The hauntingly beautiful notes, in conjunction with a glowing set of eyes, bring a cry to my throat. It rises, strangling me as the bright purple orbs get closer. Yet there's no silhouette to be seen in the moonlight.

"Those are not the correct lyrics," says a deep voice, "but they are ones I wish to hear."

I release a scream.

The shrill noise only lasts for a second before a hand slaps against my mouth, silencing me. "I'm not here to hurt you, love. Indeed, I've come to verify your safety. Neither Lucien nor Baxter can be relied upon for such things. They are too selfish by

nature.”

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My eyes widen, and my nostrils flare with every inhale as I force myself to continue breathing past my fear. I nod as though I know whom is speaking to me and for what reason. The stranger's hold on my mouth falls away as a grin appears just below the pair of eyes.

"I can see some of the mental shields are still in place," he says.

The door to my bedroom bursts open, and Lucien enters like an avenging angel. He holds his cane as though it's a weapon, and the glint in his icy gaze speaks of violence.

"Adelaide?"

"I'm here," I say.

A light flares, surrounding the lion's head at the tip of Lucien's cane. The hat atop his head tilts precariously, and he shoves it back into place. "I should've known you'd come, Nox."

Baxter runs into the room, coming to an abrupt halt just beside Lucien. His appearance is disheveled. He has bits of hair sticking up, and his clothing is rumpled as though he went to bed fully dressed.

When his gaze meets mine, it changes drastically. A moment ago, it was wide, frenzied, but now it's shuttered. Yet his blood continues to rush through his veins, his heart pounding furiously.

Is he worried about me?

I dismiss the thought. Just because he's attracted to me doesn't mean he cares about me.

Although I wish he did.

The pair of amethyst eyes and wide smile start off alone, only to become part of a man's features. Presumably, Nox. Whoever that is.

His golden hair gives him an angelic look and only adds to an already beautifully chiseled face. The man wears a crisp white shirt with thin blue stripes, the buttons undone to reveal a substantial amount of his sculpted chest. His pants are a dark shade that I can't pinpoint because of the dim lighting, but they match his boots.

He runs his gaze over me, taking in my shocked expression that I'm not able to hide, and looks to Lucien. "Of course, I came. Someone has been fucking about in her mind."

Baxter folds his arms. "How did you know? Though I'm not surprised at finding you in my home, un-fucking-invited," he says, shooting a pointed look at Lucien. "It's a clear indication you're aware of what's happening."

"I know because I put the shields there," Nox says as if Baxter is a jackass for not knowing. "Why do you think she can't remember anything?"

"Why did you do that to me?"

My question brings all three of the men's attention to me, and I clasp my hands to keep from fidgeting. One minute I'm a woman with no fucks to give, pleasuring myself on the dining room table. The next, I'm back to being the quiet, shy woman

from the mental facility. I'd rather be just one person, not a Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde.

Or a Princess Alice and Miss Adelaide.

Nox turns to me and takes a step in my direction, only for Lucien and Baxter to follow suit, but in a threatening manner. Nox stops short, and a grin tugs at his lips.

"I was going to light the lamp, but if you prefer to have this conversation in the dark..." He sweeps a hand, and the light surrounding Lucien's cane disappears. "That can be arranged."

"Jabberwocky's balls," Lucien mutters. "I'd forgotten how irritating you are. At least you know how to have a good time. I'll give you that."

Someone sighs. I guess it to be Baxter.

"Why don't we convene downstairs and finish this discussion there?" he asks.

I wrap my arms around my middle to fortify myself as the darkness causes my mind to spiral and my skin to prickle. With me unable to see, a veil of vulnerability covers my face like a bride's, yet without the anticipation of seeing a loved one.

The golden lion head is encompassed with light once again, and my breathing eases as the faces of the men come into view.

"Yes, let's," Lucien says, adjusting his hat. "I find that being in a space with a bed, while in the company of a gorgeous woman, is a temptation I'm not liable to walk away from."

Nox smirks. "You would rut her on any flat surface, my friend. Let's not spin illusions others will see straight through."

“Your ability to make things disappear is more vexing than you are,” Lucien says. His expression, matching Nox’s, fills the room’s atmosphere with mischief. “Do me a favor and make yourself scarce, hmm?”

Nox vanishes.

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I slap a hand to my chest and search the room for him, only to come up empty. His voice tickles my ear a moment later.

“Did you really think I’d leave without saying goodbye?” The whisper is so low I almost don’t make out the words. “I promise you that when I leave this time around, you’ll do more than remember me, love.”

“He’s doing it again,” Lucien grumbles. “First Baxter fucks with her mind. Now Nox is having a go. When is it my turn?”

I glare at him while sensing Nox close by. If I lift my hand, I’m certain I would touch him.

“Come on,” Baxter says. “It’s the middle of the night. Let’s get this over with.” He makes his way to the door. “You could’ve broken into my house in the daytime, Nox.”

The purple eyes appear first, followed by his pearly white teeth set in a grin, and then his full body. “That is true,” he says, “but then I would’ve missed her touching herself.”

I jump down from the bed on the opposite side, my cheeks flaming. No amount of magic can recall this flush of embarrassment. It intensifies when both Lucien and Baxter stop to turn and look at me. Lucien’s gaze turns licentious, and Baxter simply lifts a brow. I drop my head to avoid them.

Only to lift my chin a second later.

I won't be ashamed. It's what I wanted, it felt amazing, and it's my greatest sexual experience to-date. No, that's not true. The episode in the dining room was.

"You heard him correctly," I say.

"The sexy display at the table wasn't enough?" Lucien waggles his brows at me. "Had I known, I would've escorted you to bed, little bird."

"Enough," Baxter says. His command has an edge to it that causes my spine to straighten. "That's enough. Everyone downstairs. Now."

* * *

Nox and Lucien sit next to me on the couch in Baxter's office, like identical bookends.

"Don't you want to sit over there?" I ask. "There's more space."

"Little bird, you should know I'm of half a mind to put you on my lap."

Nox nods. "I was thinking the same thing. Only with her pressed against my cock, I won't be able to concentrate on what Baxter's saying. Actually, I might not pay attention anyway."

"Bastard." Baxter lowers himself in the high-wingback chair across from me, looking like a king on a throne. "Tell me why you've come, Nox."

"I already did. You're breaking the shields in Alice's mind."

"She goes by Adelaide now," Lucien says.

Nox gives him a curt nod and looks back to Baxter. “If I wanted her to remember, I wouldn’t have put them there in the first place.”

“What are you keeping from me?” I ask, placing my hand lightly on his forearm. “I need to know.”

“No, you don’t.” His purple gaze grows brighter the longer he looks at me. “I’m trying to protect you. There’s nothing in Wonderland for you, except death. The queen will stop at nothing to kill you.”

I retract my hand as if he’s burned me. “Why?”

Nox’s eyes dim. “Jealousy.”

Lucien and Baxter nod as though in agreement, while I sit there with my confusion increasing. “What is there to be jealous of?” I ask. “I don’t want to rule or anything of that sort, so I’m not a threat to her.”

“Oh, but you are, princess.” Baxter tilts his head and studies me without reproach. “The Red Queen has always forced her lovers into her bed, while you merely crook a finger, and men come running. And the queen doesn’t take rejection well.” His mouth turns down, and he clears his throat. “Are you going to reconstruct the shields in the princess’s mind, Nox?”

The man rolls his eyes. “I barely got away with it the first time. How am I supposed to do it again if you, Lucien, and Darius are aware of my plans, hmm?”

Lucien jabs the floor with his cane. “Pardon the fuck out of me, but what did you just say?”

I lean further into the couch’s cushions when the lion at the tip of the cane growls

softly. Nox places his hand over mine in a show of comfort. I glance up at him, but his gaze is fixed on Baxter.

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The man shakes his head, his brown locks swaying to and fro. “My brother is going to murder you, Nox.”

Beside me, Nox laughs softly. “I’m aware. Not afraid, but definitely aware.”

“Can someone please tell me what the hell is going on?” I ask. “You’re all speaking about me as if I’m not sitting here. Like it’s not my life you’re making decisions about.”

Nox dips his head in acknowledgment. “Very well, love. The Queen’s Messenger, Darius, uncovered an assassination plot that was supposed to take place at your birthday celebration. Knowing our history together, he told me.”

I hold up a hand. “Our what?”

“Our history as lovers.”

The air in my lungs leaves me in a whoosh and I sag against the couch. I let out a self-deprecating laugh as disbelief surges within me, rendering me stupefied. Despite my memories being blocked, I would think I’d remember something that significant. Especially since it sounds as if it’s been going on for while. “Is there anyone I haven’t slept with?”

Baxter is quick to raise his hand.

Lucien does as well. “I haven’t slept with you yet. I believe the distinction is rather important at this juncture.”

“As you were saying.” I prompt Nox with a flick of the wrist.

“Once Darius told me about the queen’s plan to murder you, I enlisted in his help, along with Baxter’s,” he says. When Baxter gives Nox a look of skepticism, the man continues. “Darius, with my insistence, convinced Baxter to shield your memories.”

“That’s impossible.” Baxter leans forward and rests his forearms on the tops of his thighs, a murderous expression etched into his features. “My brother would have killed me for even trying, let alone condoned it.”

Nox chuckles, drawing my gaze to his perfect teeth. Some of which are more pointed and sharp than normal. “I know,” he says. “That’s where Lucien comes in. He created the illusion that you were creating shields around someone else’s mind, so you and your brother didn’t know. Once the princess couldn’t recall her past, I had Darius create a portal to send her, disguised as someone else, away to safety. Then I had Baxter erase everyone’s memories of the whole ordeal.”

“Oh,” Baxter says on an exhale, “my brother isn’t simply going to kill you. He’s going to fucking murder you, Nox.”

The man shrugs, his purple gaze searching for and lingering on me. “I would do anything to keep you alive, love.” He shifts to look at Baxter. “Besides, once Darius found out that the princess was missing, he kept tabs on her through various portals. It didn’t take him as long as I thought it would to bring her back. I was hoping for more time.”

“For what?” I ask.

“To find a way to kill your mother, of course.”

CHAPTER14

ADELAIDE

Itold myself that I'd never drink again, but I think the situation calls for it.

“Excuse me,” I say to the group.

The men watch me as I rise to my feet. The lack of protests is a pleasant surprise. I guess Baxter isn't concerned with me running away anymore. Although the idea still has merit. But first, I need to learn everything I can about this place.

I walk toward the door in search of the dining room, and after a few wrong turns I locate it. The table has been cleared of all the dirtied dishes, but the wine has been left behind. The thought of Lucien's teacup, and its contents, enter my mind.

As well as how I drank it.

A flush warms my body, and I indulge in it since I'm alone with my thoughts. Reliving that moment with him and Baxter is exhilarating. It reminds me of how free I felt, of how it was to be desired by not one but two men. Both of whom are devastatingly gorgeous.

After a moment, I pour a full glass, down the wine, and then refill it. Taking the beverage with me, I return to Baxter's study, my gait not as steady as it was when I left. It doesn't matter. A relaxed state is what I need.

Tension tries to dig its claws into me once I reach the door. The men's voices drift to me from inside, but it's the rapid beating of their hearts and the speedy rushing of their blood that halts my steps. I lean closer, my ear hovering next to the small crack of the partially open door.

“I can't stop the return of her memories,” Baxter says. “According to Lucien, one has

already broken through, and once that happens, the rest will follow. The shield is a cracked vessel, and each memory is a droplet of water adding pressure to the barrier until it's completely eroded."

A long exhale and then Nox's reply. "Figured as much. I knew this day would come, but I'd hoped to be more prepared. Is she of a mind to face her mother?"

A pause.

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“No,” Lucien says. “Adelaide is confounded by her memories, not enraged by them. That’s what it’ll take for her to dethrone the queen.”

“Maybe we don’t need that.” The leather from Baxter’s chair creaks softly when he moves in his seat. I can imagine him leaning back, stroking his chin in thought. “The princess is powerful.”

“This is true,” Lucien says.

Nox begins to pace. His steps are muffled in the plush rug, but they’re harried. His shadow—created by the flames in the fireplace located behind him—flickers across the floor, coming in and out of my line of sight. “What is the extent of her abilities?”

“Oh, let me answer this one.” Lucien’s excitement can be felt all the way in the hall where I lurk. “She is a blood-bender, but not only that, she can make it feel like you’re burning alive from the inside out. It’s glorious.”

“For a masochist,” Baxter mutters.

“You say that like it’s a bad thing.”

“She must’ve come into her magic while in the other realm. If not, she hid it well.” Nox stops, and his shadow stretches toward the door. “She has to be trained, even if it’s only to defend herself.”

The men hum their agreement.

That stupid warmth in my chest, the one that makes me feel deliriously happy and idiotic, spreads through me. I hug my middle and close my eyes. Their concern for me is genuine. Yes, they need my help with the Red Queen.

But they care about my safety.

At least Nox does.

My former lover... that's something I can't wrap my head around. I wish that I'd remembered a time with him as opposed to that disgusting lord from Court. But I know all of my memories will eventually return.

The good and the bad.

I just hope there's more of the former.

"It's settled then," Nox says. "You two will help the princess develop her abilities, therefore ensuring she can protect herself while I'm gone."

Lucien laughs softly. "I won't be sad to see you go, but I must ask, where and why?"

"I have to find the seer. That fucker is the only person in Wonderland who can tell me if Adelaide will survive an encounter with her mother."

"And if she won't?" Baxter's chair groans once more as he shifts. "What then?"

"Then I'll take her away and into another realm where she'll be safe," Nox says. "I could give a flying fuck about Wonderland, and I won't sacrifice her to save it."

"You'd damn the rest of us to suffer?" This coming from Baxter.

Nox's shadow mirrors his curt nod. "In a heartbeat."

"I rather like going mad," Lucien says, his voice thoughtful. "It frees a person to act however they see fit. That kind of freedom is priceless."

Baxter huffs. "It comes with a price, and that'd be your head. The queen would take it from you and place it on her mantle like she's done with many others."

"I don't mind being the center of attention."

"Enough, Lucien," Nox says. "You're not too far gone. If anything, you're perfect to help the princess with her training since you like getting your ass kicked."

The sharp rap of the cane striking the floor makes me jump. "I like pain, not defeat, you silly cocksucker."

"Pussy-licker," Nox corrects.

This conversation is taking a turn in a direction that I'm susceptible to, and if I don't stop it, I'll find myself indulging my fantasies once more. This situation with the queen is too important for me to get distracted by pleasure.

I push open the door and the men's gazes immediately shoot to me. "I needed liquid courage," I say, holding up the teacup.

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Lucien's mouth spreads into a wicked grin. "I have more for you, if that's what you're in need of."

My cheeks heat, and my legs tremble under the layers of my dress. I take an unoccupied seat across from Lucien and Nox, earning a frown from both of them, although the latter's is more petulant.

"What did I miss?" I ask. I lift the cup to my lips and hide my face behind the object. There's not a bit of guilt in me over the fact that I listened in on their conversation. My only worry is that I'll give myself away.

"Lucien and Baxter are going to help you with your blood-bending abilities," Nox says.

Baxter shakes his head. "No, I will not. I've done what my brother has asked of me, and it didn't include that."

"I'm happy to have her all to myself." Lucien winks at me. "Well, have fun together, little bird."

Nox resumes his pacing from earlier. "Baxter, you have to supervise at least. I don't trust the hatter to behave long enough for her to actually learn something. He'll fill her lessons with sex instead of self-defense."

"Again, you say that like it's a bad thing," Lucien says.

Baxter lifts a hand, and everyone's attention shifts to him. "I will monitor her

progress, but that is all.” He stands, looking down his nose at me. “The sooner she leaves, the better.”

Lucien rolls his eyes and Nox frowns as Baxter exits the room. I watch him leave, my thoughts of him a jumbled mess. It’s a string of knots I’ll unravel at a later time.

Right now, I need to sleep.

