



Caged Love (Fated Love #5)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: My fated mate helped murder my father.

But there are two sides to every story.

As I slowly get to know August, I soon realize not everything is as it seems.

Is there hope for a love that started off with heartbreak?

Or will we be the first ones to walk away from our fated bond?

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A smile falls from my lips when my eyes land on August.

My fated mate.

My enemy.

What is he doing here?

He's a handsome fae warrior, built exactly to my tastes, with curly brown hair, warm chocolate-brown eyes, and a smile that could bring a woman to her knees. Unfortunately for us, the fates set us up for failure.

I glance around, wondering if he's alone. Is he going to try and take me captive again?

When Saylor let me out of my prison slash bedroom, I returned directly to our compound two hours north of Chaos, the capital of the Incubus Kingdom.

“Can we talk?” he asks, sliding his hands into his pants pockets.

My eyes roam over his round ears—unlike the pointed ones of the highborn fae—and I'm reminded that my mate is a common fae. He might not be as powerful magically as some, but I can feel a strength within him.

He's not a bad male—I know that—but it makes everything harder, especially when he never once hurt me while he had me, always making sure I ate and had everything I wanted.

Everything except my freedom.

He had tried to talk to me, to get to know me. But how do you look your enemy in the eye and give him a piece of you? The person who helped murder my father.

Is he the one who did it? How did he die? What were his last words? These are all the questions I don't have any answers to. All I know is that Declan, the man who raised me alone, the first person who loved me, is gone.

I've always been Daddy's little girl. My father loved and protected me my entire life, and I'm lost without him.

He was my anchor, and now I'm afloat in a tide of sorrow.

That type of grief doesn't just go away. No, it clings to your soul and tries to drag you down with it.

I might not have had the perfect upbringing, I might have come second to his ambitions to take down the royal line, and maybe even raised to be married as a bargaining chip, but I never once felt like I wasn't loved by him.

"As long as you don't try to kidnap me and lock me up again," I reply, scowling.

"I won't," he promises, his eyes flickering with... regret?

"Okay," I agree, leaving the inn with him to step outside. I know what I must do, but that doesn't mean I want to do it. This is my fated mate and the only one I'll get. He is the male who will amplify my magic, making me even more powerful.

"I want to say I'm sorry," he starts, shifting on his feet. My long hair blows in the wind and tangles around his arms.. My whole body wants him—the draw to him is

unlike anything I've ever experienced.

"Me too," I reply, swallowing hard.

Pulling the needle out of my pocket, I stab him in the shoulder. It wasn't meant to be him we were taking today, but since the option has presented itself, I'd be a fool to let him leave. Besides, this saves Astrid from this fate, the captive we had originally planned on taking.

I stare at him as he falls to his knees. In another realm, he'd be doing that for a different reason.

"You shouldn't have come looking for me, August."

"Milana..."

I can't look him in the eye. It hurts.

I zip him away into the dungeons, locking the heavy metal cell door while he watches. The loud creak is uncomfortable, but not as much as the thought of leaving my mate down here.

"Let's see how you like it... mate," I whisper, swallowing hard. "Welcome to what's left of the rebellion."

But the truth is, without my father here, I don't even know what we're fighting for anymore. I turn away, swiping at my tears before he can see them fall.

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Chapter One

Three Days Later

Staring at the bread in my hands, I wonder when I became so spoiled. Growing up, Astrid and I didn't have much of anything. My mom always made sure we had a full belly, but we weren't eating like I have been since I moved to Chaos. I've been treated like one of the Incubus Princes, living with Axe, Kai, Bane, and their father, King Zython.

Zython is Astrid's father, which no one knew until recently, and Axe and Kai are his sons. Bane was taken in as his ward but now mostly lives in The Circle in the Demon Kingdom. I have a massive room, just like them. I eat with them. I've been treated like a prince, even though I don't have a drop of royal blood in me. I'm a part of their royal guard, a warrior. But really, I'm just a common fae. My magic isn't as strong, but I never let that stop me. Before coming here, it was just Astrid and me. I was a mercenary and made sure she was safe, but when she met her mate, Rave, that all changed.

Forcing myself to take a bite of the bread, I chew slowly, wondering how long it will take them to find me. My eyes raise when I hear someone approaching my cell. I already know who it is.

"How long are you planning on keeping me here?" I ask her. Dressed in all black, her golden hair flowing over her shoulders, she looks almost ethereal with her fair coloring and striking blue eyes.

“Depends on what Zython is willing to give us to get you back,” she replies, smirking.

I might not be up-to-date with all the kingdom’s politics, but I do know that her father, Declan, a warlord who led his own army, wanted Astrid for her succubus blood. I also know that originally, Milana was meant to marry Axe, who is next in line for the throne. Just the thought makes my fists clench.

“You know I’m no one to him, right?” I mutter, taking a sip of warm water. Milana’s eyes roam over me from head to toe. With nothing else to do here, I’ve been working out—push-ups, sit-ups, and whatever else I can manage within these small confines.

Her pink-tipped fingernails graze the cold metal bars. “Who killed my father?”

It’s the only thing she asked me. When Laurel saw a vision of Declan killing Astrid, we knew he had to die.

Rave killed him.

But I won’t tell her that.

I remember Laurel’s warning—“ Milana has to come over to our side, or bad things will happen .”

“Why did you help Vera?” I ask instead, starting from the very beginning.

“You mean my good friend, Vera, who is now also dead. You really do love to kill people I care about, don’t you?” she fires back, her blue eyes flickering with anger and pain.

Bane killed Vera so Rave wouldn’t have to.

I had nothing to do with that, but according to Milana, I'm to blame for everything .

“Vera was trying to kidnap Vale from his father, and you helped her,” I say, keeping my tone even and gentle. “And then when Vera was... handled, you tried to kidnap him yourself to take him away from his father. How did you justify that?”

Her eyes narrow, and her cheeks redden. “Vera asked me to do that. She said Rave was going to hurt Vale, and if she couldn't protect him, I had to. He's just a child...” she trails off, taking a deep breath. “Everyone knows the King of Shadows is known for being ruthless.”

“Not to his own flesh and blood,” I reply, shaking my head. “Vale is very well-loved and close with his father. You added extra trauma that Vale didn't need.”

She pauses, then shakes her head. “Vera told me all about Rave and how he couldn't be trusted with his son.”

“Vera played you,” I reply, looking her right in the eyes. “She was a manipulator. Rave is a damn good father. He might be bloodthirsty to his enemies, but he protects those he cares about.”

He treats Astrid like a queen. I can't lie—it used to kill me—but now I know everything played out as it should.

With a deep sigh, Milana looks away from me, and I hope she's not automatically discounting what I'm saying.

Maybe Vera was a good friend to her, who knows, but what Vera got her to do was wrong.

“I was being a good friend and helping her,” she replies, biting the inside of her

cheek.

“And your friend was in the wrong, putting you in that position.” I make sure to keep my voice soft and gentle, not wanting her to become defensive.

It must work because she replies, “I didn’t want to hurt anyone. And I love Vale. He’s a wonderful little boy.”

“He is,” I agree.

“How is he doing after losing his mom?” she asks.

“He’s doing well,” I assure her, tilting my head to the side and studying her. “No one can replace his mom, but he’s thriving with Rave and Astrid.”

I’ll give her that much.

“Good.” She nods slowly, eying the bread still in my hands. “I’ve held off Rion for as long as I can, August, but you’re not giving me any information. Sooner or later, he’s going to be the one coming down here.”

“Let him come,” I murmur.

So Rion is still alive. We once thought he was an ally, but apparently, we were very wrong.

The truth is that I’m tired.

So tired.

The beauty in front of me is meant to be mine, and the fact that she falls farther out of

my reach every day is draining my soul.

“August...”

“Do you ever think what it could have been like?” I ask her, closing my eyes.

“What?” she rasps.

“Us,” I whisper, bread falling from my fingers onto the cobblestone ground.

What if we’d just randomly met at an inn or a party?

What if we weren’t standing on opposite sides of a battlefield?

What if I left everything I believed in for love?

What if our love was simple?

I’m already drifting off when I hear her soft reply, “Every single day.”

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Chapter Two

Panting, I wake from a dream of blue eyes.

But these eyes are warm, not cold. My brow furrows when I notice something in my cell, right in front of where Milana was standing when I saw her last. Standing, I take a few steps to pick it up. The chains cuffed to my ankles drag behind me, stopping me from using any magic, which is smart because one of my abilities is to walk through any type of ward.

She has left me chocolate.

And wrapped in brown paper are an apple and some beef jerky. I take all my gifts and sit with them, taking a bite of the apple first. So far, I haven't been harmed, but like she said, Rion hasn't gotten his hands on me yet.

I spend the rest of the day waiting for Milana to return.

When she finally does, I'm almost asleep.

"I wasn't sure if you were going to show," I murmur, sitting up from the cobblestone ground with my hands resting on my knees. I've got nothing but a thin blanket to sleep on, but I suppose it could be worse.

"Me either," she admits, sitting in front of the cell and crossing her legs. Her long blonde hair curtains her face, and it looks so soft. She appears like an angel that doesn't belong down here in the dirt with a mere commoner like me. However, the

fates saw me fit for her, so that has to mean something.

“Tell me something about yourself,” she asks, and for the first time, I notice dark circles under her eyes.

I like that she wants to know about me. But right now, I’d rather learn everything about her.

“You look tired,” I say, lifting my knees against my chest and wrapping my arms around my thighs. “Are you getting enough sleep?”

A line forms between her brows. “You’re down here and worried about how I’m sleeping?”