The alcohol has fully invaded my bloodstream, and I want nothing more than to lie down. I slump in the chair, my posture very unladylike, and it brings a lopsided smile to my face.

My mother would kill me if she saw me acting sloppy like this. That type of behavior once earned me a night in the dungeons where I was denied food and water until the following day. The jail master groped me until I made his eyes and nose bleed by using my magic. It was the first time I suspected I was a blood-bender.

I jerk upright in my chair as the memory fades. Nox is by my side in the blink of an eye. He takes my shoulders and yanks me to him, putting our faces less than an inch apart.

“What did you see?” he asks, his breath skimming my cheeks. And my lips, making them tingle with curiosity.

“I recalled a time where the queen punished me for not exhibiting proper etiquette. She made me stay in the palace dungeons,” I say. “It was the first time I ever used my abilities.”

Nox narrows his gaze, and his grip on me loosens. Only fractionally, as if he’s scared to let go of me. “What else?” When I hesitate, he digs his fingers in my skin. “What. Else.”

The pain of his hold has me sucking in a breath. Lucien sits forward and lays his cane across his lap, lightly tapping the walking stick. His gaze captures mine from across the room and briefly darts to Nox.

His message is clear: he's going to kill Nox if he hurts me.

"The jailer tried to rape me," I say. "I used my magic for the first time and almost killed him. Or did I? Maybe that's—"

I clamp my lips and shrug. Nox slides his hands from my shoulders to weave his fingers in the hair on either side of my head. He clasps my skull firmly, and my heart beats so loudly between my ribs that I swear all of Wonderland can hear it.

"He will die a horrible death. That, I promise you, love." Nox's eyes take on an eerie glow, one that has both purple and blue mixing together, the bright colors undulating within his gaze. Like a vortex, I'm pulled inside. Everything around me fades except him.

Those amethyst eyes watch me from between my thighs as he lowers his mouth to run his tongue over my sensitive flesh. I give a lusty groan and arch my back as my legs tremble with the effort to stay still.

"You taste like Wonderland," he says.

My laugh makes my breasts bounce. Nox runs his gaze over them, admiration and desire burning in the depths. He nibbles on my clit, and my amusement morphs into a gasp. Now it's his turn to chuckle.

"You don't play fair," I say.

"Never have and never will, as far as you're concerned."

I purse my lips. "I know."

"Can you blame me?" He licks me from my clit to my entrance and back. "You drive me crazy. Your scent, your skin, and your voice all render me mad."

"We're all mad here," I say, throwing his words back at him. Understanding dawns on his handsome face, and he thumbs my clit. Rough and hard. "Damn it, Nox."

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My chastisement is forgotten the moment I feel the length of his cock against my thigh. He moves up my body to position himself above me, poised to fuck me into oblivion. When I'm with him, I forget my life at Court and everything else about my miserable existence.

Nox is my saving grace in such a mad world.

I stroke his face to stay him, knowing once he enters me, the time for conversation is over. "What does that even mean, to taste like Wonderland?"

Nox pauses to think, but his hands never stop caressing my skin. "It means that you are everything good in this world. From its secrets to the beauty, there's nothing I can look at or touch without thinking of you."

He thrusts inside of me, stealing my breath.

And my heart.

"Pardon me, Nox, but what in the king's cock are you doing to my little bird?"

Lucien's voice pulls me from the memory with a jolt as though he slapped me. I blink rapidly to clear the vision while both men stare back at me. Nox's eyes have returned to their normal hue, but Lucien's blue ones are colder, freezing me where I sit.

"Nothing," Nox says. He drops his hands from me and stands. "I don't know what came over me."

Lucien lifts his cane, creating a barrier between Nox and me, and steps between my legs. His gaze holds me in place as he scrutinizes me from head to foot. Nox looks at me from over the man's shoulder, his expression a scowl.

"Another memory, little bird?" Lucien asks. My hesitation just before nodding causes him to bend down, putting us eye-level. "This one was naughty, was it not?"

I turn my head to avoid his probing stare. "I don't want to talk about it."

At the feel of cool metal underneath my chin, I swing my focus back in his direction. Lucien uses the cane to lift my head until I'm looking at him and nowhere else.

"Well, I want to hear about it," he says. "Your expression is different this time around. It was softer, more sensual, and it made my cock nearly burst."

Lucien adjusts himself, and my eyes zero in on the movement. The urge to lick my lips rises and I shove it away. It's a miracle considering the way my blood sings whenever he's near.

Nox too.

Especially after recalling that memory of us together.

"It..." I seek out his gaze and it meets mine. His knowing and mine spiraling. "It was about Nox."

The hatter swings his head toward the other man. "You nasty fuck. I knew you were good in bed. Look at her smile," Lucien says, gesturing to me with his free hand. "It's the smile of a satisfied woman, the most addicting kind. When you see it, you know you fucked her good and well." He looks back at me, a gleam in his blue eyes, making them sparkle with unbridled lust. "It's an expression I endeavor to put on her

lips.”

My breathing goes shallow at the images that bombard me with his statement. The two of them looming over me, close enough to touch... and kiss. The thoughts arrest me where I sit. My core pulses wildly as if trying to match the way my heart pounds.

Bothparts of me want these men.

I shove aside Lucien’s cane and get to my feet. “Goodnight.”

When I leave the room without hearing a single protest, I’m not sure if I’m more surprised by their lack of interference...

Or my disappointment.

CHAPTER15

ADELAIDE

I close and lock the bedroom door, only to lean heavily against it afterwards. My eyes flutter shut with exhaustion, and my limbs hang listlessly by my sides as I take in the quiet around me. It’s most welcome.

My time spent in the mental facility provided a lot of solitude where I could be alone with my thoughts. Not my first choice, but at least it was peaceful, when I didn’t dredge up what little memories I had then. Now, having been around people nonstop for however long, I’m desperate to have some time to myself.

The strength of my legs dwindles, and I stumble to the bed, undoing the ties in the front of the corset. The dress cascades to the floor in a flurry of ribbons and lace. I step from it, relishing the light material of my undergarments. Well, my chemise.

Lucien didn't give me any underwear when he presented the gown. Pervert.

Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 8:58 am

I throw myself onto the fluffy comforter and sigh when the mattress cradles me as I sink into it. Baxter has good taste in furniture. If only he wasn't such an ass.

His attitude toward me hasn't softened one bit. It's not my job to get him to like me, but things would be less stressful if he did.

However, he does want me.

As soon as I figure out how to use that to my advantage, he's in for it. I suppose I'm similar to Nox: I don't plan on playing fair. I've entered Wonderland at a disadvantage without having my memories.

At least, I think it's an impairment. Part of me still isn't sure. The vision of my time with Nox is something that could change my thoughts on the matter. After seeing that, I felt a connection to him.

Maybe Lucien was right. Our past experiences help make us who we are. So the question is: Who am I?

A humble human?

A powerful woman?

A princess of pleasure?

The answer rises from my intuition. All of them. That is who I am, a combination of Alice and Adelaide. The notion settles in my gut, the feelings of self-discovery

comforting. No longer will I try to be something I'm not.

A pair of amethyst eyes float toward me from across the room. Inwardly, I smile at Nox's appearance. "What are you doing here?"

The entirety of him materializes before me at the foot of the bed. He leans against the post, resting his shoulder there while regarding me in the dark. The only light in the room is a dimly lit lamp that was left on from earlier. It casts a gentle glow on the space, making it intimate.

"I've come to say goodbye," he says, his tone threaded with regret.

My chest aches at the sound. "Why do you have to leave so soon? We just barely met."

His lips twitch. "No, love. We didn't just meet."

"You know what I mean." I drop my gaze to the comforter and trace the floral designs on it. "I'm not ready for you to leave."

The admission leaves me in a whisper, having forced the air from my body. I've never told anyone else besides Darius that I wanted them to stay with me. Only this is different. My memory of Nox did something to me. A deep part of me that cannot be readily accessed locked onto him, and now I can't take it back without hurting myself in the process.

Because I gave him a piece of my heart.

I might not love Nox, but my soul does. It knows him in a way I can't recall.

He blows out a sharp breath. "I'm not ready either, but I have to. The seer must be

found. And not just that elusive bastard. There are other things that require my attention.”

“I understand.”

“Do you?”

I look up at him, searching his features that are covered in shadow. Reading his face in order to uncover his thoughts is a lost cause. Just like any attempt I’d make to convince him to stay. “I want to understand.”

His grin is like a beacon in the dark, and my lips respond in kind, matching his expression. I already miss him.

“Everything I do is for you, love. Always has and always will be. Right now, that requires me to leave your side, hence the reason I came here.”

My smile fades. “To say goodbye.”

“Yes.”

“I’m glad to have met you again, Nox.” I give him a little wave as self-consciousness creeps along my psyche. “Please take care of yourself.”

He laughs softly, and it has me squeezing my thighs together. It’s the same way he sounded in my memory of us. Sexy and masculine, with a hint of tenderness. Or pride. The feelings his laughter evoked were compounded by my arousal, and then he satiated them.

If only.

Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 8:58 am

“Do you think that’s what I mean when I say ‘goodbye?’” he asks, his voice still bearing hints of amusement. When I scrunch my face and nod slowly, Nox shakes his head. “No, love. I’m not leaving until I’ve kissed, touched, and fucked your cunt.”

I stop breathing. My heart beats angrily at the lack of oxygen, and my lungs feel as though they’re shriveling. The discomfort has me sucking in air and slapping a hand to my chest.

“What?” I finally manage.

Nox smirks at me, and my pussy flutters. “Is that not enough?” He cocks his head and his blonde hair sways. “I could always add more things to the list, but I thought you were tired. My mistake.”

“I was. I mean, I am tired.” My words trip over themselves in haste to leave my mouth. That only adds to the nervousness building inside me. “I just...”

Closing my eyes, I take a deep breath to steady myself. When I open them, Nox is in front of me, his weight sinking into the mattress. He cages me within his embrace and places a hand on either side of me.

“You just... what?” he asks.

“Fuck it. Just kiss me until I can’t breathe.”

“As you wish, your highness.”

He takes possession of my mouth, and I throw my arms around his neck. The physical connection makes my blood sizzle in my veins, the ruby currents streaming with arousal, coursing through my entire body. How I yearn for him.

I kiss him back with fervor. This could be my only chance to experience intimacy in a safe setting. Although my mind doesn't remember him fully, the brief memory is enough to put me at ease.

However, my skin remembers him, his touch.

The moment Nox runs his fingertips across the base of my throat, I sigh into his mouth. He smiles against my lips and snakes his hand through my hair to grasp the strands at the nape of my neck. With a firm jerk, he pulls my head back and breaks the kiss.

I blink up at him in a lust-induced fog and tighten my hold on him, not wanting him to disappear. "Is something wrong?" I ask.

He laughs softly, the breath from him skimming my face. "How can perfection be wrong?"

"But you stopped kissing me."

"I wanted to look at you. It's been too many years since I've had the luxury to do so. I won't waste this opportunity."

A smile creeps onto my lips. "Oh. Well, don't take too long."

"You're feistier than I remember," he says.

I shrug. "Maybe. Now shut up and kiss me like you said you would."

He tackles me to the bed.

A shriek of surprise gets stuck in my throat when Nox slams his mouth to mine. He kisses me until I can't breathe and I become light-headed, stars appearing behind my eyelids. I'll have to be careful when I challenge him. He makes good on his promises.

He drags his lips down the column of my neck, placing a feather-light kiss just behind my ear. A low moan gathers in my chest, and I release it into the night. Nox's cock twitches in response.

A power that has nothing to do with blood-bending rises to the forefront of my mind. If a simple moan affects him, then what else can I evoke from this man?

My curiosity takes the bait.

I wrap my legs around him and grind into the hardness of his body. Pleasure hits me like lightning, sending sparks of excitement everywhere. My clit pulses greedily, and my nipples tingle, both of them eager to be stroked.

Nox lifts his head from the curve of my neck and grins down at me. "Impatient, love?"

My facial expression is coy as I rub against him once more. "No, you're just slow."

"I'm going to remember that."

He brings his mouth to my breasts. The second his lips encircle my nipple, the peak hardens further underneath the material of my chemise. Nox bites and sucks until I'm squirming and pulling at his hair. Neither of those things pushes him to move faster.

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It frustrates me just as much as it heightens my arousal.

Nox trails his fingers along my curves at a maddening pace. The feel of his hands on my skin sets me ablaze, my hunger for him spiraling out of control. Mumbled pleas escape me when he pushes my hips onto the mattress and spreads my thighs.

I watch his face, the way his gaze traces every single inch of my skin as though he's committing me to memory. Or loving me with his eyes. It's like a physical touch, and my body responds, my skin prickling with anticipation.

He circles my entrance with a knowing smile playing about his lips. Gathering the dampness there, he brings it to my clit, and my eyes roll back. It's everything. Nox shifts on the mattress, and the warmth of his mouth replaces his fingertips on me.

My groan is loud, and he chuckles against my clit, making me wetter than before. I open my eyes to look at him, and it's just like in my memory: his amethyst gaze locked onto mine while he ravages me.

Nox plants both of his hands on my thighs to keep me in place when he tugs hard on my clit with his mouth. My orgasm builds until I think I'll die from the delicious torture. I claw at his wrists, a silent demand that he give me release. He bites my clit, and I'm gone.

My scream fills the room, my whimpers following shortly after as I shatter. Nox is there, picking up the pieces of me, only to destroy me once again by thrusting his fingers into me. My body locks up at the invasion and then melts when he begins to stroke me.

“Adelaide?”

Lucien’s voice seems far away, in another dimension. I’m floating on a breeze of ecstasy and I ignore him. My only focus is on what Nox is doing to me. And how much I want his cock.

“Go away, Lucien,” Nox says.

A sigh and then, “I never get to have any fun.”

Nox doesn’t stop pleasuring me, driving me crazy with needing things I can’t put into words. I reach out to grab his cock, and he groans but removes my hold.

The rustling of clothing is followed by Nox lifting me into a sitting position where he yanks off my chemise. When he lays me back down, he follows me, pressing his body to mine. I sigh at the feel of his skin and his weight against me. His blood pumps through his veins faster than before at the contact, and I smile to myself.

He steals my lips for a kiss, once again dragging me under an ocean of pleasure, to depths I’ve never been before.

Nox takes his cock in hand and strokes it, making my eyes widen. “See something you like?” he asks.

I nod. Vigorously. His laughter surrounds me a second before he thrusts into my body.

He groans loudly, and the sound swallows my tiny gasp. His cock is buried to the hilt, and there’s not an inch of it I don’t feel pulsing inside me. The fullness. The stretching. The pinprick of pain. I soak it all in.

Then he begins to move.

There's no buildup, no gradual increase. Nox fucks me as though demons chase him. His cock hits deep inside, bringing me close and closer to another orgasm with every gyration of his hips.

"Come for me, love," he grits out, the veins on the sides of his neck pulsing wildly. "I'm not going to stop fucking you until you do."

Watching Nox dominate my body, imprint himself on my mind, and sear my soul is something I'll never forget.

My release hits me, and I cry out his name.

He forces me to ride the waves of ecstasy longer than I can handle, and tears sting my eyes before trailing along my temple. I hold onto Nox, letting him take me wherever he wants. Even if it kills me.

His muscles go taut, and then he's shouting as he comes. He never stops slamming into me. Only when his arms tremble with fatigue does he slow down. Even then, the languid strokes bring a moan to my lips.

I reach for him and cradle his face between my hands, staring into his eyes. Something passes between us. An understanding that this was a reunion, a connection of two souls that'd been left bereft of the other.

It's all I've ever wanted.

And now he's going to leave.

I pull him to me, and he allows it, resting his cheek on my breast, where my heart

weeps for him with every beat. My eyelids are heavy and my body satiated, but I fight sleep with the remaining energy I possess.

“Sleep, love.”

“No,” I say with a shake of my head. “I don’t want to miss a moment. These are the last ones I’ll have...”

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Nox rises onto his forearms and stares down at me. His gaze is unreadable. But his blood tells me of his nervousness to leave me.

“I’ll be here until the last possible second,” he says. He brushes back a lock of my hair, and I lean into his touch. “Tears? For me?”

“For your cock, but yes.”

He barks out a laugh. “I’ll have to ensure you have use of it again in the future.”

“If not, I’ll find another,” I say with a teasing lilt to my voice.

“I know.”

“What?”

He makes a soothing noise and caresses the side of my face. “I know I’m not the only man to love you, but I am the only one whose love you actually return. That’s enough for me, Adelaide.”

“I...” I bite the inside of my cheek, ruminating on that impactful—and possibly insightful—statement. “I don’t understand.”

“You will. Now, I’m going to hold you. First, to fuck you again. The second time, to sleep.”

ADELAIDE

Nox is gone when I wake up the next morning.

I clutch my chest because of the void that's taken up residence there. It's an ache, a pain that I'm not familiar with, and I don't know how to fix it. Maybe there isn't a remedy for this emotional wound.

The melodious voices from the day prior reach me through the open window of the bedroom and I slide from bed to investigate. At finding myself sore between the thighs, a smile tugs at my mouth. Nox said goodbye quite thoroughly.

I'm still reeling about that and him talking about me taking on another lover—though I can't act as though it hasn't crossed my mind. What was meant to be a joke turned into something else entirely. He talked about that as though it was fact, without being resigned or jealous. Perplexed is not a strong enough word to describe the mindfuck he slapped me with.

So, I ignore it.

Avoidance is a defense mechanism I'm adept at employing. It's the reason I didn't ask Nox any questions about the time he sent me through the portal. I've already learned so much about my past, and I'm barely coming to terms with it. Knowing who I killed before I left Wonderland is going to remain a mystery until I'm able to handle the answer.

As of now, I can't.

The notes from a slow melody grow louder the closer I get to the windowsill. I push against the glass pane and lean over to scout the area below. There's a greenhouse in the shape of a gazebo.

Curiosity prodding me, I head to the bathroom with the intent to get dressed so I can go outside and visit the conservatory. My shower is quick, regret coating me when I use soap to wash Nox from my skin.

After I'm finished, I search for the dress from the night before. That's preferable to the green hospital gown I arrived in. When I can't locate it, I head for the armoire. The mahogany wood piece reminds me of the coat closet leading to Narnia, and I grasp the brass handle to pull open the door.

Within lies a full wardrobe of women's clothing.

There are dresses in all the shades of the rainbow, all of them vibrant with color, each more beautiful than the last. One evening gown is soft and elegant, like the silkiness of a butterfly wing, while another's fabric is as delicate as I imagine a cloud would be. Some of the garments shimmer as if wet, metallic and shimmering.

I select a blue dress. It's structured with a long skirt that flows to the ground in a smooth material that catches the light at every angle. The satin is cool against my skin as I slide it on, and a set of stockings with blue ribbons complete the outfit. After digging through one of the drawers inside the armoire, I slip on a pair of ballet flats.

Everything fits as though it were made for me.

If this was any other place besides Wonderland, I'd question it.

I'm careful to open my door as silently as possible, not knowing the time and if Baxter is still asleep. My steps are soundless on the carpet and I take my time walking to the stairs while enjoying viewing the paintings along the way.

"There you are, little bird."

Lucien greets me from the foyer at the bottom of the staircase with a devilish grin. His waistcoat is a ruby red, covering a white shirt that has a sharp collar and flared ruffles at the wrists. His overcoat is the same red hue with oversized gold buttons, and his pants are the color of a baby fawn. He's not wearing spectacles, but his old hat is ever-present, sitting on his head at a rakish angle.

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“That is a very pretty dress. It’ll look even better with blood splattered all over it,” he says.

My stomach lurches, and I almost trip over my feet on the final step. “What?”

He claps his hands together. “This is going to be so much fun. Now come along and follow me. We have a lot to do. Baxter won’t let us play in any of the rooms, so we have to do your training in the cellar.”

I think I’m going to be sick. “Lucien, wait.”

He turns to face me, a frown tugging at his lips. “What is it? We don’t have time to waste.”

“This isn’t what I had in mind.” I walk up to him and beseech him with my eyes, letting him see my fear and resistance. “I don’t want to hurt you. Or worse, accidentally kill you. I’ve done it before.”

The confession leaves me in a rush before I can recall it. I bite my lip and wait for Lucien to express his shock and for him to judge me. I know I would at hearing something like that.

He simply stares at me. Then he drags a finger over the seam of my lips, making my throat go dry. And my core wet. “I knew you had sharp teeth, little bird, but I didn’t realize they were fangs.”

I shrug in lieu of speaking, not knowing what to say.

“You’re going to need them at Court,” he says. “That place is crawling with monsters. And I don’t mean just those like me, in search of a good time. I’m talking about depraved individuals who aren’t afraid to hurt others to obtain what they want. In my opinion, it’s better to kill than be killed.”

He runs his gaze over me once more and jerks his chin. “Let’s sharpen those fangs, my dear.”

Lucien strides down the hallway, leaving me to catch him. I grab fistfuls of my skirts and quicken my pace to position myself by his side.

“Thank you for understanding,” I say. “I’m having a hard time coming to terms with this other woman who lives inside my mind. It’s... challenging to reconcile her behavior with mine.”

“Illusions might be my forte, but they are my detriment as well. Having to discern farce from fact is a battle I’m all too familiar with.”

We lapse into a heavy silence.

Unlike the scary cellars featured in some of the books I read while in the mental facility, Baxter’s wine cellar is pleasant. The bottles are rack upon rack of expensive reds and whites without a single dusty cobweb hanging from the ceiling. Crystal wine decanters shimmer in the lamplight while sitting on a bar along the far wall. The sweet smell of spices, cedar, oak from the barrels tickles my nose, while the dampness of the walls coats my skin. The temperature drops the further I walk into the cellar.

“So what do I do now?” I ask.

Lucien spreads his arms wide. “The very thing you did when I first arrived at

Baxter's house."

"I already told you, I don't want to hurt you."

"But I do want it. In fact, I've been looking forward to it. Now, show me what you've got."

"Lucien..." I shake my head. "This isn't a good idea."

"Fine," he says, rolling his eyes.

He plucks his hat from his head and flips it so the rim faces the ceiling. After shoving his hand inside, he withdraws it, holding a rabbit. The furry brown creature peers up at me with eyes wide and pink nose wiggling.

"What are you doing?" I ask.

"You said you didn't want to hurt me, but we need something with blood that you can practice on. Hence, the rabbit."

"Lucien!" My shriek causes the frightened creature to struggle against Lucien's hold. "I abso-fucking-lutely willnotpractice on that sweet bunny. Now put it back... wherever the hell you got it."

"If you won't work with him," Lucien says with a pointed look at the animal, "then it has to be me."

"Fine."

He sets the furry creature on the ground and turns to me with an expectant air. "No more excuses, little bird."

I close my eyes and take a deep breath. My heartbeat thrums in my ears, but when I concentrate on Lucien's, my blood begins to rush through my body, heating me all over. His pulse has a steady cadence.

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Until I open my eyes and focus on him.

Then it speeds up.

“I hear your blood as it races through your arteries,” I say quietly. “It’s like a language only I can interpret.”

“What is it telling you?”

“You’re excited.” I walk up to Lucien and place my hand directly over his heart. It thumps against my palm as though wanting me to hold it. My fingers curl in delight, the tips pressing deeper into his shirt. “You’re aroused.”

He nods. “It’s always this way when I’m around you.”

Lucien snakes his hand around my waist and brings me flush to the length of him. His hardened cock twitches against my belly, the blood within calling to me like a siren’s song. He lowers his head, and his lips brush the shell of my ear, making me shiver.

“I want you,” he murmurs. “It is the one thing that’ll never be an illusion.”

“You want me to weaponize my ability, but I can’t do that with you distracting me.” I take a step back to break our connection. And to stop myself from kissing him. “This isn’t going to work.”

A floral scent reaches me a second before Baxter’s voice does. “She’s right,” he says. He folds his arms and leans against the doorway. “You’re going to have to

concentrate. Focus on Lucien and force his blood to travel to a designated location.”

Lucien grabs his cock. “Mission already accomplished.”

I press my lips together to keep from laughing and Baxter glowers at the man. “A different body part,” he says. “Perhaps his head so his brain can function properly.”

Shoving aside my amusement, I channel Lucien’s blood, becoming more in tune with its ebb and flow. The crimson rivers flood with excitement at my intrusion, rushing through his veins when I shift their direction. The change is instant but mild.

“I don’t feel anything,” Lucien says. “There’s no fire, no pain.”

With a huff of frustration, I shake my head. “I can feel you, but it’s not the same. I don’t know how to explain it.”

“You’re lacking strong emotion.” Baxter shoves from the doorway and walks over. Once he’s looming over me, he stops. “You need to get upset.”

My gaze darts between the two men. “What do you mean?”

“The first time, you used your magic against Lucien because you were scared of him,” Baxter says. “The second time, during dinner, you were angry with me. In both of those instances, you were experiencing intense emotion. You need to do that again. Now.”

I scrunch my face. “I can’t just make myself angry.”

“Very well. Then I’ll do it.” Baxter’s hand shoots out to grab my throat. He squeezes until his nails bite my skin and my breathing goes shallow. “How about now?”

My eyes widen as my senses go on alert. The sound of his life force streams through my ears, providing a map of sorts. I focus on it.

Baxter hisses. “Yes. That’s it. Fuck, it burns.”

“I never get to have any fun,” Lucien says to himself. My concentration is disrupted when the hatter comes to stand behind me and shoves his hand between my legs. “Now it’s a party.”

My brain shorts out like an electrical socket. The fear brought on by Baxter fuses with the arousal created by Lucien to create an entirely new combination of heightened sensation. I try to relax and fail miserably.

“Baxter.” His name is a gasp, evidence of my growing panic. And anticipation.

He shakes his head at me and increases his grip, hindering my ability to speak. I grab his wrist with both hands and attempt to remove his hold. I’m unsuccessful, and that only serves to frighten me more.

Deep down, I don’t think Baxter will kill me, but...

Lucien brings his other hand to my breast and I stiffen. With me staring at Baxter, I catch the flash of lust that streaks through his gaze when the hatter rolls my nipple between his fingers. A moan builds on my tongue, and I melt into Lucien, watching Baxter all the while, my breathing so shallow it’s a wheeze.

He works his throat and swallows, his green eyes sparkling with unfulfilled wants. If I could talk, I’d ask him what he desires. Since I can’t, I’ll glean the answer from his blood.

Which is rushing toward his cock.

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I dip my gaze to his erection and give him a pointed look, despite the anxiety streaming through me because of him. In return, Baxter steps closer until the tip of his nose brushes mine.

“You think you know me, but you don’t, princess.” He cups my cheek and digs his fingertips against the skin at my temple. “Time for you to remember who you truly are, and then you’ll know who I am.”

The hatter freezes behind me, still holding my breast in his palm. “Baxter...” His voice carries a warning but also a question.

Baxter narrows his gaze. “Hold her.”

The wine cellar and the two men disappear as darkness consumes me. Then a scene unfolds right before my eyes, starring Baxter. Only he’s no longer wearing a dress shirt and pants. Instead, his soldier’s uniform clings to his body, showcasing his lean yet muscular form.

“Go back inside, princess.”

I look up at him from where I sit on the garden’s stone bench and give him a rueful smile. “Why? So I can do my mother’s bidding and spread my legs once more?”

“What you do is none of my affair,” he says with a frown. “However, I can’t have you out here unattended. It’s not safe.”

“Nowhere is safe, Baxter. You don’t know this yet, but you will.” I shake my head

and turn away from him. “You think that as her Captain of the Guard you’re immune to her evil ways, that she won’t destroy your soul piece by piece. I envy your ignorance.”

“We are all bound to her wishes,” he says. “It’s best to act quickly and avoid her ire.”

My laugh is weary. “Her ire is not the problem.”

I get to my feet and face him. Baxter stands straight as though ready for inspection, his head held high and his features schooled. He’s such a handsome man. It’s only a matter of time before he becomes my mother’s plaything.

He won’t stand so tall once she’s through with him.

“You have a good heart,” I say. I walk up to Baxter, my skirts whispering against the grass until I stop just in front of him. I rest my hand against his chest and soak in the steady beating of his heart. “Be careful that you don’t let her take it from you.”

“You don’t need to worry about me, princess.”

I let my arm fall away. “I’m not certain whether or not you consider us friends, but I do. And I will always concern myself with your well-being. Stay away from my mother as long as you can.”

His forehead wrinkles, and the soldier clears his throat. “In all honesty, I’m not sure how to respond.”

“It’s all right, Captain.” I wave a hand in dismissal. “I’m not trying to fuck you, so relax. I know you have a wife.”

“I...” Baxter runs a shaking hand through his hair. “I never meant to imply...”

My smile appears at his nervousness. I step up to him, pressing my body against his and relishing the way his blood pounds faster in response. And flows to his cock.

“Do you want me?” I ask.

“I don’t think there’s a man alive that doesn’t.”

With regret streaming through me, I step back from him. “See what I mean? You’re an honorable man who tells the truth while remaining faithful. A woman like me isn’t good enough for you, Baxter.” I give him a smile to hide the pain underneath my words. “Your wife has no idea how much I envy her.”

He steps up to me and raises his hand, only to fist it before letting it fall back to his side. His desire to touch me is fierce. As is mine for him to.

I breathe him in for a moment, wanting it to last forever while knowing each second that passes is detrimental for him because of my mother. And for me.

It’ll give life to dreams that can never be.

I turn away from him and stride back toward the palace, grief making my steps heavy. Baxter’s fate is all but sealed. It won’t be long before my mother destroys whatever goodness she detects.

The Queen of Hearts is good at tearing people apart.

Both figuratively and literally.

“Baxter.” His name comes out broken and weak, my voice riddled with tears.

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“Bring her back before she kills you,” Lucien says from behind me. His tone is razor-sharp, cutting into my consciousness. “Damn it, Baxter, do it now.”

CHAPTER17

ADELAIDE

My eyes flutter open. I quickly scan the room, although my mind takes a minute to process what I’m seeing. Lucien has me wrapped in his arms, but he’s not looking at me. I follow his line of sight to find Baxter leaning over a wine barrel with his head bowed, blood streaming from his eyes and nose.

“Baxter!” I struggle in Lucien’s hold, shoving at his chest. “Let go of me.”

The hatter tightens his grip and I glare up at him. “He’s fine,” Lucien says. “He removed himself from your mind before you could do too much damage. Give him a moment to recover.”

My expression morphs into one of horror. “That’s my fault?” When Lucien’s mouth thins, I briefly close my eyes as a wave of guilt slams into me. “I knew this was a bad idea. How could you let me do that to him?”

Lucien makes a soothing sound and raises me in his arms, bringing his face close to mine. “It’s nothing we didn’t expect.”

I press my lips together to refrain from saying something I’m likely to regret later on. Even though I’ve accepted Wonderland and all her quirks, including her residents, I

have yet to fully embrace them. It boggles my mind that these men can rationalize my ability to kill them.

“Are you all right?” I ask Baxter, unable to stop the trembling of my words.

He nods and uses his sleeve to wipe away the trails of blood from his face. I catch the way his fingers shake. The way his heart trips in his chest on the lie. It causes pain to flare in mine.

More tears clog my throat, and I take a deep breath to fight them off. “I’m so sorry.”

Baxter flinches at my apology. Or maybe even the sound of my voice. I push against Lucien’s torso, wanting to go to Baxter and reassure myself that he’s okay.

The latter sets me on my feet but keeps an arm hooked around my waist. He gives me a firm shake of his head. “Come along, little bird. You must be famished.”

“But...” I look between the two men, noting Baxter has yet to meet my eyes. “Captain.”