I nod, swallowing hard. If only she knew. Ever since I found out she was my mate, all I’ve done is worry about her. I’m not a man who’s ever felt helpless. I do what I need to do. I adapt and am resilient. But I’ve never felt more out of control than knowing my mate hates me.

When I had her locked up in my bedroom in Chaos, yeah, it was fucked up.

But I felt better knowing she was there.

She was safe.

She was in my home.

And when Saylor set her free, I panicked.

But Saylor did the right thing.

Beauty like Milana's should never be caged. She should be free, and I know deep in my gut that how I would love her would give her that freedom.

The freedom to be herself.

To be safe.

To be loved unconditionally.

To be protected.

"I'm fine," she replies, stretching her neck from side to side. I know she's what they call a booster. Basically, she can share magic by powering or draining. So she could suck the magic right out of me if she wanted to, or she could make me more powerful. I don't know how long the effects would last. It would depend on how strong she is.

But I do know that after being around her, I could zip.

And I've never been able to zip.

I've never had enough magic for that skill.

I don't know if she did that to me accidentally, or maybe she's unaware, but I know it was her. Just that small little thing gave me so much fucking hope. It's embarrassing because why would she do that if some tiny, minuscule part of her cared about me?

"I'm fine, August. I think right now you need to worry about yourself."

Right.

I decide to answer her original question. “I grew up in a small village in Aravelle. My mother raised me. She died about six years ago while I was away. She was killed at the inn she worked at. A fight broke out and...”

I’d gone away for some mercenary work, and I’d taken Astrid with me.

I wish we had stayed.

I ended up killing the fae who hurt her, even though he claimed it was accidental.

How do you accidentally slit a woman’s throat?

If Astrid had been there, she could have saved her with her healing magic.

So many what-ifs.

I never told Astrid any of this, protecting her from the truth of my mom’s death. They were very close, and I couldn’t do that to her.

“I’m sorry,” Milana whispers, sounding sincere. “And your father?”

I shrug. “He died when I was a baby. I don’t remember him.”

We go silent for a few long moments.

“I’m scared of storms,” she blurts out.

“You’re really going to hate Bane then,” I reply, my lip twitching.

She slowly grins, and it brightens up her face. Fuck, my heart races just from seeing it, and it wasn’t even a full-fledged smile.

“The Demon King with the weather magic? Yeah, I suppose so.” She takes a deep breath and exhales. “My father wanted to make this kingdom better.”

“Your father wanted power, Milana,” I reply, licking my dry lips. “He didn’t want Zythron to be king. He didn’t want anyone else above him.”

“He wanted to help?—”

“The only person he wanted to help was himself. He wanted Astrid because of her succubus blood, and when he couldn’t have her, he was going to kill her so no one else could have her. How is that making this kingdom better?” I ask, studying her. I don’t want to upset her. I don’t want to fight with her. I’d prefer her in my arms, my face buried in her blonde hair, breathing in her sweet scent. She’s mine to protect, not hurt. I should be shielding her from all of the bad, but I need her to see the truth.

We aren’t the enemy.

We aren’t bad people.

And no one will take care of her like I will.

“I know he’s your father, and you loved him, and I’m sorry for that. I really am sorry. I would never want to do anything to upset you. You’re my mate, Milana. And you know that means everything to me. We’re only given one mate. We only have one chance.”

“Imagine if I had killed someone close to you, August. Your precious Astrid? Would you still want to bond with me?” she fires back, lifting her stubborn chin.

And with those words, she stands and storms out before I can say anything else.

Chapter Three

My fingernails dig into my palms, leaving crescent-shaped marks. Rion is down there with August, and it's making me feel sick. With Rion's electric magic, I can only imagine what he's doing to August. Leaning back against the brick wall with my head against the cold, hard surface, I close my eyes and take deep breaths.

He killed your dad, so you shouldn't feel bad. He's not on your side. He locked you up in his room like a prisoner, I tell myself, but allowing anyone to hurt my mate goes against every one of my instincts.

I cover my ears with my hands, even though I can't hear any sounds. Rion is probably using a sound barrier. I don't know what to think anymore. With my father gone, I'm no longer grounded, and I can't remember why I'm even fighting August in the first place. For a moment, I imagine giving in and getting to know him. I wonder what that would be like?

I doubt all his friends will ever accept me, and giving him a chance would mean turning my back on everything I've ever known. But I've lost sight of what we've been fighting for in the first place, and it's made me realize something—I was loyal to my father, not to this cause.

What even is the point of fighting the royals?

I don't want the crown. I could have become queen through marriage. I don't want to lead. I'm sick and tired of all the scheming and unnecessary death. I'm tired of what's happening downstairs in the dungeon.

What would my father say if I walked away? He'd probably be rolling in his grave if he knew where my head is at.

"You okay?" Halia asks, leaning against the wall next to me. With her bright red hair, big blue eyes, and shimmery skin, the Mermaid Princess is not someone you can easily forget. She's stunning and has been my best friend for as long as I can remember.

"No," I admit, swallowing thickly. I turn to face her, wrapping my arms around myself. "Could you ever be okay if your mate was being tortured?"

She winces, tucking a red lock back behind her ear. "No. I don't think I could let it happen."

Great, I'm a heartless monster.

"You aren't heartless," she murmurs, letting me know I said those words out loud. "You don't have a normal situation, Milana. Don't be so hard on yourself. Your father raised you to be loyal to him. To his army."

"Did you know that Vera lied about Rave being an abusive father to Vale?" I blurt out, August's words replaying in my head.

Halia nibbles on her bottom lip. "I've only seen Rave with Vale once, and he seemed like a good father. Vera wasn't a good person."

Halia has slept with Rave before—I know that much. I know she was upset when he found his fated mate, Astrid. The same Astrid I was told August loves.

She must have beer-flavored nipples or something.

“I’m an idiot.”

“No, you just see the best in everyone,” she replies, gently nudging me with her shoulder.

Apparently, everyone except my own fucking mate.

“Have I fucked up?” I whisper, licking my suddenly dry lips.

“I’m a romantic, you know this,” she replies, pushing off the wall and coming to stand in front of me. “You don’t need to fight your father’s battles anymore, Milana. You don’t owe his rebellion any loyalty. They will use you, spit you out, and go on like nothing has happened. You are replaceable. But to your mate...”

“I’m his only one.” I sigh, and she rests her head on my shoulder.

“You know I’m here for you no matter your decision.”

“Rion isn’t going to let me just walk out of here with August.”

“Rion won’t know about it until it’s too late,” she replies, shrugging. “Besides, who died and made him king?”

“My dad,” I blurt out, and she winces.

“Fuck, sorry.” But her lip twitches like she wants to laugh. Halia and her dry-fucking-humor.

“When do you have to go back?” I ask.

“Tomorrow,” she replies, glancing down at her legs. “I’m looking forward to being

back in the ocean. Three days on land is three too many. Next time, we'll meet back at the cabin."

My lip twitches. I know she only comes here to see me, and I appreciate it more than she knows.

She looks down toward the staircase that leads to August. "So, what are you going to do about him?"

"I don't know," I admit. "But I can't pretend it doesn't hurt me to know what's happening down there. And I fucking brought him here. I have to live with that."

"He kept you captive too," she reminds me.

"Yeah, in a nice comfortable room, where I was fed delicious food. I once told him my head hurt when I was there, and he sent a fucking healer to help me. Our accommodations for him have been a little different."

She shrugs. "You guys aren't royals. Look at where we are... an old, abandoned castle with rats bigger than my head."

I roll my eyes. Yeah, this place is shady, but it's our hideout. I still have my father's stunning two-story house to go home to.

"I messed up bringing him here. I thought I could turn off my feelings. I tried, trust me. But seeing him down there, sitting on the fucking ground..."

"Stop going down there, Milana. Get out of here for a while and clear your head," she suggests.

It would be so easy to just turn my back on the situation and tell myself I'm not doing

anything wrong. But the truth is that August isn't even originally from the Incubus Kingdom. He's a common fae who fell in with that crowd.

He's not a royal.

But he did have something to do with my dad's death.

However, I don't think he killed him.

August is a warrior.

If what August says is correct, Rave would have been the one to make the kill, trying to protect his mate.

Would my dad want to kill Astrid because he couldn't have her?

I might not have believed him—if I didn't have a memory to prove it. One night, I walked in on Dad talking to Rion, and I still remember what he said...

"She has succubus blood, so she's either with me or against me. I can't have her just out there existing. She can't have succubus babies that will rule the Fae Kingdom instead of ours."

My father was all about trying to keep our bloodline as pure as possible. Without the incubi giving birth to daughters, it was almost impossible. I was born before the curse hit, and I'm still of mixed blood, not that that is common knowledge. No one knows the truth of who my mother was.

Would August care if he knew his mate has some human blood in her? If he knew my mother was half human, half fae? I know my father cared. The male who cared so much about the incubus bloodline had a daughter with some human blood.

It was a secret he took to the grave with him.

What would August think?

It might not matter, though.

Because after this, he may never look at me the same again.

Chapter Four

When Rion leaves, I'm in the most pain I think I've ever been. I've basically been electrocuted on repeat, and that bastard didn't let up. Every inch of my body hurts. My skin feels hot and dry, and I know my back is bleeding from the sticky wetness I can feel sliding down it. My clothing is torn and ragged, and my mouth is parched. In a painful haze, I remember looking at his black mating bands as the sparks flew from his hands.

He didn't even give a fuck who killed Declan.

He wanted other information like King Zython's weaknesses and the castle's layout. He wanted to know how many guards we have protecting the king and how often they change shift—shit I'm never going to give him. I might not have originally been from this kingdom, but they've been good to me.

I'd die before I betrayed them.

I feel like I am dozing when I hear a familiar voice.

"August," Astrid whispers, reaching out to touch my shoulder. Instantly, all of my pain fades away, her healing magic leaving behind nothing but a comforting warmth. Opening my eyes, I see her standing before me, dressed in all black, her long braid dangling over her shoulder. Standing behind her to her right is Rave, and on her left is Soren. She brought the cavalry.

"What did they do to you? Come on, let's get out of here," she murmurs, leaning

down to help me stand, but I shake my head.

“No, I need to stay a little longer. Milana?—”

“I’m not leaving you here to be tortured!” Astrid whisper-yells, turning to Rave.
“Talk some sense into him, please .”

Rave studies me, his ice-blue eyes giving nothing away. “They could kill you.”

“I’m not leaving without her,” I state, my jaw twitching. “She’s my mate. You would both do the same thing.”

Soren and Rave share a look.

“We will give you a few days, and then we are coming back for you. Let’s hope you are still in one piece,” Rave replies, resting his hand on Astrid’s shoulder.

“August, don’t do this,” she quietly pleads.

“Star…” I whisper, using the nickname I’ve always called her.

“It’s his choice to make,” Soren says, nodding at me. “At least let us check in and bring you some food.”

I nod, knowing I’m going to need all of my strength.

“Who hurt you?” Astrid asks, searching my eyes.

“Rion.”

She nods. “No good deed goes unpunished. We shouldn’t have helped that asshole in

the first place.”

They once saved Rion’s mate and even considered him an ally.

“I don’t know what’s going to happen, August. The visions keep changing.” She lowers her voice. “I’ll be back to heal you. Don’t even bother arguing with me. I think you’re being stupid.”

Rave smirks, his shadows wrapping possessively around his mate. “August, either you kill Rion, or we’ll be back to do it.” His tone gentles. “Let’s go home, baby. Vale is waiting for us.”

“Good luck,” Soren murmurs, arching his brow as he scans the cell. “Looks like you’re going to need it.”

“You must be loving this.” I smirk, thinking about how Soren wanted to kill me for taking his mate, Pandora’s virginity.

Soren’s jaw tenses, and he rakes a hand through the middle of his blond hair. “There might be a little satisfaction there.”

Astrid slaps his shoulder and gives him a death stare. “What is wrong with you?”

Soren shrugs, crossing his arms over his chest. “We do crazy things for our mates.”

“If anything happens to him?—”

“He’ll be fine,” Rave assures her, throwing me a look that clearly says I better be alive the next time they see me.

“We could just kill Rion now,” she mutters, tilting her head to the side like she is

contemplating the idea.

“No, this needs to play out,” I rasp, swallowing hard.

If they just went and killed everyone here, Milana will never come to me. She’ll never forgive me or see that we are different from them.

They all zip away, and I’m left alone with my thoughts again.

At least I’m no longer in pain.

I don’t have a plan other than trying to get to know Milana and show her there is a reason the fates chose us for each other out of every other person in this realm.

I don’t know what Laurel saw, but Milana needs to come home with me, where she belongs, and not as a fucking captive this time.

As my mate.

I’ve never really fought hard for anything in my life—I’ve always chosen my battles very carefully.

But this is one I’m not willing to lose.

Milana will be mine.

Before I see her, I feel her magic. Her long blonde hair looks like she’s run her fingers through it, more messy than usual. With a deep sigh, she rests her forehead against the bars, her blue eyes giving me a slow once-over. “What are you doing, August?”

Pushing myself off the thin blanket, I slowly approach the bars, not wanting to scare her. The chains clang with each step. I don't dare touch the metal between us, but I am close enough that I can smell her sweet coconut scent. I want to reach out and touch her soft skin. Just imagining those lush lips on mine has my mind spinning.

Fuck! This woman makes me hard.

I hope she doesn't look south because there isn't much I can do to help hide that.

"Looking at my beautiful mate?" I reply, taking in each perfect feature on her face—eyes that hold a quiet storm, a nose that uptilts slightly at the end, and heart-shaped luscious lips I can't wait to taste.

She worries her bottom lip with her teeth. "Rion is going to come back down tonight."

"And I'll be here waiting," I say, shrugging. "But I'm not telling him anything about King Zytho. That man took me in and gave me a home. I'm never going to betray him or my brothers. They aren't my blood, but that doesn't matter to me. Loyalty is more important than blood."

"And I was loyal to my father," she mutters, but I don't miss the past tense she uses. "And his fight for freedom against the royal family." She pauses and then adds, "Your family."

"You were going to be forced to marry into that family, were you not?" I remind her, my fists clenching at the thought of her marrying Axe. "Not that I would have ever let that happen once I realized who you are."

"If you can't beat them, join them, right?" she replies, her eyes narrowing slightly.

I cross my arms over my chest. “Or maybe you blindly followed what your father ordered. Wouldn’t he have wanted you to find your mate and not be married off to another male, even if he is the prince and heir?”

“Not everyone finds their mate.” Those words almost sounds like regret in her voice.

“But we found each other. It might not have been under the best circumstances, but we can turn it around any time we want, Milana. It’s up to us. We control our future. And frankly, I’m fucking sick of pretending I don’t want to be with you more than anything in this realm.”

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Chapter Five

“If only it were that easy.” I sigh, squeezing the bridge of my nose.

He had the chance to leave with his friends, and he didn’t.

For me.

He’s going to withstand days of torture just to be able to speak to me.

To be around me .

He’s fucking crazy.

And the wildest part? Rave knew I was there. His shadows slithered up the staircase and snaked around my ankles, holding me in place.

I heard some of what was being said.

They came to save him, but he chose to remain.

I don’t know what I’m meant to do with that or the words that just came out of his mouth.

I want that more than anything, but it’s not that easy . Is it?

To be with him, I must betray all I’ve ever known and stood for. I’d be stepping away

from my father's legacy to be with his enemy.

And what does that say about me?

What kind of daughter does that make me?

He's not wrong about one thing, though—I did blindly follow my dad, wanting nothing but his approval. I tried to be the perfect child, always making sure I kept up appearances and was the daughter he wanted me to be.

I never realized how much until I lost him and his influence.

“It can be that easy,” August says, tilting his head to the side. What I wouldn't give to run my hands through his curly hair or push that lock off his forehead. His gorgeous eyes see things I don't want him to and have tried to hide.

They see me.

And it's more intense and real than I've ever imagined.

Not to mention terrifying.

I sit cross-legged on the ground, and his eyes flicker. “You don't have to sit on the dirt, Milana. That's not where you belong.”

If he's willing to withstand torture to be around me, maybe he's worth me giving him a chance.

He sits, too, joining me. We're so close, his knees almost touching mine. He has a quiet intensity about him and seems like someone who is always in control. I like that.

“What’s your life like back home?” I ask.

He smiles, and I stop breathing. His whole face lights up, and suddenly, everything is alright in the realm.

“I’m a royal guard, so I do a lot of training… whatever Zython or Axe need. I spend a lot of time with Kai and Bane. Occasionally, we go to Aravelle and visit everyone there.”

By everyone, he means Astrid.

I heard how she spoke to him, and I know she cares for him. There’s a connection between them.

But Rave was standing right there, too. So there’s obviously nothing they have to hide, right?

I don’t know how to feel about him having that emotional closeness with another woman who happens to be a powerful and beautiful queen. I can’t compete with that.

I’m the daughter of his enemy, a man they killed and who has left behind nothing but his ghosts of fighting against the royal family.

All I want now is peace.

Can August give me that?

“What about your life?” he asks when I stay silent, too lost in my thoughts.

Swallowing hard, I contemplate my life. When my father was here, I did whatever he needed me to. Now he’s gone, I’ve been letting Rion treat me in a similar way. “I

don't think I know anymore," I admit. Or, more honestly, I don't know if I like the person I've become.

August smiles sadly and reaches his hand through the bars. I take it, and the second our skin touches, magic sizzles between us, the golden glow tempting us to follow the fate's path.

"Let's just forget everything and everyone else and get to know each other. We aren't enemies, Milana. We never have been," he rasps, his gaze sweeping over mine with a heated intensity. "Give me a chance."

I want to so fucking badly.

I glance around the dungeon exaggeratedly. "We're not exactly in the best situation for that."

He laughs, and I pull out the water bottle from under my cloak with my free hand and pass it to him.

August arches a brow. Up close, his lashes are long, thick, and frame those dark, soulful eyes perfectly. "Rion isn't going to love you keeping me alive. Does he know you are my mate?"

I shake my head. "No, and I'm going to keep it that way."

I don't know what they would do, but I know they would use me to get what they want. I'm not going to let that happen. "That's my smart girl," he murmurs, opening the lid to the bottle and taking a few deep swallows. When it's empty, he hands it back to me. "I still haven't eaten the chocolate you gave me."

"You saving it for a rainy day?" I ask, my lip twitching. He brings his lips to my

fingers and places a soft kiss there. A shiver shoots through my hand and up my arm. And then I decide to use my magic, closing my eyes and pushing it through to him.

I've done this once before, but I don't know if he even knows it. It was when I was locked away in his castle. He couldn't zip before, but with a little boost, I knew he could. And now, if Rion tries to hurt him, he will have more magic to keep him alive.

"What are you doing?" he asks, his brow furrowing as his eyes close.

"Lending you a little power," I reply, leaning my face against the bars.

"This doesn't feel like you hate me," he whispers in a husky tone.