Our gazes come together in a clash of blue and green, an ocean of memories. Drowning us both.

“I remember you,” I say, my voice low. “We used to be friends, Baxter. Or at least as much as I knew to be. What happened to us?”

His features twist into a scowl that sends chills along my arms. “Get her away from me.”

Lucien hauls me away, but not before I catch the agony glittering in Baxter’s eyes. It’s the same that’s surely found in mine.

* * *

“Cheer up, little bird, Baxter will come around. Give him time.”

“I don’t think he will,” I say. “I must’ve done something horrible to him for him to hate me so.”

Lucien takes my arm and weaves it through his. He leads me from the dining room and into the main hallway. The sunlight streams through the windows all around me, taunting me with its cheerfulness.

“I highly doubt you’ve done anything to warrant such distrust,” he says. “Now, what shall we do to amuse ourselves, hmm?” He waggles his brows at me in a suggestive manner that causes my lips to twitch. “I can think of several positions—erm, things we can do.”

“We just ate breakfast. I think that whatever we do shouldn’t require large amounts of physicality.”

His mouth pulls to the side as he pouts. “Fine. Do you want to take a stroll in the greenhouse or play a game out on the patio?”

“What kind of game?” I hold up my hand. “Your answer should be platonic, Lucien.”

“Have I ever told you how boring you can be on occasion?”

I nod. “And I don’t care in the slightest. Given my history, I’ve had enough fun to last me a lifetime.”

“Ah yes” he says, tapping my nose, “but you’ve never had fun with me. That’s something no mental shields could ever repress.”

“So you say.”

“So I know.”

My sigh is long and loud. “What games could we play?”

“My favorite is chess. It amuses me the way the pieces move. There’s no logic to them, yet they come together in a way that progresses the game.”

“It’s been so long since I’ve played that...” I search my mind for the rest of the thought and come up empty. “It’s very frustrating not remembering anything. I know Baxter broke through more of my shields since I recalled a time with him back at the palace, but at this rate, I’ll be old and gone before everything becomes clear.”

Lucien makes a noncommittal sound that has me playfully smacking his arm.

“You’re so violent,” he says. “I love that about you.”

“So chess?”

“Chess.”

A while later, I’m ready to make Lucien bleed from every orifice in his stupid head.

I slam down a pawn while glaring at him. “How can you be so good at this?”

“You’ll find there are few things in this life that I can’t perform expertly. When you

ride my cock, you'll understand."

"You're ridiculous."

"And you're losing." He gestures to my king and queen, my two remaining white pieces, surrounded by his black ones. "One move left."

I'm two seconds from sweeping my arm over the chessboard, to clear it before I smash it against his smug face. Instead I get up and walk over to the window. "Take the win."

"I will, along the other three."

I make a face at him. "You're not a gracious winner. Quite a dick, actually."

"Alldick, my dear."

My lips twitch to hold in my amusement, but my smile perseveres. "You're ridiculous."

He tips his hat at me.

"What's so special about that one?" I ask. "You wear it, no matter your outfit."

"It was a gift."

"From whom?"

His gaze turns glacial, and the air around me chills. "It's not important."

"You say that, but I've noticed you're never without it. The hat is old and raggedy

compared to what you wear.”

“My sister,” he bites out.

My eyes widen. “Your sister?”

“Yes, she gave it to me. Can’t you leave well enough alone?”

“I don’t know if I can,” I say, partially in jest. This isn’t the first time my curiosity has led me to places I don’t belong or wasn’t invited to. “A sister, Lucien... you have to tell me her name. What is she like?”

His gaze cuts me where I stand.

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Turning away from him, I press my hand to my forehead when it begins to throb. “It’s perfectly normal for you to have a family, yet it never occurred for me to ask. What an idiot.”

My stomach clenches, and I close my eyes as a wave of nausea washes over me. I press my face against the windowpane, letting the glass cool my heated cheek. “In my memory, Baxter was married, and presumably still is. What about you? Darius?” I cover my mouth in horror. “Nox... what have I done?”

I turn around to notify Lucien of my need for solitude, only to find him towering over me. My gasp fills the space between us, and I back up until my back hits the wall. He watches me like a predator watches its prey.

Right before devouring it.

Holding up my hands in supplication, I search his gaze for any indication of what’s going through his mind. “Lucien...”

“I’ve finally come to understand some of the reason why Baxter hates you so,” he says. His words hit me like a knife to the gut, making me wince with every syllable. “You’re nothing but a constant reminder of the things we’ve suffered.”

“I can’t express how sorry I am.” I let my arms fall away and fist my hands at my sides. “And I won’t, not when all of you don’t accept my apologies.”

He closes the distance between us, bringing the thrumming sound of his blood that much closer to my ears. I tilt my head and drink in the way it courses through him,

fueled by his anger. He stops short, inhaling sharply.

“You’ve taken control of my life force.” Lucien closes his eyes and a muscle along his jaw ticks. “I can feel it.”

Infusing his veins with fire causes the hatter to fall to his knees before me. The image of this wild, volatile man holding his hardened cock because of his desire for me is overwhelming. Seeing him at my mercy is something I never want to forget.

“My anger can burn as brightly as yours or anyone else’s,” I say. “You’d do well to keep that in mind.”

He laughs, but the sound ends on a grunt of pain. “Not only do I think about it, but I’m counting on it, little bird.”

“Good.”

I pull back my magic, and his chin drops to his chest, his breathing labored. I’m careful to step around him, keeping my skirts from slapping him in the face, and head for the door. If there was ever a time for me to be alone with my thoughts, it’s now.

Before I hurt someone on purpose.

My steps are quick and determined, and when I reach the exit, I grab the doorknob with a steady hand. Using my abilities on Lucien didn’t unnerve me as much as it did before. If anything, I’m growing more comfortable with them.

I’m unsure whether or not that’s a good thing.

Just as I wrench open the door, it shuts in my face. A pair of hands grabbing my upper arms forces me to spin around, and I stare up at Lucien as he slams me against

the wall. My adrenaline surges.

“What the hell are you doing?”

He grins at me. It’s unstable, maniacal. Reflected in the gleam in his eyes. “It’s my turn to ask the questions now.”

“Go ahead. I have nothing to hide.”

“We’ll see. Tell me, what would you do if I bent you over the table right now and fucked you?”

I blink up at him, desire pooling in my belly. “You wouldn’t.”

“Wouldn’t I?” Lucien quirks a brow. “What would stop me?”

His blood is like an ocean, roaring in a tempest. It beckons me, challenges me to tame it into submission. Or to send it soaring.

I grit my teeth against the pull, the temptation to bend Lucien to my will. “Don’t.”

He slides his hands from my arms up to encircle my neck, resting his thumbs directly over my windpipe. His touch sends electric currents of arousal through me, lighting me up from the inside. I bite back a groan.

“Don’t what? I’ve chased you long enough, little bird. Either you need to fly away, or I’m going to clip your wings.”

CHAPTER18

ADELAIDE

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Lucien yanks me from the door, using his hold on my throat, and shoves me backwards. I trip while trying to get my feet underneath me, but my attempt to walk is cut short. In my peripheral vision, I watch the chess pieces fall to the rug, their landing muffled by the plush material.

Then I'm the one who's being pushed down.

The cool temperature of the marble tabletop seeps into my cheek as the hatter presses my head against the surface, guiding me with a fisted hand at the nape of my neck. He leans over my back, pinning me there. I lie still as my shock registers.

And my arousal blooms.

He kicks my foot to spread my legs. At the feel of his hand trailing my thigh underneath my skirt, I swallow past the moan gathering in my throat. My heart ricochets in my chest, and it's so loud I almost can't hear his whisper.

"I've envisioned you like this more times than I can count while fisting my cock. After today, I won't have to imagine what it'll be like to be inside you, to feel your cunt spasm as I fuck it. No more illusions, only reality."

His fingertips brush my entrance, and he laughs when they come away drenched. "Such a dirty bird."

He plunges two fingers inside me, and it rocks my whole body. I throw out my arms to grip the edges of the table as my core tightens around him. Words are beyond me.

Breathing is not far behind.

My breaths are shallow, each one a struggle as he begins to pump in and out of me, each thrust bringing about more slickness. It travels down my inner thighs like tears down a woman's cheeks.

"I could add another finger, but that won't be enough to prepare you," Lucien says.

The sudden withdrawal of his hands from me leaves me feeling drained and empty. I lift my head to seek him out, but Lucien prevents me by gripping the back of my neck and slamming me down. The warmth of his skin matches my own, both of us scorching with unsatisfied lust.

"If you move again without my permission," he says, "I'm going to bring my cane to your ass. Actually, I might anyway."

"Lucien—"

"No moving or talking. As a matter of fact, no coming either, Adelaide. Nod if you understand."

I do, ready to do anything he asks if it'll ease the need pulsing inside me. The same one that's growing with each of his commands and threats. The arousal is beyond control, my pussy weeping in earnest while thrumming with every word that comes out of his beautiful mouth.

If he's mad, then I am too.

The cold metal of his cane brushing my calf makes me jump. Lucien brings the cane into my line of sight, and I watch in amazement as the lion's head morphs into a golden sphere.

I flick my gaze to his. “What are you doing?”

“What did I say?”

The firm slap of his cane against my ass has me whimpering and my skin sizzling. I close my eyes and take deep breaths, but it's with great difficulty. My core spasms with the need to be filled and clenches against nothing, frustrating me. When I open my eyes again, it's to find Lucien leaning over me, his gaze latched onto mine.

He doesn't look away as he brings the head of his cane to my entrance. My eyes widen when he slowly spins it, coating the entire orb with my dampness.

“You're not going to put that inside...”

My question dies at the wicked expression on his face. He swats my ass, and I can't hold back my groan. I'm finally beginning to understand how pain is pleasurable. And who better to teach me?

“If you can handle this, then you can take my cock.”

Lucien presses the sphere against my entrance. I freeze as he guides it inside me, wincing at the stretching sensation. But the fullness is everything.

“Look at you,” he rasps against my neck, making me shiver. “I've never seen anything more glorious, never met anyone I wanted to fuck more.”

The metal is quick to absorb my body heat, bringing the temperature to something more soothing. He continues to spin the object inside me, and the pressure sends me into a state of euphoria. I grip the table until my fingers ache.

Lucien adjusts the angle and starts to withdraw the orb from my body. Only to

quickly shove it back, making sure it presses against the spot where my nerves are gathered.

My moan leaves me on a sigh. It tells the hatter everything I want to say but can't. He understands my unspoken message, picking up the pace until I'm meeting him with my hips, wanting it deeper.

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“Such a dirty bird,” he says. Lucien continues pleasuring me until my orgasm crests. “I knew it all along. Now, don’t move.”

He releases my neck to bring his hand underneath my skirt. With him standing off to my side, his fingers dance on my clit while his other hand grasp the cane. His cock digs into my hip, and I wiggle, rubbing him and also trying to send myself over the edge.

“Naughty girl,” he says.

His hands pause, and I bite my bottom lip to keep from protesting at the lack of movement. With the metal ball still inside me and his fingers resting on my sensitive flesh, I’m one good stroke from oblivion. Tears of frustration spring to my eyes. I squeeze them shut.

This is like chess, where Lucien is more skilled than I am. He’ll come out victorious if I don’t adopt a strategy—or overpower him.

I’m one second from setting him ablaze when he places his lips next to my ear. “If you want to come, you’d better listen. You’re going to hold still, and if you can do that, then I’ll let you come. If you can’t... well, the game is over.”

He tweaks my clit and thrusts the cane inside me so fast I can do nothing except take it. Then my nerve-endings come alive, and I bite my tongue until blood coats it. He wrecks me by stroking me inside and out until my vision blurs with tears, but all the while I remain motionless until I think I’ll combust.

“Now,” he says, rubbing me harder and the orb going deeper, faster. “Give it to me.”

My body erupts.

My scream echoes.

My mind shatters.

Lucien doesn't bring me down from the intense high. He adds to it. He shifts behind me and gathers my skirts, using another hand to grip my shoulders, his fingers bruising my skin. He rams into me, and I see stars as I'm filled to the point of breaking.

“Your body was made for sex,” he grits out, “and I'm going to indulge. Again, and again.”

Lucien withdraws out completely and then thrusts into me, making us both groan. “That's a good girl, taking all of me. I knew you could.”

His strokes are frenzied and his hold painful, but the ecstasy born from the discomfort is magnificent. The more he hurts me, the higher I climb, until there's nothing but pleasure assaulting every single part of me.

I cry out when his cock swells, and he snarls behind me.

Tears continue streaming down my face, a release all on their own. Lucien's chest, flush with my back, presses into me with each of his labored breaths. Every inhale and the pulsing of his cock are a constant reminder of how this man owns my body. There's not a part of me that isn't aware of him, nothing he hasn't invaded. The same goes for my mind.

Possibly my heart.

Loving Lucien won't be easy. It's the reason I've fought my attraction to him. Any walls I created between us have been pulverized, leaving behind a vulnerability that I'm uncomfortable with.

Now that he's had me, is he finished chasing me?

CHAPTER19

ADELAIDE

I bite my lip to keep from making a sound, not wanting Lucien to know about my inner turmoil concerning him. The hatter's ability to create illusions is probably why he's so good at seeing the truth in others. It makes me wonder if he's ever created one for me to see while hiding something he doesn't wish to share.

That brings me back to the way he spoke about his sister. My curiosity is far from satisfied, but it'll have to be. I can't deal with Lucien being angry with me right now, not when I'm feeling weak.

Lucien pulls me from my musings by sweeping his lips down the curve of my neck and along my shoulder. I shiver, and his cock twitches inside me. My lips part on a silent gasp at the fullness. I never want it to end.

"You're such a good girl," he whispers. His praise is like a caress to my psyche, and my body tingles in response to his touch. "Such a sweet, flightless bird."

"With fangs. Don't forget that important detail."

His soft laughter, a warm breath against my skin, resurrects my arousal, and my inner

walls squeeze him. “Perhaps you can bite me next time, hmm?”

I stiffen underneath him. “Next time?”

He nibbles on my shoulder, causing me to squirm. “Yes, next time. Did you think once would be enough to satiate my hunger for you?”

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“Yes,” I whisper, struggling to give voice to my fear.

“Don’t make me fuck some sense into you.”

“Is this where I’m supposed to protest?”

Lucien raises himself from laying on me to swat my hip. We both groan as the movement. “You can tell me of your complaints,” he says, “but be advised that they’ll be dismissed. I told you when we met that I wanted you, and that hasn’t changed, despite having fucked you.”

He snakes an arm underneath me to wrap it around my waist and uses his other hand to grab my throat, resting his fingers along my jaw. With a firm hold, he turns my head. “Look at me.”

I meet his gaze. Instead of it freezing me in place, there’s a brightness in the blue of his eyes that I’ve never seen before. It’s intense emotion. Or madness. Hard to discern with the man.

“There it is,” he says.

“What?”

“You have the look of a woman who’s been well and thoroughly fucked.” His gaze softens the longer he stares at me, the sharp edges to his icy gaze disappearing. “I don’t know if there’s anything more beautiful than seeing a woman satisfied.”

I yank my face from his hold. Only for him to snatch me up once again. This time with a harsh grip. “I’m sure you’ve seen plenty,” I snap.

He makes a clicking sound with his tongue in chastisement that makes me want to chop off his balls. “Is my little bird jealous?”

“Let go of me.”

“You are jealous. How delightful.”

My anger swirls in my chest, gathering strength like a tornado with every cycle. Lucien’s hiss of pain follows shortly after. And his cock hardens.

I glare at him, but it’s hard to maintain my animosity when my pussy flutters around his length. “I’m not jealous.”

“Pity. I was going to fuck it out of you.”

When I squint at him in warning, he starts to withdraw from my body. It’s slow and deliberate. He stops when the head of his cock comes up against my rim, teasing and stretching me.