I could never hate him.

He's half of my soul.

I just don't know if he deserves my heart.

But what I do know, and what I need to admit to myself, is that I'm not going to let anything happen to him.

I'm wired to think of him as mine, and I was fool to think I could ignore that.

Chapter Six

Again, she boosted me with her magic. I knew when she did it before because I could feel it, but I didn't say anything then because I was too scared she'd regret giving me anything of herself. I don't care about the magic. Yeah, it's nice to be able to zip after having to get others to do it for me all of this time, but that's not why I want the beautiful female sitting in front of me.

Does she realize she's on the dirty ground, as close to me as she can be, without tearing down this cell?

"Do you ever wonder how different things would have been if we'd just met at a party or the market?" she asks, and I slowly nod because I've thought about that a lot.

"Yes, but there's no point questioning everything," I reply, stretching my neck from side to side. "You were introduced into my life when you were meant to be."

"You believe that?"

I have to, or it's all for nothing. "I do."

She stands up, dusting her clothing. "I better go before someone shows up."

"Okay. I'll see you during your next visit." I smirk.

"If you're smart, there won't be a next visit," she murmurs, shaking her head.

“I’m exactly where I’m meant to be,” I reply, watching her as she ascends the stairs.

She hesitates on the third one, turning around and staring at me. “I don’t fully trust you yet, August,” she states, her expression emotionless.

“You will,” I reply in a confident tone. “You’ll learn to trust me more than anyone in all eight kingdoms,” I promise. I’m her mate, and I’ll fucking treasure her. I’ll show this woman she can trust me and realize there is no one else for her.

My soul is wired to yearn for hers.

From the moment I saw her, I knew she was it for me.

Anyone before her no longer matters—they were just pathways that led me to her.

I suddenly understood why Rave wanted to kill me, and Soren tried to do the same. It was because the thought of another man touching her has me wanting to burn this realm to the ground.

When Rion steps into my cell tonight, I can tell something is different—off. The way he watches me, his mind is working overtime like he knows something I don’t.

He’s a few steps in front of me. The air is thick with tension, and the back of my neck prickles. Yeah, something bad is about to happen.

My jaw tightens when four of his men step into the cell behind him. Two are demons, one is a vampire, and one is a fae. I feel the power emanating from them, and here I am, wearing these shackles that contain my magical powers.

But I’m not going to go down without a fight.

Let him try and fry me.

Maybe this is my penance for all that I've done.

For locking Milana away and thinking that was somehow a good idea.

Rion crosses his arms over his chest and smirks, his red eyes filled with satisfaction. The rugged scar on his cheek that cuts through his eyebrow looks even more ominous today.

“You've given us nothing that we need, so now we're going to kill you. Unless you conveniently have decided to share something that will save your life. All we want is the castle layout. Surely, that small tidbit of information isn't worth your life?”

I'm not stupid. Either way, they aren't going to let me live.

“Why don't you let me out of these?” I murmur, glancing down at my chains. “And make it a fair fight? Or does it take five of you to kill one common fae?”

Rion chuckles, but there's no humor in it. “So you can zip away before we're done with you?”

Electricity sparks from his fingers.

The vampire behind him steps forward, and vines stream out from his fingertips.

Fucking wonderful.

I brace my feet apart. I'm not going down without a fight. I'm not fucking dying and leaving Milana out here alone to live with these assholes using her as they see fit.

I've killed before. I've taken lives. I've never claimed to be innocent.

I know people make assumptions about me. But that's what made me a good mercenary and an even better royal guard. I'm always underestimated.

But I'm protective.

Possessive.

And I look after what's mine.

I'm not ready to leave this realm just yet.

She's going to know unconditional love if it's the last thing I do.

The vines wrap around my shoulders, snaking around my arms to hold me back, and when the first strike of electricity hits me, my head slams back against the wall.

I don't know how long the torture goes on for, but I pass out, and when I come back, it's just Rion standing over me, a knife in his hand.

"We've decided we're going to keep you alive a little longer and send Zython a little present to show him how serious we are," he says, stamping his foot down on my open palm. Pain spears up my arm, and when he brings the knife down toward my fingers...

"What are you doing?" comes a sweet yet stern voice.

My eyes snap to hers, but she's looking directly at Rion. Her expression is carefully blank, and I hate that she's seeing me like this. Absolutely fucking hate it.

“Showing our prisoner what happens when he doesn’t cooperate.” Rion smirks, stepping off my hand and giving me his back. “Go back upstairs, Milana. Now . You don’t need to see this.”

For once, I agree with the bastard.

“I don’t think I can, Rion,” she murmurs, reaching out to touch his shoulder. He freezes, Milana’s magic holding him in place while she drains his magic from him. A booster is a very dangerous person and not one you want to be on the bad side of.

But even when she was kept in our castle, she never drained me.

Not once.

And now I can see just how easily she could have done so.

She only gave, never took from me.

“What are you doing?” Rion barks between clenched teeth. “Your father?—”

“He’s gone, Rion. And you won’t be hurting August anymore. This rebellion... do you even know what we’re fighting for anymore? We wanted fair leaders, a fight for freedom against the royal family, but look at what we have become. We aren’t any different from them. We just want their power and control. I’m done being a pawn in a game I never wanted to play.”

Rion crumples to the floor, passing out from losing his magic. Milana takes the keys from his pocket and unlocks the shackles.

She made a quick decision.

And right now, it's me.

Her mate.

Fuck everything else.

She takes my hand in hers, helping me up.

And then we zip the hell out of there.

Chapter Seven

We go to the first place I can think of—Halia's cabin. It's on the border of the Mermaid Kingdom, and nowhere anyone besides Halia would think to look for us. It's my safe place.

She won't mind me being here. We use this place for our monthly girls' night catch-up, and it's magically warded to let me in.

"Wait here. Let me make sure it's safe," he says, stepping in first.

I'm confused as to how he could go in without me. He shouldn't be able to.

"Are the wards down?" I ask, frowning.

He comes back and holds out his hand. "Come on, it's safe. The wards are up. They usually don't work on me. It's the most useful magic that I have."

"That's pretty cool," I admit.

Wards can't hold him? I'd love to have that gift.

We step inside, and he glances around again, taking in the small kitchen, peach-colored leather couch, and a dining table that seats four. A door leads to the bedroom and the bathroom with a bathtub attached to it. It's the perfect hideout, except for the fact that there's only one bed.

I didn't think about that when I brought us here.

"Where are we?" he asks in a deep, husky rumble.

He's tall—much taller than I ever realized. His gaze is gentle as he stares down at me, so different from the other males I have been with. There is a strength to him, a calming presence that steadies me in a way I didn't know I needed. As someone who can be anxious at times, it's comforting to be around that kind of energy and soak it in.

"Shelly, in the Mermaid Kingdom. It's my friend's cabin," I say, sitting on the couch while August stares out the kitchen window. He seems captivated by the ocean views, and I know how he feels. It's stunning here, with blue skies and water as far as the eye can see. Behind us are lush green cliffs and a small town in the center. Shelly is the smallest capital city in all eight kingdoms, which makes sense, considering they spend most of their time in the water.

"I've always wanted to come here," he admits, turning around and licking his lips. I realize he must be hungry.

"Help yourself to anything you need. I'll get us some food while you have a bath," I offer.

He glances down at his clothing and winces. His shirt is torn, showing off most of his muscled back.

"I'll go grab you some clothes too. There are clean towels in the bathroom."

He nods, walking forward and stopping in front of me. "Thank you."

"I shouldn't have brought you there in the first place," I admit, swallowing hard. "I'm

sorry, August. I betrayed you by doing what I did. Just know, nothing like that will ever happen again.”

He smiles, and a curl falls across his forehead.

Fuck. He’s spectacular.

“I’m loyal to you now, Milana,” he states, lifting my chin in his fingers. “What’s a little drugging and kidnapping between mates?”

My lip twitches, and I raise my hand to touch his. “Don’t forget locking me in your bedroom.”

“Are we keeping score now?” he teases, and I poke my tongue out at him.

His eyes darken, and his gaze lowers to my mouth before the pad of his thumb brushes across my lower lip. “I’ll go get cleaned up.” He lets go of me, and I miss his touch instantly. How long has it been since I’ve been with a male? A year, at least. I’m not a virgin, far from it, and I hope he doesn’t expect I am. From what I’ve gathered, I’m a lot older than him—not that it matters so much when we live so long.

I zip away to get August everything he needs, picking up some fresh clothes, a toothbrush, and some food. I’m placing the items on the bed when the door opens, and he enters wearing nothing but a towel wrapped low around his hips.

Wow. Hard, corded muscles stare back at me. His body is lean and muscular, his six-pack making my mouth water. He has a trail of dark hair that disappears beneath the towel, drawing my attention lower. His V points toward what I know is going to be a prize by the way it’s pushing up against the material.

Thank you, fates.

He has no ink, only smooth, tanned skin. He clears his throat, and my eyes snap up to his amused ones. “You had your fill?”

I look away and can feel my cheeks heat as he laughs a deep, melodic sound that sends a shiver down my spine. He runs his thumb across the rough shadow of stubble on his cheek as he steps forward, a few droplets from his damp hair trailing down his chest.

I want to lick them.

“Milana, if you keep looking at me like that...” he growls, reaching behind me to pick up one of the tunics I got him. His bicep touches my shoulder, and I clear my throat, stepping aside to give him a little space.

“You didn’t have to get me anything, you know? I could have gone myself,” he says, holding the material.

I look over his perfect naked form. “August, you’ve been tortured, half-starved, and left to sleep in the dirt for days. Please, let me do this for you. It’s the least I can do. I’m the reason you were down there in the first place.”

“We’re letting that go, remember?” He flashes me a smile I’m sure has caused many panties to drop in the past.

“I’ll let you get dressed,” I manage to get out, closing the door behind me to start cooking.

When he’s fully dressed, he steps out and sits at the table while I place a thick, juicy steak, some potatoes, salad, and a glass of ale in front of him.

“Thank you,” he rasps, keeping his eyes on me as he takes his first bite. “You made

this? It's delicious."

I shrug. My father ensured I was raised to be a good wife. I'm a great cook, I keep a tidy house, and I know how to plan and host events. He didn't want me to learn how to fight, and I've always hated that. I never wanted to be weak, and I pushed to get involved in the rebellion, but looking back, I think it was for more of his time and approval than anything else. I wanted to feel useful. I didn't want to be a pretty toy waiting to be picked up.

"So, what now?" he asks, sipping his ale. "I need to let my friends know that I'm safe. Will Rion try and look for you? I'm not going to let anything happen to you. You know that, right?"

I do.

"Yeah, he will be looking for me. He would have told everyone about what I did by now," I say, leaning back in my chair. "He won't find us here, though, and Halia won't tell him where we are."

"The Mermaid Princess?" he asks, eyebrows raising.

I nod. "Yeah, she's kind of my only friend. At least now that Vera..." I trail off, not wanting to bring that whole Vale thing up again. I already feel bad enough knowing that Vera lied about Rave abusing him. I was manipulated by her, and now I feel like an idiot. I thought I was helping and doing the right thing for a friend, for another woman, but I was being manipulated. "We can trust her."

We finish the rest of our meal in silence, and August cleans up before I stand to do so. I go to the bathroom to wash up and change into some of Halia's spare clothes, which she leaves here. Now we're safe and out of fight-or-flight mode, my mind starts to wonder what the hell will happen next.

Leaving the bathroom and entering the bedroom, I stare at the bed. Lifting my head, I notice August standing in the other open door, doing the same.

“I can sleep on the floor,” he quickly suggests, rubbing the back of his neck and glancing up at me with a lopsided smile, giving him an almost boyish look.

“I can take the couch,” I suggest instead, knowing there’s no way his large frame will fit.

“Milana, that’s not happening.” He shakes his head, pulling the sheets back on the bed before turning and lifting me in his arms. With a soft squeal, I hold onto his shoulders while his big hands land on my hips. He gently places me on the bed and then kisses my head.

I hesitate before offering, “The bed is huge. There’s no reason for you to sleep on the floor, especially after how you’ve spent the last few nights.”

His eyes flicker. “Are you sure?”

I nod and slide over on the mattress.

Wisps of golden magic slice through the air, an awkward reminder of who we are to each other.

Of what’s on the line.

August slides into bed, pulling the blanket over us and tucking me in.

My heart races, and my nipples pebble.

I’m on the run from the people I thought I belonged with, turned on, and in bed with

my mate.

What can go wrong?

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Chapter Eight

She rolls over onto her side, facing away from me. My eyes drop to her shoulder, where I see her tattoo—a small bird flying away from a cage, leaving behind a trail of feathers—for the first time. It's stunning—a caged bird, now free, just like her right now.

As if she can feel my eyes on her, she rolls back over, facing me. She really is beautiful. There's so much we need to say to each other, yet I can't find the words.

She's here.

In the same bed as me.

I didn't know if we'd ever get to this point, and now that it's happening, I don't know how I should play it.

Do I slowly get to know her?

Or do I follow my gut and reach out to touch her?

I want her so badly.

However, she's only just gotten over thinking I am her enemy, so I don't want to push her too fast and scare her off. But then her blue eyes soften as they search mine, and her tongue brushes over her lower lip, my eyes dropping at the movement.

I'm so hard it's painful.

I haven't been with anyone since Pandora and found out I had a mate.

"Fuck it," I whisper hoarsely and kiss her without warning, claiming her. She stills for only a second before she kisses me back, her tongue tasting mine almost frantically. I slide my hand underneath her hair, holding her nape, bringing her closer to me. A soft moan escapes her, and the kiss soon deepens. It's the best kiss I've ever had. I lift her on top of me so she's straddling me, giving her control. She winds her fingers in my hair and presses her hot little body against mine. I know she can feel how hard I am, and when she grinds down against me, I make a rumble deep in my throat. She shudders against me before I break the kiss first, but only to trail my lips across her jawline and down the column of her throat.

"August," she whimpers as I suck on her skin, marking her.

I want the world to know she's mine.

But I want her to realize that fact first.

The bond hums, enhancing the heat between us. My mouth stops on her collarbone and then rises back to her lips. I grip her jaw in my hand and search her eyes. "You're perfect, Milana. Thank you for saving me. For choosing me. You won't regret it."

I place another soft kiss on her forehead. She closes her eyes as if savoring the moment and touches her lips with the pad of her thumb. "I don't know what we're doing," she admits.

"We're trusting the fates," I whisper, and she smiles. "I don't care about anything else. As long as I have you by my side, we can figure out everything else along the way."

She laughs softly. “You mean a rebellion now chasing us?”

“They were already chasing me,” I remind her with a grin.

We share a glance of amusement, and I rub my chest. “Come on, let’s get some sleep.”

I want nothing more than to fuck her right now. Nothing more. But I don’t think it’s the best idea to rush into sex, not when she’s still so unsure of me.

When I have her, I want to have all of her.

I want her to trust me.

She takes the invitation and buries her face in my chest. “I must admit this isn’t how I thought tonight would end.”

“Me either,” I agree, smiling to myself. I rest my chin on the top of her head. “It’s better than I ever imagined.”

“Me too,” she whispers, nuzzling into me.

And with that, I fall into the best sleep of my life.

Chapter Nine

When I wake, a hard body is pressed against me. August is spooning me from behind, one of his arms under my head and the other on my waist. He's holding me to him tightly like he's scared I'm going to disappear.

I might not know him, but my body sure feels like it does. I don't know why he stopped last night, but I was so wet I almost begged him. The kisses we have shared turned me on so much I didn't even know it could be like that.

His mouth.

Wow.

I can feel his morning arousal pressing into my ass, and I can't help but move against it.

"Milana," he warns in a deep, husky growl. "I only have so much restraint."

"No one is making you stop," I reply, grinding back onto him.

He pushes into my touch, seeking more.

He wants this too.

He suddenly grips my neck in a possessive hold and brings his lips to my ear. "Do you trust me? Until the answer is yes, I don't think we should."

A slight whimper escapes me. I'm so fucking turned on, and I don't like being told no. In fact, it makes me want to break his resolve even more.

"Trust is built... through experiences."

He makes a sound deep in his throat—a mix between a laugh and a growl—and then starts to play with my nipples. I can't think straight at this stage. It's been so long since I've had a male worship my body, and the last one who did was a waste of a body count.

"Yes, I suppose so. But we don't know each other that well, do we?" he rasps, kissing up my neck. "But we're about to. I'm going to make you come all over my fingers."

"Yes," I plead.

He lets go of me and rolls me onto my back, sitting up on his elbow.

"Eyes on me, love," he demands while he slides his hand under my nightdress. "I want to see your face when I make you come for the first time."

He's so intense and sexy I can't help but follow his orders.

"So wet for me," he murmurs, sliding two fingers inside me while his thumb rubs delicious circles around my clit.

It doesn't take long.

My thighs start to tremble before the pleasure hits me, making me gasp. August doesn't look away from me, taking in every detail of my reaction. I hope my face looks sexy when I orgasm, but I'm guessing not.

“Good girl,” he growls, pulling out his fingers, only to bring them to his mouth and lick them clean.

My eyes widen.

Holy crap.

He’s so fucking hot, and I think I could come again just from that action alone.

“So perfect,” he whispers, lowering his face to kiss me. I taste myself on his tongue as I push him back and straddle him, much like last night. But this time, I lift his tunic until he takes the hint and sits up, gripping the material at the back of his neck to slide it off.

I nearly sigh at seeing his body, using my hands to explore. From his chest down to his abs, I feel each hard muscle before tracing it with my tongue. By the time I slide his pants down his hips, he’s so hard his cock just about slaps me in the face. Wrapping my hands around him, I slowly start to work him up and down. His brown eyes stay locked on mine, a soft growl leaving his lips.

When I kiss the head, his hips move upward of their own accord.

“Fuck, Milana.” His voice is gravelly.

Smiling, I slide him into my mouth as deeply as I can. He’s a perfect size, big and thick, but not too much that it’s going to hurt.

His fingers tangle in my hair but don’t push down—they simply grip against my skull in a delicious way. With my fist at the base, I suck up and down until he tries to stop me.

“I’m going to come.”

Good .

I appreciate the warning, but I’m going to swallow every drop either way.

“Fuck, just like that. That hot little mouth is so fucking perfect,” he rasps, his hips jerking as an orgasm hits him. Golden magic almost suffocates us, urging us to bond. We both have to make that decision but now is not the time.

When he’s done, I suck gently, and his entire body shivers. I fucking love that. Call me evil, but I feel so powerful in this moment. He gently cups my cheek, and I slowly let go of him. Our eyes connect and hold.

“I was trying to be good,” he murmurs, his lips twitching into a small, lopsided smile.

“You were good,” I reply, and he laughs, dragging me up his body until I’m pressed against him.

When I glance up at him a few moments later, he’s still smiling.

“Is this what we’ve been missing out on?” I ask, planting a kiss against the middle of his smooth chest.