The hand on my waist travels to my belly, and he pushes down, thrusting back into me at the same time. “I can feel myself inside you.”

I slam my palms on the table to keep myself upright as he rams into me again and again. My orgasm builds, and I will the blood in my body to retreat, but even my magic is no match for the needs of my body. No deterrent for my desires.

“Look at you,” he rasps, still gripping my face. “I’ve never seen anything so beautiful.” His cock swells, and it catapults me into rapture. I come, and he watches

me all the while, finding release inside me. “That’s it. See how your eyes shine? How your mouth lies open for my kiss?”

He places his thumb on my bottom lip, sliding it onto my tongue. I wrap my lips around him and suck. His moan has tension coiling inside me, enhancing my release.

I shudder in his arms, and my eyelids lower to block out everything except this man, the sensations he’s creating. He continues to press on my belly, driving his cock and hitting that spot every time, until I hang limply in his embrace and the waves of ecstasy carry me away.

Eyes closed, my head falls back against his shoulder, and he releases me to bring his fingers to my face, tracing the curves of my cheek and jaw. I don’t know how long we stay that way, him caressing me while I slowly come back to reality, but when he pulls out of me, it causes my legs to buckle.

Lucien is quick to sweep me into his arms, saving me from face-planting. His soft laughter tickles my ear. “I think I fucked more than jealousy out of you. I might’ve ruined your ability to walk.”

A smile has my lips spreading.

“There it is.” The awe and reverence in his voice have my eyelids fluttering open. He stares down at me with an expression that takes my breath away. “That’s what I’ve been waiting for. The blissful smile, born from satisfaction that I’ve given.”

Lucien watches me for a few more seconds before striding from the room, holding me close. Not having the energy to stand, let alone care, I offer no protest. He carries me to the guest room and sets me on the bed.

I watch him as he strips my clothes from me, leaving me in my chemise, his gaze

never straying from me the entire time.

“I’m not jealous,” I say quietly. “I’d be an idiot to think you haven’t enjoyed sexual experiences with other women.”

“So what prompted the animosity?” He removes his hat and sets it on the nightstand. How he managed to keep it on while fucking me, I’ll never know. “You can’t deny you were upset with me.”

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I sigh. “No, I don’t deny it. I’m more upset with myself than you. It’s hypocritical that I don’t like you speaking about other women, knowing I was with Nox last night. Yet, here I am. Besides, I wasn’t sure if you were married or not, which only added to my irritation.”

“I’m not married. Never have been and never will be. You needn’t worry.”

He removes his clothes, and my gaze widens. “Again? Already? Holy shit, Lucien, let a woman catch her breath.”

He laughs and pulls back the comforter to join me in the bed. “Later. For now, we talk about this dilemma of yours.”

“Don’t be dramatic.”

“I am an illusionist, a showman. It’s in my blood to be dramatic.”

He reaches for me, and I go willingly. His arms wrap securely around me, giving me a sense of tranquility that I wish to have for the rest of my life. What is it about this man that both frightens and exhilarates me at the same time while providing serenity that shouldn’t be possible?

His crazy is rubbing off on me.

“I don’t care who you sleep with,” he says. When I frown, he waggles his finger in my face. I try to bite him, and he smiles. “Listen, little bird. As long as you’re with me, mind, body, and soul, when we’re together, then I don’t care who you have sex

with. The day you think about someone else when I'm fucking you is the day I'm done."

My brow furrows as I roll this over in my mind. "I don't understand that because I want you all to myself."

He scoffs. "As you should."

"I'm serious, Lucien. I can't handle the idea of you being with another woman. Although..." When he raises a brow in question, my face flushes with heat at my thoughts. "I do think about you being with another man...and me."

"Seriously?"

"Never mind."

I shake my head as if it'll get rid of the images parading through there. The ones of me with him and Baxter. Of me with him and Nox. Or Darius. Fuck, with me, Lucien, and practically anyone.

He raises the hand on my hip and flicks his wrist. Suddenly, Baxter stands at the door with his usual surly expression. It changes to something sensual, ravenous. My pulse begins to race.

"That's not real," I whisper, my throat dry.

"No, but your response is."

I swallow to wet my tongue. "How did you know?"

"You tend to eye-fuck his cock. A lot." At my gasp of outrage, Lucien chuckles. He

waves away the vision of Baxter, and disappointment floods me. “Like I said, your reaction to seeing him here with us is telling.”

“I know.” I drop my gaze, embarrassment still lingering in the warmth of my cheeks. “But I wish I didn’t think about him like that. Baxter hates me, so there’s no chance.”

Lucien places his index finger under my chin and lifts it until I’m staring into his kohl-rimmed eyes. “I wouldn’t say there isn’t a chance at all. It’s just a very small one.”

“Do you know what I did to make him hate me?”

“No, but even if I knew why, I wouldn’t tell you. That’s a question he needs to answer.”

I purse my lips. “Don’t get all logical on me now. The day you do, I’m done.”

His brow rises at me throwing his words in his face. “Oh, really?”

“Yes.” My tone is light, but it quickly darkens to something serious. “Well, that and being with another woman.”

Lucien brushes my lips with his in a chaste kiss. There’s a layer of sensuality present, but it feels more affectionate than anything.

“It’s nap time because I’m tired,” he says, pushing my head onto his chest. “Next time we do this, you’re going on top so you can do all the work.”

There are those words I long to hear: next time. They imply a future together, and right now, I’m desperate to have some stability in my life.

Even if it's only for a little while.

CHAPTER20

ADELAIDE

Lucien not only invades my waking thoughts, but my dreams as well.

He's not alone. Darius and Nox are there, making my fantasies epic. It's the only place where Baxter and I get along, since he's there too.

Well, there and my one memory of us.

The need to know the mystery surrounding him gnaws at me, bringing me out of sleep. Lucien continues to slumber beside me and I take the opportunity to simply look at him. There's no doubt in my mind that I'm falling for him.

With a sigh, I extricate myself from his hold and slide from the bed. My steps are light as I make my way to the bathroom and throw on a robe I found in the armoire earlier.

"Where are you flying off to, little bird?"

With my hand on my chest and my heart racing, I spin to find Lucien reclining on the bed. "You scared me."

He nods, and a lock of his midnight hair falls over his brow. His devil-may-care look

is making it hard to leave, but I can't let Baxter torture me any longer. One way or another, I'll get the answers I'm seeking.

Even if they crush me.

"Tell me, or I'm taking my cane to your ass."

"But—"

Lucien sits up the tiniest bit, and I go still. "Don't threaten me with a good time," he says. "Where are you going?"

"I wanted to visit the greenhouse... and then talk to Baxter."

"I knew this was coming. Very well, but don't provoke the man, not unless you intend to bleed him out. Also, keep in mind that I'm not above killing him."

My entire body softens at Lucien's protective nature. "I know. Thank you."

On an impulse, I race over to him and throw my arms around his neck. He laughs until I silence him with a kiss. I pull away faster than I'd like. If I don't, I'll be on my back with Lucien inside me.

"What was that for?" he asks.

"Can't I show you affection?"

He shrugs. "Of course. But my cock wants some as well."

I shake my head and blow him a kiss. Forgoing footwear, I leave the bedroom. Once outside, I revel in my decision to remain barefoot when my toes sink into the grass.

The sunshine sheds light on my soul, and I imagine it warming my insides, keeping the gloom away.

The beautiful harmonies within the greenhouse add to my gaiety.

With deliberate slowness, I open the door and step inside. My senses are assaulted all at once. The song's notes grace my ears. The beauty of the blossoms stimulates my vision. And the scent of the flowers waft under my nose. I close my eyes and simply let the atmosphere of the place envelop me.

At the sound of a deep voice joining the sopranos and altos, I look around. There's no one. Come to think of it, I'm not certain where the feminine voices are originating from in the first place.

I follow the path down the aisle, using my hearing to draw me closer to whoever's singing. After turning around the corner, I stumble to a halt, right before retreating into the leaves of a nearby plant.

Singing flowers. Of all varieties. Roses, violets, daisies...

Sitting in the midst of them is Baxter.

This is why he smelled like roses earlier. He was here.

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Baxter hums periodically, but when he sings, it's pure magic. As though he's the blood-bender, the sound of his voice pulls me to him with an unseen force. I stiffen at the impulse and dig in my heels. The second Baxter knows I'm there, he'll stop, and I'll miss out on something extraordinary.

I lose track of time while I watch him. He's mesmerizing, every note perfection. His mouth forms each word with articulation that I can feel in my soul. This man has an astuteness to him that's different from the rest. Something I doubt that he's aware of.

The song comes to an end. I stand there, hesitating on whether or not to make my presence known. Baxter won't appreciate me spying on him, and he certainly won't be happy that I've interrupted his privacy. With those thoughts in mind, I spin on my heel, ready to keep his secret to myself. I can get my answers later today.

"Did you enjoy yourself, princess?"

I squeeze my eyes shut and steel myself to face him. And his ire. After taking a deep breath, I turn around and walk to where he sits.

"Good morning. This place is lovely."

"It used to be serene as well." Baxter gives me a pointed look, and I force myself to hold his stare. When I don't cower, he stands and reaches a hand to stroke the petal of a rose. "It will be again."

"You're always welcome here, Baxter."

The feminine voice has my eyes widening. “The flowers speak too?” I ask, staring at the red rose. Unlike the ones in my fractured memories, this bloom isn’t painted.

Baxter looks at me with amusement dancing in his green eyes, the hue enhanced by the foliage surrounding him. “Did you think they could only sing but not talk? Silly, princess.”

I shrug.

“Who is she, Baxter?” This from the red rose again. “A guest? A friend? Or a lover?”

His gaze bores into mine at the inquiry. I concentrate on his blood to assess him. It’s flowing steadily, straight to his cock. My body tingles in response to his growing arousal.

“She is none of those things to me,” he says.

I nearly wince at the clipped answer. “I beg to differ.” His brows snap together, and I wave a hand, maintaining a nonchalance I don’t completely feel. “I’m an unwanted guest, but a guest nonetheless.”

His mouth tilts up at the corner in a smirk. “I stand corrected.”

“Is she a weed?” asks a daisy.

“Not exactly.” Baxter shakes his head and chuckles. “You don’t need to worry. She won’t hurt you.”

“But I am a threat of some kind,” I say. “Isn’t that right?”

The man’s lips thin, all amusement from a moment ago vanishing. “What are you

getting at?”

“When it comes to the past, I’m a reminder of what pains you. Isn’t that right?”

I crane my neck to hold his gaze as he towers over me. “Be careful, princess.”

“Tell me what happened.”

“Get out.”

I step closer. My breasts graze his torso, and Baxter’s nostrils flare. His blood roars in my ears, tempting me to tame it.

“I’ll leave when you tell me what I’ve done to you,” I say.

“Why do you care?”

“Because I do.” I take his hand in mine, surprised that he doesn’t pull away. “I felt how much you meant to me in my memory, yet now you can’t stand the sight of me. Please tell me why.”

He remains silent until the weight of it presses down on me. Even the flowers close their petals and hide. The greenhouse, already humid and warm, becomes stifling. What was heaven on earth a moment ago is now hell.

“What will you do, once you know?” Baxter asks, his voice barely above a whisper. “What could you possibly hope to gain?”

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“Insight. And if I’m fortunate, forgiveness.”

He laughs, but it holds no joy. It’s harsh, gutting me where I stand. “That was not what I expected.”

“I don’t want to be a villain in your story. Tell me what I did, so I can make it right. Please.”

Baxter pulls away and turns, giving me his back. The stiff set of his shoulders and his rigid stance make me want to go to him, but I know if I do, I’ll never hear what he’s about to say. This is more than assuaging my curiosity now.

It’s about redemption.

“To this day, I don’t know what you said to the Queen, but she never tried to bed me. However, she did destroy me.” Baxter faces and the sorrow etched into his features makes tears sting my eyes. “She had my wife killed, and it’s because of you.”

“No.” I shake my head as though that’ll make everything disappear. “I wouldn’t.”

“You didn’t just wreck me that day. And when Lucien learns that you played a part in his sister’s death...” Baxter scoffs. “He will despise you more than I.”

“What did I say?” I walk up to Baxter and grab the material of his shirt, gazing up at him in desperation. And fear. “Why did I do it?”

“I wasn’t there when you spoke to the queen, but whatever you said caused her to

remove me from my position as Captain of the Guard and be exiled from Court, and it led to the execution of my wife.”

I stumble back, my hand covering my mouth. “No.”

The flowers quiver before a melancholy chorus of sound hums in the background. Slowly, they unfurl, revealing their stricken faces to me. Sympathy rolls off of them in waves. I wish it was enough to drown me.

Baxter nods at me. “Enjoy him while you can, princess.”

CHAPTER 21

ADELAIDE

My guilt is like a thousand chains. It burdens my steps, slowly sapping my energy until I want to lie down in a pool of misery. And forget everything.

If only Nox could make this memory disappear.

“What is wrong, little bird?” Lucien asks the next morning. “First you denied me entry to your bed last night, which has never happened to me before. It was quite a shock, I assure you. Second, you’re not focused at all today.”

I summon a smile. It wobbles a bit. “I’m just tired. It takes a lot of effort and concentration for me to use my magic.”

His ebony brows snap together. “What have I told you about lying?” He raps the floor with his cane, the sound making me jump. “Using your magic isn’t the reason for your somber demeanor. I know what you look like when fatigued because I saw your face after I fucked you. That isn’t the case right now.”

“Lucien...”

“Tell me the truth, or try harder with your ability.”

I take a preparatory breath and straighten my shoulders. “Okay, let’s try again.”

“Whenever you’re ready.”

With my eyes closed, I direct my attention toward Lucien’s pulse. It beats quickly, gaining speed due to his anger. The rushing of his blood fills my ears, and I follow it through his veins, the ebb and flow of it soothing. His life force beckons with a surge as though teasing me, and I latch on.

The hatter groans softly. The sensual noise breaks through my concentration, and I open my eyes to find him gripping the edges of a wine barrel. His knuckles are pale, his jaw clenched.

“More,” he says. “Set me ablaze.”

I visualize a trail of fire and drape it over Lucien’s figure. His hips jut forward, gyrating in time with the pounding of his heart. The stiffness of his cock is revealed to me by the blood gathered there.

How I wish to touch him.

Once my memory of my past wrongs comes to light, I’m going to confess everything to Lucien. The decision has been weighing heavily on my mind since Baxter recounted my transgression to me the day before, and I vowed to be honest with the hatter. It’s not right to keep things from him.

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Even if those things take Lucien away from me.

“The burn is dwindling,” he says. His movements stop and he exhales. “What’s wrong now?”

I shrug. “This isn’t easy for me. I didn’t know about my magic until a couple days ago. It’s not feasible that I’d gain the skills necessary to effectively control it right away. These things take time.”

“It’s time you don’t have.”

“That’s not helpful.”

He sets his cane on the barrel and walks over to me, his steps full of intent. The urge to retreat is overwhelming. Lucien’s gaze zeroes in on my foot when I lift it, freezing me in place. I straighten my leg and stay rooted to the floor, but the damage has been done.

“Trying to fly away?” he asks, his voice laced with dark humor.

“Maybe.”

His wicked smile makes each beat of my heart that much more painful. “Where are you going?” he asks.

“Nowhere. Lucien...” I reach out and grasp the lapel of his coat, curling my fingers around the material to anchor myself. “There’s something you need to know.”

He eyes me, caution making his gaze wintry. “What?”

“Yes, princess, what is it?”

Lucien and I both turn to find Baxter striding into the cellar. He stops several feet away but close enough for me to see the worry swimming in his eyes. It belies his calm outward appearance.

I swallow past the lump in my throat and let my hand fall away from the hatter. “He needs to know because I can’t keep it from him any longer.”

Baxter’s mouth pulls to the side. “You’d tell him of your guilt?”

“What else can I do?”