“Not looking back, remember?” he reminds me, soothingly running his fingers down my back. “What do you want to do today?”

“You said you’ve always wanted to come here, so why don’t I show you around?” I suggest, sitting up and turning to face him.

He traces a line down my cheek with his thumb. “I’d love that. We just need to keep

an eye out in case Rion somehow finds us.”

“So don’t forget it’s not a holiday?” I tease, and he grins, flashing me his straight, white teeth.

“It can be a holiday for you. I will stay on guard because I’m not letting anything happen to you now that I’ve finally gotten you.”

Fates, he is sweet.

We force ourselves to get ready and head outside. We go to the ocean first, and he’s blown away seeing all the mermaids and mermen swimming around. Halia told me they have their own city and the palace where she lives underneath the water. They can go back and forth between land and sea, but they much prefer the water. She said that being on land is kind of like being underwater for us, beautiful and curious, but you don’t feel like you belong there.

We walk along the white sand, hand in hand, and up the stairs to the main town.

“It’s like another realm here,” he comments, his eyes wide as he takes it all in. “It’s beautiful. I could sit at the beach all day, just people-watching.”

“I know. That’s why I usually visit Halia here instead of her coming to me.” I grin, pointing to my favorite little inn. We walk up the cobblestone steps, and August opens the door for me to enter. When we sit, he even pulls out my chair.

“Thank you,” I murmur.

We’re looking over the menu when I hear a familiar voice.

“Milana?”

Lifting my head, I turn to see Reef. He's someone I've slept with in the past, a merman Halia introduced me to, one of her many cousins. He's handsome with white-blond hair, ocean-blue eyes, and a muscular body, but he pales in comparison to August.

"Reef, how are you?" I ask, turning to August and clearing my throat. "August, this is Reef, Halia's cousin. Reef, this is August."

Blue eyes dance with amusement. "Pretty sure I'm much more than just Halia's cousin to you. I've had your?—"

Shit.

"August is my mate," I blurt out, cutting off whatever vulgar thing he was about to say.

August stands up in front of Reef, blocking him from seeing me. "She's mine . Don't look at her, and don't fucking bring up whatever you had because it's done with."

He reaches for his hip, and I realize he's used to having a weapon, likely his sword, right there with him.

I glance around August to see Reef raising his arms in surrender. "I had no idea you'd met your mate." His eyes drop to August's bare wrists. "Although I can see you haven't bonded just yet."

"That's none of your fucking business," he snaps, grabbing Reef by the throat and lifting him off the floor.

Oh boy.

“Well, well, what do we have here?” comes an amused masculine voice.

I turn to the left and look into cold, lifeless, light-green eyes. The male has black, almost shaved to his skull hair, a scar down his cheek, and an aura of fuck-around-and-find-out. He looks kind of familiar, but I can’t remember where I recognize him from. Then it hits me. This is Saylor’s brother, the one she called to help get me out of August’s room. He broke through the wards for her and helped me escape.

“What are you doing here?” August growls, letting Reef drop.

Salem glances between August and Reef, then cracks his neck from side to side. “I’m here on a mission.”

“The Assassins’ Academy rehire you?”

My eyes widen. He was fired by the academy? I’ve heard of them. They train the most ruthless killers in the realm.

Salem scowls, shaking his head. “No, those fuckers don’t know a good thing when they see it. I’m still on probation, but Sage gave me one of his jobs to do, so I’m here on his behalf.”

I glance around, gasping. “You’re going to kill someone in this inn?”

Salem smirks, pulling out a dagger and flipping it in the air. “No, I’m here for the strawberry cheesecake.”

“Oh.” I don’t know what to say to that.

“If you see your sister or Bane, can you tell them I got out of the dungeons and I’m all good?” August asks him, and Salem arches his brow.

“I’m seeing Saylor tonight, so I’ll let her know... for a price.” He smirks, turning to point his dagger at Reef, who is still standing there like an idiot. “We going to have fish for lunch?”

“Let him go,” I say, widening my eyes at Reef and telling him to get the hell out of here.

August flattens his palm against my stomach, pulling me tight against him. “Stop trying to protect him, Milana.” His tone is deathly.

I don’t want an innocent person getting hurt, but I don’t say that not wanting to push any of them further.

Salem throws his dagger in the air and catches the sharp part in his hand, not even flinching. There’s something seriously wrong with him. “Unbonded males are very dangerous creatures.”

“What price do I have to pay for you to let my friends know I’m alive and safe?” August asks Salem once more.

Salem slowly smiles. It doesn’t reach his eyes, so it makes him look even creepier. “Have lunch with me. No one likes to eat alone.” He pulls out a chair and sits, placing the dagger on the table next to the fork.

Reef finally runs out of there.

And I’m left to have lunch with my mate and a shifter who is too crazy to be employed by The Assassins’ Academy.

Wonderful.

Chapter Ten

Having lunch with Salem wasn't on my bingo card for today, but here the fuck we are. Milana watches him as he eats each bite of cheesecake like it's the best thing he's ever tasted. He's licking his lips and putting on a massive show, and I'm regretting asking him for anything. I should have just gone and told Astrid my damn self, but I didn't want to leave Milana even for a moment.

I don't like her eyes on any other male right now, but the look of undisguised confusion in her eyes instead of any kind of lust has me contained. She appears like she'd rather strangle him than fuck him.

"So, you going to tell me why you were locked up in your mate's dungeons in the first place?" Salem asks, smirking.

"No," I reply, and he laughs, his wide shoulders shaking.

I turn to Milana. "How's your food?"

"Amazing," she replies, offering me a small smile. "Is the chicken good?"

I nod, and she beams. One thing I've noticed about her is that she's used to taking care of people. I didn't expect her to go out and get me clothes or even feed me, but she did those things automatically. I don't know if it's because she was the only child and a daughter or if it's just her nature, but from now on, I'm going to be the one taking care of her.

She is going to come first, no matter what, in more ways than one.

Salem tilts his head to the side, his face a mask of concentration. He then rolls his eyes and laughs to himself.

Okaaaay then.

“My brothers,” he comments, his lip twitching. He shakes his head and then looks at me. “Does your mate know that you fucked the Witch Queen?”

The gasp from beside me is a clear indication that, no, she did not know that, nor did I want her to.

“We both have pasts that no longer matter now that we’ve found each other,” I grit between clenched teeth.

“Tell that to Reef,” Milana sasses, tapping her nails on the wooden table.

“Reef left alive and uninjured,” I reply, covering her hand with mine and interlacing our fingers. “Which is more than he deserves for touching what’s mine.”

Salem nods his head. “Good luck to anyone who has even looked at my future mate.” An evil glint flickers in his light green eyes. “I’m going to kill them all.”

Milana clears her throat and takes another bite of her pasta. “Well, good luck to whoever she is then.” The way she eats and her manners are all so impeccable. It’s like she’s been trained to be the perfect wife or be married right into a royal family, which I suppose she was going to be.

We’re a lot more relaxed in Chaos, though. At our last family dinner, Kai threw a piece of bread at Axe’s head, resulting in a massive food fight. After that, we all went

to the lake and jumped in to wash off.

“Astrid needs to tell me who she is so I can go and find her,” Salem murmurs, running his fingers across his chin. “Or maybe Laurel can tell me. As my new sister-in-law, she can’t say no, right?”

“Does everyone know Astrid then?” Milana asks, and I can’t place her tone.

Salem shrugs, licking the last of his cheesecake from his fork. “This life is nothing but a game of power. You want to know who you’re up against. Rave and Astrid are key players.” He pauses and lifts off his chair a little to stare out the window. “And there’s my mark. Be right back, going to do some killing.” He disappears into thin air, and Milana and I share a look.

“Let’s get out of here before he gets back,” she blurts out, and I grin, standing up and offering her my hand.

We walk back to the cabin, hand in hand. This feels like the first vacation I’ve taken in the fates only know how long, and I think it’s just what we both needed.

“How long do you want to stay here?” I ask her as we sit on the couch together. “Do you feel comfortable coming back with me to Chaos?”

She bites her lower lip and tucks her blonde hair behind her ear. “Can we wait a few days? I think I want to get to know you more before we go back to your kingdom.”

“Okay.” I nod slowly. “We can do that. I want you to feel safe, and maybe you could learn to love it in Chaos with me. Or hell, I could go wherever you are.”

She’s about to reply when I turn my head only to see Salem leaning up against the door, arms crossed and his leg lifted. “Nice place you got here.”

“What the fuck,” I growl, standing up and moving in front of Milana. “How did you find us?”

He smirks and throws me a bag of gold. “Bane said to give you this.”

And then he’s gone.

“Crazy bastard,” I mutter but grin at the coins in my hand. Considering all my belongings, including my gold, are back at home, this is going to help us survive our next few days. “Okay, I’m going to go and get some things to make dinner for us tonight.”

Blue eyes widen in surprise. “You cook?”

“I grew up with a single, hardworking mother who wasn’t always home,” I say, shrugging. Sitting back beside her, I put the gold down and cup her face. “What do you feel like eating, love?”

“Surprise me.” She grins, planting a soft kiss on my lips.

“Okay, you relax. Do you need me to get anything else?”

She shakes her head. I kiss her this time, my tongue delving into her mouth. She moans and runs her fingers through my hair before letting me go. My lips brush her forehead.

I think she has a thing for my curls. My mother used to always say, the curls get the girls, when I was growing up, and the thought makes me laugh.

“I’ll be back,” I call out to her.

It's time to show my mate a taste of what the rest of her life will be like.

Chapter Eleven

After I soak in the bath and finish getting dressed, August steps into the room with a bouquet of flowers. And not just any flowers, my favorite wildflowers.

I've always wanted to get 'just because' flowers.

"How did you know?" I ask, taking them from him and bringing them to my nose.

"Lucky guess." He grins, playing with the end of my hair. "You look beautiful."

"Thank you," I reply, noticing the sword on his hip. "Feeling naked, were you?"

He looks down and laughs, his warm eyes pulling me in. "Yeah, actually, I was. I always have my sword with me."

In the kitchen, I find a glass vase and arrange the flowers while August unpacks the food he brought. He cooks dinner, surprises me with dessert, and even handles all the cleanup—like it's the easiest thing in the world.

After that, he takes me to bed and gives me a full body massage with the oil he bought today. He's really thought of everything, and I can't remember the last time, if ever, someone has taken care of me like this.

When I moan as he rubs my lower back, he stays there a little longer, giving more love where it's needed, and I don't even have to ask. His big, strong fingers then work their magic into my thighs.

“You’re good with your hands,” I murmur.

August laughs softly, pressing a kiss to the curve of my ass. “I’m glad you think so. If you keep making those little noises, this is going to get cut short, though.”

How sad is it that no one has taken the time to treat me like this before?

My eyes close. I try to stay awake because I want him to massage my front, too, if you know what I mean, but his hands are magic, and soon I’m fast asleep.

It’s still dark when I wake up, rubbing my eyes and reaching my hand out to feel for August. He’s curled up on his side, facing me. This man massaged me to sleep and didn’t want anything in return. And that thought makes me smile, my lips curving even more as I gently slide down his body. His cock is halfway hard already, and when I start to stroke him, he comes alive instantly.

“Milana?” he rasps in a husky tone. And then, “Fuck!” as my tongue licks his head. He rolls onto his back and threads his fingers in my hair. “Yes, just like that. So fucking good.”

His magic seeps into my skin, the push heavier than before. I’m so tempted to let it in, but we haven’t had that talk yet, and bonding isn’t something we can undo. When we decide to let it happen, we are intertwined forever. We will share magic and be able to feel each other’s emotions. We will be tied to each other for the rest of our lives. There’s no walking away. Only death can sever the bond, and even then, you probably won’t want to live with such a loss.

My mouth works him up and down, my cheeks hollowing as I suck him into the back of my throat as far as I can take him. Gagging, I ease up and run my tongue along his length. August makes this growling sound that makes me so damn wet.

“I need to be inside you. Now,” he rumbles, sitting up and lifting me onto his cock like I weigh nothing.

“Are you on the contraceptive herb?” I ask him because I’m not. And we sure as hell should have had this conversation before.

He nods, and my teeth sink into my lower lip as I slowly slide down onto him. He fills me up so well, and I’m so wet that I’m making a mess. Rolling my hips, I rest my palms on his pecs and grind down onto him, getting him in a spot that hits just right. August grips my ass in his fingers, controlling my movements from underneath me, thrusting his hips up to meet me.

“Give me that mouth,” he orders, and I lean forward to kiss him. His tongue sensually tastes mine, and we both moan. I’ve lost all coherent thought at this stage with my body running the show, and I’m giving it what it wants.

August flips us over so I’m on my back and lifts my legs against his shoulders. He’s so wonderfully deep, and when he reaches between us to play with my clit, I come instantly with his name on my lips.

“That’s one,” he murmurs, pulling out and going down on me. His tongue laps swipe over me, sending tingles down my spine. I’m already sensitive from the last orgasm, so it doesn’t take long for ecstasy to claim me again.

“Two. Mmm... I think another two before I bend you over and fuck you from behind and fill you up with my cum.”

Who knew August had such a filthy mouth?

Thank you, fates.

He continues to eat my pussy until I come again twice before he does as he says, getting me on my knees and driving into me from behind. He slaps my ass twice, and I moan into the pillow, pushing back against each thrust he delivers. Gripping my hands, he puts them behind my back, pinning them so I can't move.

Fuck.

I don't think I've ever been more turned on in my life as he takes control of my body.

I give all of myself to him, and he takes.

It's perfect.

"You feel so fucking good, love. So, so wet. No one has made me feel this good before, Milana."

He hits the right spot, and I almost black out as I come all over his hard cock. The second I'm done, he finally lets go, filling me with his hot cum. His harsh groan fills the room.

I'm panting, gasping for air as he lets my hands go and swipes up my leg, rubbing his cum into my skin. "Fuck, you are so perfect," he growls, pushing his finger inside me.

Is he?

Pushing his cum back inside me?

Yes, yes, he is.

Fuck.

“August,” I moan. “I can’t do it again.”

But even as I say that, my hips push back against him. I’ve always wanted a man to do this to me. To force me to come. I want to fight it, and yeah, in the end, I want to lose.

Is that bad?

I’ve never said those words out loud before.

“Yes, you can. You’re going to come once more like a good girl, all over my tongue,” he orders.

“I can’t.”

“You can, and you will ,” he growls. “One more, whether you want it or not. I fucking need it.” He grips my hips and slowly licks over my clit until he builds up the tempo, then licks faster.

I shake my head from side to side. I can’t.

He slides two fingers inside me, curling them until I have no choice but to give him what he wants.

I fall apart.

And this time, I do pass out.

Chapter Twelve

Her eyes flash open, and I take a deep breath.

She scared me for a second.

“Are you okay?”

She nods, a dreamy, sated smile on her face. “Yeah.”

Lifting her against my chest, I hold her tight and trail my fingers down her back. “I didn’t push you too hard, did I?”

“No, I loved it.”

Thank fuck.

Kissing her forehead, I let my lips linger against her skin. After about ten minutes, I slip away and return with a warm cloth, cleaning her up. The sun is just rising now, so I go fill the bath for her. She’s awake when I return, watching me. She laughs as I lift and carry her into the waiting tub. When I start to wash her hair, her eyes widen in surprise, then close shut as she relaxes. My fingers gently massage her scalp, and she makes those little noises I love so much.

“I could get used to this,” she says with a sweet sigh.

“Me too,” I admit, kissing the side of her neck.

Fuck, I can't get enough of her . There's no way I will live without her after this.

I've just gotten her out of the bath and wrapped a towel around her when we hear a loud bang.

"Rion," she whispers.

Fuck.

Before I know it, we've zipped right into Chaos.

Literally.

We're in the dining room while King Zython, Axe, Kai, Bane, and a pregnant Saylor are all having breakfast together.

Milana is in a towel, and I'm in a pair of boxer shorts.

Bane laughs, his inked hand raking through his hair. "I knew today was a good choice to drop in for breakfast."

Saylor waves at Milana. "Are you here of your own free will this time?"

I throw an unimpressed look in her direction, but she simply winks at me. Today, she's wearing a rainbow-colored dress, the opposite of her mate in his usual all-black get-up.

"Welcome back, son," King Zython says, trying to hide his grin behind his morning coffee.

"You have a lot of explaining to do." Axe smirks while Kai simply laughs, his

shoulders shaking.

Assholes.

“Milana, you know Saylor. That’s her mate, King Bane. You know King Zython, and Prince Kai and Axe,” I introduce quickly. “I’m going to take her to my room to get dressed.”

“I’m sure she remembers me, considering I was going to be her betrothed!” Axe calls out.

“Over my dead body!” I call back as we walk up the staircase.

“Not my best first impression as your mate.” Milana sighs, making sure her towel is covering her tits.

I grin and open my door. “Don’t worry about them.”

“This isn’t the room that?—”

It’s not the room I held her in—my old room. I didn’t want her to think about that.

“I wanted a new room... fresh start and all that.” I shrug, letting her look around. The bed is massive, with dark green sheets, and a big window shows off the views of our beautiful mountains.

“Wow,” she whispers, sitting on the bed. I go to my armoire and pull out some track pants and a shirt. They will be big on her, but will have to do for now. After she gets dressed, she sits on my lap and wraps her arms around my neck.

“You feel okay being here?” I ask, burying my face between her neck and shoulder.

“Yeah.” She sighs.

“You’ll tell me if you don’t?” I ask, and she nods. “Promise?”

“I promise. But right now, I’m starving.”

I stand with her still in my arms, and her legs tighten around me. “Let’s go get you fed and catch everyone up on what’s happened.”

“They won’t mind having the ex-rebellion princess under their roof?” she asks as we go back down the stairs.

“They didn’t mind before.” I smirk.

“I was locked away before, and my father was being killed,” she blurts out, and I stop in my tracks halfway down the wooden staircase.

“Milana—”

“I’m letting you in, August, but that doesn’t mean it’s so easy to just forget what has happened.”

“I’m not asking you to forget,” I say, kissing her temple and continuing on my way.

“You know you can put me down now.”

“I know.”

She laughs as I carry her to the table, placing her on the seat next to me. I can feel everyone’s amused gazes as I grab Milana a plate and start serving up everything.

From the corner of my eye, Axe is holding out his hand to Kai with a smug expression. Kai, sighing heavily, places a gold bag of coins into his palm.

“What did you bet on now?” I ask, frowning.

“How long it would take you to bring her here,” Kai admits, rolling the coins in his hand. “I said less than three nights. I won.”

“I won’t underestimate your charm again,” Axe grumbles, making Kai laugh out loud.

Milana’s ocean-blue eyes dance with amusement.

I wish the two of them would shut up in front of Milana, and the look I send them says as much.

Placing the plate in front of her, I move to fill mine while Milana clears her throat, eyeing the huge amount of food.