“That is not what I expected from you,” he says quietly. “I thought you would’ve denied it and spun the story to fit your narrative. Better yet, not tell him to begin with.”

I lift my chin. “There are things about myself that I’m not proud of, but I won’t lie to people I care about.”

Lucien slams his cane, and the lionhead lets out a rumble. “Excuse the fuck out of me, but I’d like to know what is going on. Little bird?”

My breathing goes shallow. “I’m the reason y—”

Baxter straightens and makes a slicing motion with his hand. “Wait.” He walks over to me and grabs my upper arms, staring down at me with such intensity that I rear back. “Now is not the time,” he says. “You have to complete your training and then kill the queen. If you tell all of your secrets now, it’ll derail everything.”

“Lying, even by omission.” I squint at him. “You and my mother have that in common.”

Baxter’s grip tightens on my arms. His blood is like a faucet, jetting from his veins and into his heart, making it pump fiercely. I flick my gaze to his neck and bite my lip at the riveting sight.

“Don’t ever compare me to the murdering witch,” he says. “So you remember, is that it?”

“No.”

“Then how do you know that I told you the truth?”

I place my hand on his chest, directly over his thrashing heart. “Because of how much you hate me and the pain I see in your eyes. It’s too raw, too real to be anything but true.”

Baxter sucks in a breath. When he leans into my palm, I press my fingertips against his shirt in a show of understanding and comfort. He opens his mouth to say something, but Lucien walks up to us, frustration creasing his forehead.

“If the two of you don’t tell me what you’re talking about, I just might get angry.” The latter cocks his head, looking expectantly at his neighbor. “We’ve been friends for many years, Baxter. Surely you can trust that I’ll listen without judgment.”

“Listen, yes. But without reacting violently?” He shakes his head. “I don’t want you to do anything you’d regret later.”

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I cup Baxter's cheek, and his blood immediately rushes to greet me, making him flush with warmth. "Make me remember," I say. "Do it now, before I lose my courage."

Lucien's gaze widens. "No, wait."

Baxter places his hands on either side of my head. Pressure ascends on me like I've been buried alive. I part my lips to scream just as Lucien wraps an arm around my waist.

"Don't move her," Baxter snaps. "I'm already in her mind. Hold the princess."

My eyes roll back in my head as I tumble into darkness once more.

My mother watches me from the settee by the window, like the beautiful, deadly creature she is.

Her legs are tucked underneath her, similar to how a snake coils its body, and her dress glitters like scales. The only thing missing are fangs. Although, venomous words and her propensity to kill people are certainly present.

At her nod, I enter the room fully and shut the door behind me. A curtsy follows.

"Good evening, my queen."

"Come here, Alice."

I straighten and walk over to where she sits in the parlor, my pulse hammering within my chest like a drum heralding my fear. Once I'm a foot away, I stop and clasp my hands in front, a show of gentle demeanor.

And to hide the trembling of my fingers.

She cocks her head, her gaze sharp. "What do you think of my Captain of the Guard?"

My lack of expression is due to the nature of my childhood. It trained me to protect myself from my mother's inquisitions and antics. But only after I was taught a harsh lesson because of my failings.

"He's a soldier," I say, keeping my voice even. "What do you think of him?"

"I want to fuck him."

I give her a shrug while ignoring the weeping of my soul. Even though I'd warned myself it was only a matter of time before my mother dug her claws into Baxter, I foolishly hoped he'd escape her clutches. The fates might've blessed him with looks, but they're more of a curse than anything else.

"Go ahead." I wave a hand and sigh as though bored. "Your sexual escapades are none of my affairs."

"No, but yours are definitely of importance to me."

I scrunch my face in confusion. "But I haven't slept with your captain, so I don't understand why we're talking about him in the first place."

"That's theprecisereason we're discussing him. You haven't taken him to your bed.

Why not?"

"I'm sure I don't need to tell you that I've been busy securing the nobles' support in our rally against the White King and Queen. That leaves me little time to do much else."

The queen taps her ruby lips. "Even so, I would think you'd want him. A strapping young man like him is nice to have around."

"Your majesty, please tell me what this is about. You've never been one to ask for my opinion on a bedmate before pursuing them, so why are we discussing Baxter? If you want him, take him."

"Baxter?" She smiles at me and my heart plummets to the depths of my stomach. "I didn't realize you were on a first name basis."

I hold her gaze in hopes it'll hide how unsettled I am. "I make it my business to know who everyone is. Especially when it concerns your safety. I only met the man once in the gardens. He warned me to return inside, claiming it wasn't a good idea for me to be alone outdoors."

She scoffs and sets her slippers on the marbled tile. As soon as she's standing, we're at eye level. Although my mother hasn't touched my skin, I swear she can still see straight into the center of my heart.

It's where my yearning for Baxter lives.

Nox is the only other man I've ever felt a pull towards, but somehow, I've managed to keep the queen from finding out about him. I have to do the same with the captain. However, given the fact that she brought me here to converse about him, my chances of success are null and void.

“Is that so?” She holds out her hand. It’s an unspoken command, but it strikes me as painfully as a slap to the face. “Then let me see.”

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Having no other choice, I rest my fingers on her palm. The warmth there grows, intensifying to the point it burns. It takes all of my self-control to remain still. Not only to avoid suspicion, but I don't want to give her the satisfaction of knowing she's hurting me.

I've cried and pleaded more times than I wish to think about.

My mother's power doesn't give her the ability to read minds. Which is the only reason I've been able to avoid her detecting a few of my secrets: by focusing on something entirely.

I do that now.

"Hmm." She purses her lips. "That's strange."

My silence is the only armor I carry.

Yet she pierces it with one blow.

"You don't lust after the captain," she says, her arched brows slanting in confusion. "There's nothing but envy surrounding him... and his wife."

The queen drops my hand, but it's too early to breathe a sigh of relief. That's equivalent to exhaling before the ax swings.

I nod slowly. "They care for each other. Isn't it normal to want love and devotion?"

“My naive and foolish daughter. How much you have to learn. It is better for men to obey you than love you. Emotions are fickle things, easily manipulated. But obedience?” She licks her lips. “That is worth something.”

“You’re right. I’m an idiot to want affection. Thank you for sharing your wisdom with me.” I drop into a curtsy and bow my head, silently praying that she’ll let me leave unscathed.

And Baxter will remain safe.

“Rise.”

I stand. The moment my gaze meets hers, my knees tremble, hidden by my voluminous skirts. Within her hazel eyes is a gleam that only means one thing: pain is forthcoming.

“I want you to bring the captain to me,” she says.

A piece of my heart falls and crumbles to dust.

“Very well. Will that be all, your majesty?”

She taps her chin before waving a hand. “For now. You may take your leave.”

I dip my head in acknowledgment and curtsy once more. Although I want to break into an unladylike run and never return, my steps are measured and without haste. My trek to the door feels as though an eternity has passed once I reach for the handle. Freedom will not greet me on the other side, but at least I can be alone.

With my agonizing thoughts.

“One more thing, Alice.”

I turn to look at my mother, the woman who gave me life, the woman who will most likely kill me. The irony is not lost on me.

“Yes?”

“Don’t forget to bring his wife as well.”

CHAPTER 22

ADELAIDE

When I come out of the memory, I’m weeping.

Baxter stares down at me, his appearance haggard as though he’s aged rapidly. Lucien has me in his arms, my back to his front, and turns me to face him. My tears flow all the more at this, but my sobs quiet with him near.

The latter is the last person who should want to ease my suffering, but I don’t have the strength to tell him why just yet. The memory surrounding his sister’s death hasn’t been recalled, so I’d have nothing to reveal that he doesn’t already know.

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Except for my complicity in the events leading up to it.

Like Baxter, he's sure to despise me once he knows.

"That's enough," Lucien says to the other man. "She's spent, and this emotional outpouring is only going to incapacitate her further. But I will say this: whatever you're holding over Adelaide isn't enough to change my opinion about her."

"It can wait until the queen is removed from the throne." Baxter massages his forehead and exhales. "I let my need for revenge cloud my judgment."

"I suspect there's more to it, but that'll be dealt with later on."

Lucien carries me from the wine cellar. and I cling to him, knowing it'll be one of the last times I get to experience this. Only a sliver of surprise remains when I think on Baxter's sudden change of heart. I was convinced he wanted the hatter to hate me, but without taking the responsibility of telling why.

Instead, he shut me down.

If I wasn't so drained from him invading my mind and reliving the dreaded memory, I'd be tempted to march back there and confront him on the matter. However, Lucien's presence brings me out of my musings and into his embrace. I turn my face toward the soft material of his waistcoat, snuggling against him.

For as long as he'll allow it.

A yawn sneaks up on me, and I cover my mouth. “Are you taking me upstairs for a nap?”

“No. I’m taking you upstairs for a fuck, then a nap.” He tightens his hold on me with every word spoken. “I don’t know what the hell Baxter was thinking when he dove into your psyche like that. Although I don’t possess his abilities, it can’t be good for you to have so many shields removed at the same time.”

“I asked him to. Please, don’t blame Baxter.”

Lucien stops abruptly and drops his chin to stare at me. “You’re defending him? After he tortured you?”

“Whether they’re good or evil, those memories are mine. Within them is the truth of who I am, and I need to know. Maybe it’d be best if we didn’t...”

“If we didn’t, what?” His eyes narrow to pinpricks, but I can still see the anger blazing in their depths. “Answer me, little bird.”

I bite my lip, and his heartbeat accelerates. Is it due to anticipation or desire? “We both know the person locked in my head has done some dastardly things, things I’m sure I’ll regret and wish I could change. But the fact is that I can’t. She and I are the same person, and her wrongdoings will fall on me. Don’t you see?”

He remains quiet, and tiny remnants of his thoughts flicker across his features. A muscle in his jaw ticks. The lines around his mouth deepen. But the biggest tell is the way his pulse begins to hammer between his ribs.

I restrain myself from comforting him by fisting my hand and pressing it to my chest. Lucien doesn’t need me to sway him one way or the other. Even so, I want to prepare him for my betrayal as best I can, prior to him learning about it. Not that I think it’ll

save our relationship, but I hope it'll prevent him from trying to kill me.

Because if he does, I won't hesitate to use my magic to defend myself.

Unless he can create a powerful illusion, he'll die.

"What I see," he says, his words careful and measured, "is that your lack of memories created such a significant change in you that even Baxter doesn't hate you as much as he thinks. There was a time he refused to speak your name or your mother's. And that rule applied to anyone who spent time around him. But now? The man struggles to keep your name from his mouth. And his hands off of you."

"He doesn't want to want me," I whisper, immediately smashing the hope building in my heart. "Is that it?"

"I'd bet my treasured hat collection on it."

Despite everything, the image of Lucien surrounded by various hats brings a smile to my face. I cup his cheek with a sigh. "Of course you have a collection. You millinophile."

He makes a chastising noise by clicking his tongue. "You should know better than to insult me."

"It's not. It's someone who has an excessive love of hat—"

"Pussy. You're correct. It's not an insult."

Laughter bubbles in my throat and spills from me, filling the room. Lucien winks, and my smile deepens. As does my affection for him.

“That’s better,” he says, brushing my cheek with his fingertips. “I hate to see you cry, little bird. Unless it’s because of my cock. That is perfectly acceptable. Mandatory, even.”

I shake my head at him. “You’re incorrigible.”

“You’re beautiful.”

A knock on the front door shatters the tender moment between us. Lucien’s expression turns serious, and he sets me on my feet, his hands lingering around my waist.

“Go into the hallway. I don’t want anyone to see you when I open the door.”

I nod and pass Baxter as he enters the foyer. “I’ll answer the door,” he says to Lucien. “People can’t seem to remember that it’s my fucking house.”

Baxter waits until I’m gone to reach for the handle. I conceal myself behind a large potted plant and peer through its leaves. When the visitor is revealed, I slap a hand to my mouth to stifle my gasp.

“Hello there, brother.”

Darius stands there in his livery as the Queen’s Messenger. I run my gaze over every inch of him as though starving. His white hair is secured at the nape of his neck, giving me an unobstructed view of his face. The uniform is neat and clean, pressed and without a wrinkle. His pants are a crisp black and his vest is a combination of white and red with the emblem of a heart on his left shoulder. Shining boots and white gloves complete his refined look.

He’s just as handsome as I remember. If not more so.

The pain from missing him assaults me all at once. I hug my middle to fortify myself

and to keep from running to him. Although, I do lean forward with the anticipation of hearing his voice.

“Good day, Baxter,” Darius says. He dips his head in acknowledgment of his brother and then the hatter. “Lucien. I have brought you a letter from Her Majesty that you are to read and obey with all due haste.”

Darius withdraws an ivory-colored envelope from his pocket. There’s a heart-shaped wax seal on the back, along with a black ribbon. He hands it to his brother while his eyes flicker from left to right.

Is he searching for me?

I quickly dismiss the thought. Our last interaction might’ve been intimate, but it was also very brief. He said things that keep me awake at night and make my chest ache with longing for him. However, I can’t imagine him doing the same because of me.

Baxter accepts the correspondence without a word and cracks open the wax seal. He removes the letter inside and reads it quickly, his eyes scanning the parchment while his lips thin. To someone who doesn’t know him, that tiny frown would pass unnoticed, but to me it’s a signal something is wrong.

Very wrong.

“When do we leave?” he asks Darius.

“Now.”

“We?” Lucien parrots with a raised brow. “I didn’t receive a missive.”

Baxter tilts his head. “Here. Read it.”

Unlike his friend, the latter doesn't hold back his response to whatever was written. "Well, I'll be a donkey's dong."

"Not the way I would've phrased it," Baxter says, "but my sentiments exactly."

"Is she still here?" Darius briefly flicks his gaze to the stairs. "Does she remember everything?"

His brother crosses his arms. "Ask her yourself. Princess," Baxter calls out.

With my heart in my throat, I leave the hallway and enter the foyer. The silver of Darius's gaze falls on me. My steps slow at the brilliance of its metallic shade, brightening with emotion the closer I get.

"You look well, your highness," he says. His voice is formal like his attire, but the way he watches me speaks of a familiarity that goes beyond friends, as though I'm his lover.

I nod, my gaze darting to the group of soldiers behind him, also wearing the queen's heart emblem.

A man with an eye-patch separates himself from the rest and walks up to Darius. There's a minuscule tightening of his shoulders, but it's enough to put me on edge. More than I am already.

"We need to leave now, messenger," the stranger says. "You've identified the princess. There's nothing left to be said."

Lucien removes his hat to place it against his chest with a bow. "Felix, Captain of the Guard. How nice it is to see you once again."

The sarcasm dripping from the hatter is enough to make me wince.

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“One day, the queen is going to give me permission to kill you,” Felix says to Lucien. “You’d best behave while at Court and not give her a reason to.”

The hatter slaps his hat back on his head with a grin. “I couldn’t be appropriate if my life depended on it.”

“Once you’re back in the palace, you’ll have to be. Or your death will be expedient.”

Lucien’s smile widens. “Challenge accepted.”

CHAPTER23

ADELAIDE

The Captain of the Guard gives us little time to pack our things.

Within minutes the three of us are being led to the carriage waiting for us outside. The vehicle is hitched to four large dodo birds that are magnificent, proud and muscular, their harnesses made of glittering gold. The birds are gigantic with bodies covered in glossy black feathers. They have huge wings, tiny heads, and long beaks.

The creatures snort and squawk the closer we get, as though irritated with our presence or just eager to run. Darius opens the door, snagging my attention. He turns to assist me and holds out his gloved hand. Even though our skin won’t meet, I’m still hesitant to touch him. His blood hasn’t stopped rushing through his veins since he first saw me, and now his heart beats faster than before at our nearness.

I place my fingers in his, and they curl around mine. Are they shaking? Feelings of security flow over me, bringing my awareness of him to a higher level. His eyes never leave mine as I step into the vehicle.

Darius climbs in after I've taken my seat, sitting next to me. Now my hands are the ones trembling. My nervousness and excitement fuse together into a ball of emotion that sets me on edge.

When Lucien gets inside, he frowns. "I wanted to be next to her."

"Shut up and sit down," Baxter grumbles from the doorway. "This is going to be a long ride, and I don't want to hear you whining before we've even left."

"Baxter's cock is always in a knot. It makes sense why he's in a foul mood."

Both men find their seats, Lucien across from me and Baxter from his brother. Silence descends on the carriage despite the birds' talons digging into the earth to propel us forward. The vehicle lurches, and Darius throws out his arm to keep me from falling.

"Careful," he says.

His forearm grazes my breasts every time I inhale, and my nipples harden in response. I paste a smile on my face to hide my irritation with my body. "Thank you."

He nods. "Draw the shutters so we can speak freely."

The light dims, shrouding us in near darkness. It's as though the space around me has shrunk, and I lace my fingers to avoid fidgeting. Lucien leans on the tip of his cane, watching Darius the way a cat does a mouse before bludgeoning it to death.

Baxter folds his arms and reclines in his seat, his facial expression void of any tension. I concentrate on his pulse. It speaks of his uncertainty. What is he nervous about?

“What progress has been made in my time away?” Darius asks.

His brother scoffs. “Fuck all. You didn’t give us more than a few days at most. I can’t rush the return of her memories, not without risking her mind. You know that.”

“I had hoped...” Darius turns to me. “What can you tell me?”

Despite the dim lighting making me feel pressed upon, I’m grateful it conceals my features. Surely, they’d all see just how unsettled I am.

“I remember a few of my past lovers, various times the queen tortured me when I didn’t do what she commanded, and my friendship with Baxter. As well as my involvement with his wife’s death.”

Darius frowns. “Your involvement?”

I nod and drop my gaze, unable to look at Lucien or Baxter. My decision to reveal everything locked into place as soon as the soldiers arrived. There’s no more time to prepare Lucien or for me to master my magic.

So there’s no reason to keep this secret.

The faster Lucien hates me, the faster I can beg for his forgiveness. If he doesn’t try to kill me. That’s the reason I’m telling him with Baxter and Darius present. Hopefully, they’ll interfere if he gets violent.

Or when.

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“I was summoned by the queen to talk about her interest in Baxter,” I say, my voice low. I may not want the guards to overhear, but it’s more than that. I can barely form the words, knowing the destruction they’ll bring. “That’s also when she questioned me as to why I hadn’t slept with him. It piqued her interest. I did my best to divert it, but I’m not immune to her magic.”

I pause to swallow the lump of emotion gathering in my throat. “Shereadme, saw my envy of his wife, Lucien’s sister.”

Closing my eyes, I wait for the storm of rage to manifest. When it doesn’t immediately hit me, I sneak a look at Lucien, finding him stone-faced. This unexpected reaction frightens me more than if he’d attacked me.

Darius covers my hands with his. “You can’t blame yourself for the evil deeds your mother committed.”

“I disagree, brother. Very much so.” Baxter sits up and points a finger in my direction. “She could’ve done something. At least warn us.”

“I did!” My rebuttal echoes in the small space, the sound ricocheting and hitting me again and again. I wince and lower my voice. “I did. I told Matilda, um Tilly, to run as soon as I went to inform her of my mother’s summons for the two of you. But your wife waved it away with a smile and said that she knew it was only a matter of time before the queen took her husband to bed.”

I cover my face, not able to look at anyone for what I’m about to say. “Tilly said she was surprised I hadn’t slept with Baxter already. When I told her that it was because I

respected their marriage, your wife hugged me. It brought me to tears and I told her to run. I was desperate to save the two of you, but she just wouldn't listen. Neither of us thought she was about to be murdered."

Tears stream down my cheeks in a steady flow, the droplets sprinkling across my chest and soaking into my dress. I don't bother to wipe them away since more will follow. At least they blur my vision enough that I can't make out the expressions of doubt and disgust that are being directed at me.

The atmosphere in the carriage is like a powder keg with a lit fuse, and we're all waiting for the second it explodes.

At this point, I'm not sure who will detonate first: Baxter or Lucien.

They both loved Tilly.

"You're lying," Baxter says. "You have to be."

Darius squeezes my hand in a show of support. "She's not."

"How the fuck would you know?" His brother narrows his gaze, but I'm still able to make out the outrage flashing through the green hue. "Besides, you've been infatuated with the princess all these years. I wouldn't believe you no matter what you said to defend her."

"This is true," Darius says. "But I know something you do not, and that's come from years of watching and studying her. I can't tell you how many times I witnessed her kindness toward a servant, despite the queen forbidding it. There have been instances in which Adelaide has taken punishment for something she didn't deserve on behalf of someone else. If I could show you the selflessness of her past actions, it'd humble you. I know it has me."

Baxter scoffs. “You’re delusional.”

“That is certainly possible, considering the madness descending on Wonderland. However, when it comes to the princess, I’m willing to defend her at all costs. Even to you, brother.”

* * *

The rest of the journey to the palace is suffocating.

And Lucien has yet to speak.

Meanwhile, my mind throbs with Baxter’s accusations and Darius’s act of defending me. The memory of my conversation with Matilda was brief, but it was enough to break me. Even though I warned her to escape, I still feel responsible for her demise. Fortunately, I don’t remember her death.

Unfortunately, I suspect it hasn’t revealed itself to me yet.

I shudder to even think about it. Instead, I wallow in my misery. Lucien is so cold he might as well be made from ice. In contrast, Baxter fumes from where he sits, the fire from his anger heating up the inside of the carriage. Darius’s presence is the only thing that keeps me from throwing myself out the window in hopes the soldiers will trample me.

Although the idea has merit.

He never lets go of my hand, even when he checks the time. Then there are the glances he sends my way. Each one of them is full of understanding and affection that have my tears continuing long after the discussion ends.

After what feels like forever, we arrive at the palace.

My heart leaps into my throat upon seeing the massive structure. I gnaw on my bottom lip as I peer out the window, worry overtaking me at the thought of more memories returning now that I'm here where it all took place.

The palace grounds are like a giant chessboard, its black and white checkered squares perfect geometry. They're similar to the fields I saw right before Darius had me lower the curtain in the carriage. The palace is a tower of ivory and alabaster. Its towers are topped with great domes and spires, and the steps and columns are made of smooth marble. The outside is adorned with flowers and heart-shaped decorations, mostly white with hints of red and gold lines on the pillars and walls. A large, square courtyard lies just inside with a marble fountain and there are roses everywhere, all perfumed and sweet, surrounding the entrance.

It'd feel more welcoming if my life wasn't in danger.

In a daze, I descend from the carriage, absentmindedly watching Darius weave my arm through his. He leads me from the courtyard and through the set of double doors, leaving Lucien and Baxter behind. After what transpired on the way here, I don't have the courage to face either of them.

I can't handle their hatred for me.

But even more so, their pain because of me.

Soldiers stand at attention upon my entrance and passing of every room and hallway. It's unnerving to have these people show me respect while knowing the things I've done. I have no doubt my sexual escapades have reached audiences far and wide.

"These are your quarters," Darius says. "You are to present yourself in the throne room tonight, where you will answer any question the queen might pose to you concerning your disappearance. A guard will be sent to retrieve you when the time comes."

I nod, unable to find the energy to respond.

Once I close the door behind me, I take in the room. Horror and feelings of nausea rise within me at the sight. It's the same gold and burgundy bedroom in my memories that featured numerous lovers.

My stomach roils, and I rush to the bathroom. After being sick, I collapse on the floor with tears pricking my eyes. Given how much I've wept, I should be too dehydrated to cry anymore. But I do regardless.

For Lucien and his pain.

For Baxter and his anger.

For Darius and his formality.

For Nox and his leaving me.

I'm all alone. Only this time I'm in a palace instead of a mental institution.

For me, they're one and the same.

CHAPTER24

DARIUS

Leaving the princess damn near killed me the first time.

Now, I hate myself for it.

If it wasn't to keep Adelaide safe, I'd be tempted to rush back to her side and take her in my arms. It might not be enough to soothe her, but it'd damn sure comfort me.

Eventually, I find my opportunity, thanks to the queen's ignorance of the secret passageways. They lead to and from the royal bedrooms to allow dalliances that need to remain hidden. She has no need for them since her sexual conquests are flaunted.

I pull the tiny lever just outside Adelaide's room, and a mechanism clicks, unlocking the door just behind the painting on the wall. After ensuring there's no one else present, I step inside, my gaze searching for the woman. She's nowhere to be found.

With the guards just outside, it's a risk to call her name, so I head over to the bathing chamber that's connected to the room. Adelaide sits on the tiled floor, her cheeks stained with tears and her eyes closed.

Wearing only a towel.

“Are you all right?” I ask.

She jerks her head up, blue gaze shining with alarm. “Darius, what are you doing here?”

I place a finger to my lips. “Keep your voice down. I don’t want them to hear us. The secret passageways need to remain... well, secret.” I grin at her, pleased when her mood lightens a bit. “Why were you crying? Did someone hurt you?”

She shakes her head. “Just my past self. Although I’m sure there will be more to lament after facing my mother.”

The very thought causes unease to rush through my body. I withdraw my pocket watch and check it, the weight of the timepiece soothing me. Holding Adelaide would go further in calming my nerves, but I can’t risk touching her.

As is, I’m almost positive the queen discovered the princess’s location because of me.

“We have a few hours before you have to present yourself to her,” I say, my words hurried, fueled by my desire to see Adelaide safe. “I can create a portal for you to escape through. At least this time I’d know what happened to you. Which reminds me: I need to find out who did that the first time around. I wasn’t aware anyone else had the ability, but there isn’t a rhyme or reason when it comes to magic.”

Adelaide bites her lip. It’s due to her nervousness, but my cock doesn’t care. It hardens as I watch her full mouth, my mind creating fantasies I want to make reality.

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“I hate to tell you this, but you’re the one who sent me into the other realm the first time,” she says. “Nox admitted it when he came to Baxter’s house a couple days ago.”

I nod, my resolve hardening. “I’m going to kill him.”

Her lips twitch. “Baxter said as much.” The mirth that briefly lights up her gaze disappears faster than a sun entering a cloud, blocking the warmth I need. “Please don’t hurt Nox. He said he uncovered an assassination plot the queen devised to kill me. Through you, Baxter, and Lucien, he was able to ensure my safety away from her.”

“The fucker should’ve told me.”

Fury scorches my insides like a forest fire, leaving behind charring and death. If it wasn’t for the desperation in Adelaide’s voice, I’d dismiss her in favor of ending Nox’s life. Anyone who takes her away from me signs a death warrant.

Even the powerful queen.

“I never would’ve brought you here if I’d known,” I say, blowing out a sharp breath. “Why did the others let you come?”

Adelaide shrugs. “It’s not exactly like we were given a choice. Besides, Baxter doesn’t care about me, and I don’t know about Lucien.”

“Are you strong enough to live through a meeting with the queen?”

The harshness of my inquiry has the woman's lips thinning. "We'll find out."

I shake my head, the ends of my hair slapping my face. "That's not good enough. You have to leave. Now."

In the blink of an eye, I have my dagger in hand and press the tip to my palm. The pain from the steel cutting into my skin is nothing compared to my fear for Adelaide's life. Unlike my brother and Lucien, I'm not willing to risk her safety on her ability to handle magic.

"Darius." She scrambles to her feet. "Don't."

Blood wells around the laceration, and I continue to drag the weapon along my palm. The portal must hold during the time it'll take for me to retrieve my brother and be strong enough to transport the three of us.

My life force will drain from me in more ways than one this evening.

Adelaide reaches for me but stops as soon as her gaze lands on the crimson pooling in the center of my hand. Her pupils dilate with fascination and a hint of lust. She releases a pent-up breath and shivers before looking at me.

"Stop," she says, her voice more forceful than before. "I can't leave, not without Nox."

I halt, yet my blood continues to spill. "Nox?"

A blush rises, inflaming her cheeks and my suspicion. "Yes, Nox," she says softly. "He and I are..."

"Lovers," I finish for her. "You have been for quite some time." I clench my jaw as

frustration swamps me. I'm of half a mind to force her through a portal. "I didn't realize you still cared for him."

"I do." She holds my gaze, giving me the opportunity to see inside her soul as it shines through her eyes. "But I also care about you, Darius. Not all of my memories have returned, but the ones that feature you and I together, however brief, are something I treasure."

She steps closer, and her fragrance sweeps past my senses. I inhale, pulling her essence into my lungs and letting it fill me. A serenity that I've only felt with her descends.

Just as my desire rises.

"You're giving me no choice but to leave you in danger," I say. "How can you ask that of me?"

Adelaide takes my hand. Her fingertips lightly graze my skin, leaving trails of fire in their wake. "I won't lie and say I'm confident in my magic. However, I am confident in my ability to survive. The queen has to die. That's the only way we'll ever be free. And together."

My pulse hammers in my ears and drowns out everything except the temptress in front of me. My reasons for staying away from Adelaide are null and void with her at the palace, yet I'm still hesitant to make her mine. Years of caution have embedded themselves in me so strongly that they're hard to let go of.

But the thought of being with her the way I've always envisioned is enough to bring me to my knees with want.

"I'll make you a promise," she says. When I nod in agreement, she continues. "If

things go badly here, we'll run away together. But it has to be with the intent to return for the others in the future. Okay? I won't leave them to suffer."

"Agreed. Now that I know you'll be relatively protected, I must go. We cannot afford for the queen to notice my absence."

Adelaide's lips form a pout and an image of her wrapping them around my cock sends a bolt of lust streaking through me. It hardens my erection to a painful degree, and I withdraw my hand from her. Turning to the sink, I pocket my dagger and run water over the wound on my palm.

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“Let me see,” she says, watching me in the mirror.

“It’ll heal quickly.”

“Darius.”

There’s an undertone to her voice, a huskiness that grabs my attention. I look at her standing next to me and raise my brows in question. She, in turn, takes my hand once more while keeping her gaze fastened to mine.

And runs her tongue over the length of the cut.

My cock leaks, and a groan bursts from me as I grip the counter with my free hand.
“Adelaide.”

Her pink tongue flicks over my skin, coming away darker, stained by my life force. Again, my cock nearly spills seed.

“Stop,” I rasp. “You’re going to make me come.”

An impish glint enters the blue of her eyes, making them like sapphires. “Good.”

She drops her towel, and my heart drops with it. I run my gaze over her body, taking in every curve, every inch of skin. It’s impossible for me to fixate on a single part of her when everything is beautiful.

If she didn’t shove my pants down from my waist, I’d still be in a trance, my

amazement of her ensnaring me.

The feel of her fingers gripping me has my hips jutting forward. She smiles to herself at my fierce reaction to her, and I can't take the time to appreciate it. Not when I'm about to erupt.

She strokes my cock, and I follow the movements with my eyes, becoming hypnotized again. "I want to make you feel the way I did when we first met," she whispers. "I want to see you vulnerable in your ecstasy while begging me to come."

All at once, my veins feel as though they're filled with lava, pathways of blazing heat that threaten to burn me alive. The blood in my body rushes south, rendering me lightheaded, and I sag against the countertop.

The rhythm of her strokes speeds up, and her grip strengthens, making my chest tight with every breath. She brings my hand to her mouth, and I tense for the pleasure that's about to wreck me.

"Tell me what you want," she says.

"To come. To be inside you."

"Beg me."

I grind my teeth in rebellion. But the need to finish is overwhelming—as is my desire to be inside her. "Let me come."

"As you wish."

The moment she licks my wound, laps at the blood there, my cock swells. It spurts cum all over her breasts and down the length of her stomach. She watches it, watches

me as I succumb to my body's demands.

Her smile is coy when she meets my eyes in the mirror. "I guess I'll need to shower again."

It doesn't matter that she's my future queen.

I'm going to fuck her raw.

Then we'll see who begs who.

CHAPTER 25

ADELAIDE

Witnessing Darius at my mercy is a high I might never come down from.

He stands there with his gorgeous cock out, his cum marking my body, and his eyes glazed over with ecstasy. It's breathtaking.

With a sigh of regret, I remove my hands from him and turn toward the shower. It's on the tip of my tongue to invite him, when I'm grabbed from behind. Darius digs his fingers into my hips and spins me to face the mirror.

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“Not so fast, dearest one. It’s your turn to beg.”

My eyes widen with surprise and excitement causes my skin to tingle wherever he touches me. “Is that so?”

He nods and reaches around to place his index finger just above my navel. Dragging his finger through his cum, he brings it to my clit. I bite my lip to stop the moan gathering in my throat.

We’re playing a game, him and I. Unlike chess, this is one I can win. As long as I pretend to lose.

Like Lucien, Darius knows I can overpower him with my magic.

He strokes me until I’m squirming and my heart is pounding. “Tell me what you want,” he says, repeating my words back to me. “Or I can tell you what I want and how you’re going to do it.”

I nod, my core pulsing at the ideas he’s creating in my head.

He continues to torture me with agonizingly slow strokes to my swollen flesh and brings his other hand to the nape of my neck. Gripping me there, he bends me over the counter but not entirely. “Put your hands flat on the mirror.”

I do as he says, anticipation humming in my veins. He nudges my foot with his, spreading my legs, and sucks in a breath.

“Do you know what I see?” he says, his voice a low rumble. “It’s a wet pussy that wants to be fucked.”

My groan escapes me. I pant at the way his eyes glitter with lust, but not only that, he watches me with a hunger that borders on insanity. We’re all going mad. At least I can enjoy the dynamic and the passion it brings.

I grind against his hand, relishing the pressure against my clit. It earns me a pinch on my nipple. My gasp is lost in the moan that follows when he dips his fingers inside me.

“Do you see the way you grip at my fingers, wanting my cock to take their place? If we weren’t pressed for time, I’d make you be patient. As is, I can barely handle the wait myself. I’ve wanted this for so long that I won’t be able to stop once I’m inside you.”

Darius wraps my hair around his fist and enters me with a single thrust. With his grip at the base of my neck, he keeps me in place while he drives into me again and again. My palms slide against the mirror, the reflective surface vibrating with the force of his movements.

I watch him as he watches us.

“You look so beautiful with my cock inside you,” he says.

I gasp when he turns us, making it so we’re parallel to the counter. He jerks my head to angle it so that I can see him enter me. With an increasing pace, he pistons into me, his pupils dilated and alight with passion. I can only take him, take what he’s doing while watching with fascination.

He’s right, I like the way it looks with him inside me.

I grab his hand and bite down on the cut before he can pull away. A small stream of blood pours from the wound on his palm and coats my tongue, making my entire body hum. The taste is like a fine wine and I drink him in, feeling his life force join mine in a union that can't be undone.

Darius groans, his hold on my hair tightening painfully, his thrusts now frenzied. I can do nothing except cling to him and let him lead me. Like a tide, my orgasm sweeps over me and he is there for every wave, every current of pleasure.

His heart pounds crazily in his veins and I listen to it, to the message it whispers. Something only I can decipher. This man cares for me. It's in every inch of skin that touches mine. In every kiss. And in every breath.

He rests his head on my back, in the space between my shoulder blades, with his arm loosely gripping my hip. When my legs start to shake, I grab the counter for support and Darius laughs.

"This is the only place I want to be," he says, nuzzling me. "I don't know if I have the strength to leave you. It was torture every time before now."

"I don't want to be alone, but it has to be this way until we are free from my mother's power."

He brushes my hair so that it sits on my shoulder. "I would do whatever, say whatever to get you to run away with me."

I shake my head. "You know we can't leave the others. Besides, I need to help the people here if I can. Maybe even right the wrongs done to them, if possible."

"Spoken like a true queen."

“Technically, I’m thefuturequeen.”

Darius kisses my skin, letting his lips linger. It sends chills along my spine and makes my heart flutter in my chest. “I live to serve you.”

I take his palm in both of my hands and press a kiss to his wound. “I hope there’s never a time you feel differently because I can’t imagine my life without you.”

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“And you’ll never have to.”

* * *

The knock on the door has every muscle in my body going stiff with tension. I take a deep breath and make my way across the room, the swishing of my skirts the only sound other than the pounding of my heart.

This is it: I’m going to be face-to-face with the queen tonight.

Will she try to kill me? That is the only thought stronger than my worry for Darius, Baxter, and Lucien.

I twist the lock and turn the knob to reveal the Captain of the Guard on the other side.

“Follow me,” he says. Felix steps back and waits for me to enter the hallway before striding off. “Don’t dawdle.”

I lift my chin and keep my steps even, refusing to speed up. This palace is nothing but a battleground. Everything I do is a strategic move that could succeed in prolonging my life or end with me dying.

That’s to say nothing of the men I care for.

I’d die to protect them.

My black dress reflects my somber mood and the darkness that lingers in the shadows

of this place. And in my memories. Some have returned, bringing tears to my eyes, while others make my heart beat faster with longing.

Most carry unwanted images that are best left alone.

Felix looks at me from over his shoulder, his brows snapping together. I hold his gaze and look at him with a quiet disdain born from a lifetime of being royalty. The soldier halts, waiting with his arms crossed until I reach his side.

I hold out my arm expectantly. He, in turn, places my hand on his forearm before continuing onward. One battle of wills complete. The victory being mine.

“How does my mother fare?” I ask, keeping my tone a note just above bored. “Has there been a change with the White King and Queen in my absence?”

Felix side-eyes me, working his jaw. “The queen is well and her reign continues, as you will see in a moment. Her advisor has encouraged our monarch to avoid war with the White kingdom thus far.”

“Advisor?” I scrunch my face, searching my memories for such a person. “Some of my memories were taken from me and this advisor must’ve been among them. Who is he?”

“Reece is his name. He has been by your mother’s side since you went missing.”

“That explains it.” When Felix nods, I continue my line of inquiry. “What can you tell me about him?”

The captain’s gaze immediately shutters.

My vigilance rises, my senses heightening. Felix’s pulse thunders so loudly that I

stare straight ahead to avoid looking at his neck. I'm sure the vein bulges there as his heart struggles to regulate itself.

Nothing jumpstarts the heart more than fear.

Except love.

I remove that trail of thought from my mind before I lose my focus. Surviving is the goal. If I don't, I won't be with the men I care about. That would be a greater tragedy than me dying.

"Captain?" I prompt.

Felix clears his throat and adjusts the patch over his eye. "Reece is a powerful individual."

"How so?"

"Because he has your mother's ear, whispering bits of influence to her." The soldier glances around the hallway before leaning close to me. "No one knows exactly what his magic does and I would warn you to exercise caution when around him."

I squeeze Felix's arm in a show of support. "Thank you for telling me, despite not wanting to."

"You're correct." The side of his mouth quirks in a lopsided grin. "However, because you're royalty, I'm bound to serve you. Not just your mother. And by right, you are my future queen."

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“And you don’t want to lose your head. Is that right?”

He massages his throat. “Quite right.”

“You may disregard my opinion on the matter, but I like your head where it rests currently. Let’s endeavor to keep it there.”

I smile at him and he laughs. “You’re different,” Felix says, lowering his voice to a whisper. “Yet you’re the same. I find it perplexing.”

“You should try being me.”

“No, thank you, your majesty.”

He leads me to a set of double doors that are so tall I can’t imagine the strength it requires to pull them. Fortunately, they are already open.

Unfortunately, it gives everyone inside the ability to see me.

The nobles of the court stare at me with unabashed curiosity. Some attempt to hide it behind a raised hand to the mouth or a lacy fan. Others are not as polite. Their murmurs fill the air all at once like a puff of smoke.

With my chin set at an angle and my head lifted, I make my way down the red carpet that starts at the doors. The throne room is large and round with mirrored walls and granite floors. If not for the reflective surfaces, it’d be like walking into a mausoleum, complete with the scent of roses and jasmine. Considering my mother might want to

kill me, it's an appropriate response to the space.

A dias sits at the back of the room, where the Queen presides over her kingdom, flanked by royal guards and a man dressed in black robes. Crimson velvet drapes hang from the ceiling, layered like a wedding cake, and stretch to pool on the ground. The crystal chandelier overhead throws prismatic light on the red curtains.

They'd do well in hiding blood.

I wrangle my morbid thoughts as I run my gaze over my mother. She's stunning. The queen wears a crown of gold atop her raven hair and her dress is blood red with hearts lining the hem, all stitched in gold thread. We share the same blue eyes and pale skin, but that's where the resemblance ends.

Her gaze is harder than the stone flooring. Under her scrutiny, I don't have a chance to look for Baxter or Lucien, not wanting to draw attention to them. My heart sighs in relief at the sight of Darius standing off to the side. Dressed in his finery, he has his timepiece in one hand and a scroll in the other.

Once I'm a foot away from the dias, I stop walking and clasp my shaking fingers. The noises from everyone's blood is like the tolling of bells, wanting to be freed, everything coming together and clamoring in my head. Memories press against my psyche, competing with the sound of the crowd's lifeforce. Sweat breaks out between my breasts with the effort it takes to subdue the chaos in my mind.

At the queen's nod, Darius begins to read. His voice grounds me enough to keep from retreating.

"Good evening, ladies and gentlemen of the court. It is the queen's pleasure to welcome home Alice, the Princess of Hearts. You are to remain silent as the Queen of Hearts questions her daughter concerning her whereabouts. Only when the kingdom

is deemed safe, will we commence with the celebration. As you know, her majesty only has your best interests at heart.”

The queen raises a hand with a smile lifting her red lips. “Alice darling, where have you been?”

Internally, I wince at the name. It’s no longer part of my identity, but that’s not something worth arguing about. My mother has no idea of the changes that have occurred within me and I have no desire to enlighten her.

“I wish I could tell you of a grand adventure, your majesty. As it is, I only have the truth. I was in another world, one conjured by the nightmares plaguing me, exacerbated by my lack of memory.”

The queen tilts her head. “That’s peculiar. So you never left Wonderland?”

Darius’s gaze bores into me and uncertainty claws at my insides. If I tell her the truth, will it condemn my lover? If I lie, will it save him?

“I went through a portal.”

“How?” she asks. “Did my messenger assist you in that?”

I nod. “I can’t speak for him when it concerns his motives.”

The queen flicks her wrist in a dismissive gesture. “I’ve already read Darius. He is as clueless as you claim to be.”

My head pounds, not only with fear but because of the memories breaking through the shields. The pain has me sucking in a breath.

The queen squints in my direction. “Come here, child.”

I close the distance between us, my feet growing heavier with every step. From my peripheral vision, I catch Darius clenching his jaw, his hands now fisted at his sides. I shake my head as though to clear it, but the motion is to encourage his silence.

It’s my turn to protect him.

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“What ails you?” The queen runs her gaze over my face, her scrutinization like needles pricking me. “Give me your hand.”

The second her skin touches mine, heat skitters along my arm. The pain from her magic joins the ache in my head and I grit my teeth to stem the tears stinging my eyes. She reads me until I’m gasping for breath, my body trembling.

My magic flares to life, ready to defend.

“Please stop,” I say.

I’m very close to taking hold of her life force and killing her. If it wasn’t for the fact that Darius and I are outnumbered, I would. I’ve never used blood-bending to control more than two people, and in a room full of individuals, my death is all but guaranteed.

“My queen.”

The man wearing black steps forward, placing himself beside the throne. He doesn’t touch my mother, but he does lean close.

“If you kill her, you won’t find what you’re looking for.”

My mother blinks as though coming out of a daze brought on by her magic. “Yes, of course. I saw what I needed and my suspicions are confirmed.”

“What are you talking about?” I ask

My breathing is jagged and I hug my middle to fortify myself, wishing it was Darius holding me. Foreboding coils around me at the way my mother's blood flows in her veins, similar to the way a serpent travels, winding and with purpose. I can almost imagine it hissing when it reaches her heart. The organ thumps faster with each passing moment.

It'd only take a second for me to make it explode.

That thought echoes in the recess of my mind when the crowd begins to murmur. Two of the soldiers lining the walls disappear through a side door, only to return with a prisoner between them. Nox, beaten and bloodied, limps to the dais while leaving a trail of blood droplets behind him.

I flinch every single time one hits the marbled floor.

My gaze shoots to Darius, who's expression of shock mirrors my own. I scan the crowd for Baxter and Lucien, but they're nowhere to be found. If they're here, I can't see them. Not that it matters, since neither of them are inclined to help me save Nox.

All of my strategic thoughts from earlier disappear, leaving behind nothing except a grim determination to do whatever's necessary to ensure my lover isn't harmed further.

"What do you want?" I ask, directing my question to the queen.

My harsh tone has her quirking a brow. "Alice, what has gotten into you? Daring to speak to me that way?"

I take a menacing step forward. Satisfaction rushes through me at the stuttering of her heart. "I dare, mother. And not without the means. Tell me what you want in exchange for Nox's release?"

The queen and her advisor share a look. Something passes between them, but all I can discern through their blood is that it's significant. Something that makes their veins flood with anticipation.

It chills mine.

Reece positions himself right next to my mother and meets my gaze. "Where is your signet ring?"

"What?" My brows snap together. "I don't know what you're talking about."

The man's robes ripple like a wraith, threats of death seeping from him. "The ruby ring. Surely your lost memories don't include that?"

"Why do you want it?"

"The reason is none of your affair," he snaps. "Your queen wants it. That is all you need to know."

We eye each other, sharing looks of distrust and skepticism. A grunt of pain from Nox shatters my focus on the advisor. I spin to face my lover, finding him doubled over, the guards gripping his arms to keep him from plummeting to the floor.

"If you touch him again," I say to the soldiers, my words rushing from me, "I'll kill you."

"The ring, Alice. Do you have it or not?" My mother sighs as though watching a boring comedy act. "I'd hate to kill one of my subjects, but I grow weary of this exchange. Give me an answer."

"I don't have it," I say slowly, "but I know its location."

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“Excellent news.” The advisor claps his hands with a smile. “Isn’t it, your majesty?”

The queen purses her lips. “Only just.”

“You’ll be tasked with retrieving it,” Reeces says to me. “You must present it to your queen with all due haste.”

“I will, but only if you let Nox go.” I steal a glance at him and his purple eyes flicker with blue in their depths, the pain from his injuries making the colors neon. “He can help me find it.”

The advisor shakes his head. “No, I don’t think so.”

Reece withdraws an oddly-shaped dagger from the folds of his robes and the length of it catches the flames from the scones on the walls, reflecting it at me. With every step he takes, my hands shake and my legs quiver with the need to move, to do something to protect Nox. Instead, I force myself to remain still and take the opportunity to listen to his blood.

It’s slow, as though he’s the walking dead.

I school my features at the discovery. “Don’t come any closer.”

He stops an arm’s length from me and Nox. “Do you know what this is?” When I frown, his lips quirk up. “This is a blade forged from the sands found on the shores that surround the Void.”

“That doesn’t help me,” I say.

“It’s poisonous. One piercing from this dagger will end a person’s life once their blood is corrupted.”

I hold out my hands in supplication. “Please. I’ll find the ring. You don’t have to hurt anyone.”

“Since when have you cared?” The queen taps her lips in thought. “My prisoner is more special than I realized. I wonder why that is? He’s no one important, not even a nobleman.”

My mother’s display of nonchalance while Nox’s life hangs in the balance, not to mention my own, has a fire gathering heat in my chest. Her life force flares briefly under my command and her eyes widen.

“Reece,” she gasps.

The advisor lunges forward, driving the dagger into Nox’s shoulder.

My scream shatters the night.

It’s followed by the pained cries of the people around me as tiny crimson rivers flow from their eyes, noses, and ears. My mother shrieks the loudest, her voice piercing my mind.

“Paint the roses red with her blood!”