She needs to eat.

“August, who knew you’d be so damn cute?” Saylor beams, bouncing in her chair. Her pregnant belly has gotten bigger since the last time I saw her. “Welcome home, Milana. I hope you two will come and visit us in the Demon Kingdom sometime. You’re always welcome.”

“Thank you.” Milana smiles as she butters the thick slice of bread I gave her. “I’ve actually never been there, so I would love to. I hope I didn’t get you in trouble, Saylor...”

“Because I let you escape after I only just got here myself?” Saylor replies, her

honey-brown eyes twinkling.

“Yeah.” Milana winces, taking a delicate bite of bacon.

Saylor shrugs, batting her lashes at her mate. “Don’t you worry about any of that. We women have to stick together. And it looks like it has all worked out for you both.”

Her eyes drop to Milana’s bare wrists, but her expression doesn’t change.

“You going to tell us what happened or keep us in suspense?” King Zythos asks, studying the two of us.

“I was in their dungeon, and Astrid, Rave, and Soren came to save me...” I trail off and realize that Milana doesn’t know about all of that or that I had the option to leave but decided to stay to force her to be in my proximity.

“I know they wanted to save you, and you told them to leave you there, August.” She rolls her eyes. “Rave knew I was there, too, because his shadows surrounded me.”

“You chose to stay in the dungeons?” Kai asks, putting his fork down and leaning back in his chair. “That is some dedication for some pu?—”

Axe slaps the back of his head. “There are females present.”

“Thanks, so romantic,” Saylor adds, looking at me in a new light.

Bane kisses the side of her neck like he wants her attention back on him and not me. And I fucking get it now. I don’t want Milana even looking at another man.

“And then what?” Zythos presses, frowning.

“Rion was going to shock me to death while I had those magic-barring shackles on. Milana saved me. We went to the Mermaid Kingdom, but Rion found us there. So we came here,” I explain.

“Oh, and we ran into Salem there,” Milana adds, picking up her drink to hide her smile. “We had lunch together. Well, he had cheesecake.”

Saylor laughs. “Of course he did. He’s such a character.”

That’s one way to describe him.

I’m guessing that Bane didn’t tell Saylor about the message he passed on about me because, knowing him, he didn’t want to upset his pregnant mate in any way, so I left that part out.

“So, we going to kill Rion?” Axe casually puts it out there.

I nod. “Yeah, we’re going to kill him.”

In fact, anyone who comes after my mate will die.

Chapter Thirteen

“So, how long do people lose their magic after you suck it out of them?” August asks. I’ve been in the Incubus Kingdom for three nights now.

I’ve been shown all around the castle, and we’ve explored Chaos together, sharing our favorite spots. I’ve lived in this kingdom longer than him, so I ended up giving him the tour. We’re now sitting in the castle gardens, having lunch and enjoying the view. I don’t remember ever being so at ease.

“It depends, but usually about a day.”

“You’re strong,” he muses.

I tilt my head to the side. “I want to be stronger. Will you teach me how to fight? I’ve always wanted to learn, but my father wanted me to be a lady. A charitable wife. Not a warrior.”

He reaches over and cups my face, lowering his voice. “I’ll teach you anything you want to learn, love. Fighting, it just so happens, is something I’m good at. When do you want to start?”

“Tomorrow?” I suggest leaving today so we can spend this quality time together without having to watch our backs. I’m in the one place my father wanted to get into, the one place Rion was torturing August for information, and it’s nothing but beautiful.

I could have been a part of destroying all of this.

And for what?

The staff seems well-treated, and everyone around me seems happy.

Happy.

Something the rebellion has never been.

Over there, we wake up with hatred and revenge on our minds.

It fuels us.

Well, not me. I was just a pawn to be married off for power.

“Perfect. We can start with some weaponry, and then I’ll move to some hand-to-hand,” he suggests, reaching over to take my hand. “I’ll have to work with the royal guard some days, but you can train with us. I’m all yours.”

All mine.

Slowly, he’s breaking down every wall I’ve built. I can’t find any fault with him, aside from his role in what happened to my father. And even then, I suppose that wasn’t his choice, was it?

He’s patient, strong, and actually listens to me.

I feel safe with him.

Seen.

Heard.

I'm more than just a pretty face.

"You haven't mentioned anything about us bonding," I blurt out, wondering where his head is with that.

August goes utterly still.

He puts down his water and turns to me, his eyes searching. "I'm ready when you are, Milana. Say the word. You're the one who is unsure. I know what I want. You're mine either way, but I'd fucking love nothing more than to wear those mating bands on my wrists." He leans over the small table in between us and kisses along my jaw. "Is that what you want? I'll take you to our room right now and give that to you. I'd burn the fucking realm down for you if you ordered it."

Annnd now I'm turned on.

"Soon," I reply, his now dark and hungry eyes pinning me to the spot.

"Soon," he repeats, a promise in his heated gaze. "Just say the word, and I'm all yours."

I nod and look back out at the mountains. He's intense. I've never had anyone be so focused on me and all the little things about me. It makes me want to hold onto him for dear life and never let go. And at this stage, I'd be a fool not to mate with him.

It all happened so fast, but I should have known that being put near my fated mate would only end in one outcome. It's how it's meant to be, how the fates have deemed it.

I couldn't resist him even if I tried. I don't know how I stayed away as long as I did, but I guess I have my father to blame for that. He would never let me bond with August if he were alive, even with him being my mate.

Looking at it now, it was extremely selfish of him to do that. He had all these plans, and not one of them involved thinking of my happiness. I was never put first. I know he loved me and made sure I was well looked after physically. But emotionally? I don't think he had it in him. My mother died when I was young—too young to even remember—and my father is all I'd ever known.

I'm meant to have a lot of succubus blood in me, but the truth is, I don't. I think that's why he wanted Astrid so much. He wanted pure-blood children—succubus daughters. He wanted what I'm not.

Even my father wanted Astrid.

Another shot that hit its mark.

And yeah, that hurts more than I'd ever admit.

But this is the first time that I've ever felt enough. I can be myself with August, and he doesn't care how much magic I have or what my bloodline is.

He just wants me.

"Would you care if I didn't have any magic?" I ask him, shifting in my chair. "Or if I had human blood?"

His eyes skate over to me, and a curl of brown hair falls onto his forehead. "No. I don't have as much magic as you do, so why would I care? You're all I need, Milana, just as you are. I wouldn't care if you were fully human. I'm a common fae." He

touches his rounded ears, not pointed like the other fae lines. “I don’t give a fuck about bloodlines.”

“No one knows this, but my mother was half-human,” I admit to him, wringing my hands together. “My father hated it. He cared about his bloodline.”

August reaches over and takes my hand, running the pad of his thumb along my knuckles. “You’re mine , Milana. That’s more than enough for me. You’re more than enough.”

Swallowing hard, I look down and nod, emotion filling me.

I am enough.

I don’t need to be the pretty face of the rebellion or be married off to a prince to know my worth.

I was meant to be his.

And I no longer give a fuck about anything else.

Chapter Fourteen

“Nice to see you out of the dungeons,” Astrid says, standing up from her seat when she sees us. She’s out of her battle leathers, wearing a black dress, her braid hanging over one shoulder. I bet she still has multiple daggers hidden on her, though. “It’s nice to officially meet you, Milana. I’m Astrid.”

Milana stiffens but shakes the hand Astrid offers her. Does she have an issue with Astrid?

“Nice to meet you too.” She clears her throat. “I just wanted to say sorry about what happened with Vale. Vera... well, she told me some things that August has cleared up for me. I thought I was being a good friend to her, but I was wrong.”

Astrid’s hazel eyes soften. “Thank you for explaining that. Vale has only good things to say about you, so we kind of knew there was more to that story. It all worked out in the end.” She turns to me and arches her brow. “I wanted to talk to you about Rion. He’s looking for you both, and it won’t be long until he makes his move. Do you have a plan?”

I pull out Milana’s chair so she can sit and wait until they are seated before doing the same. Breakfast is spread out, but we’re the first ones here.

“My only plan is to kill Rion and anyone who might step up and try to get Milana back,” I admit, my jaw tense. “He hasn’t been seen around Chaos yet. We’ve got the royal guard on alert. Have you seen anything?”

Astrid closes her eyes, her brow furrowing. “I’ve seen a few things, but nothing that has to do with Rion. We all have your back in this. And if you need somewhere else to hide out, you can always come back to Aravelle.” She stands and grins. “I better go. I have to stop in at Peach’s Bakery to get a few things before I go home. Keep me updated.” With that, she disappears.

Milana is a little quiet and doesn’t eat much. After, we start our training, and I give her a dagger and short sword to see how she does with it.

“Need some help?” Axe offers, pulling off his tunic and picking up a sword.

My eyes quickly go to Milana to see if she’s checking him out. He’s extremely ripped, and she was meant to marry him, but besides a quick glance, she doesn’t bother looking.

Stretching my neck from side to side, I decide to pull off my shirt, reminding her what she has at home so she doesn’t need to eat elsewhere. Her eyes widen when she sees me, and her teeth sink into her lower lip.

Her reaction makes me feel like a fucking king.

I show her the correct fighting stance with my hands on her hips. I’m already hard, my cock straining against my battle leathers, but I need to focus.

“Okay, let’s start with showing you how to hold it properly,” I say, guiding her grip and showing her the correct angle for the sword. “You’ll probably need something a bit lighter than this. See how Axe is holding it?”

Axe slices the weapon through the air, and Milana copies him. After showing her how to move, I pick up my sword and slowly and gently do some swordplay with her. Her concentration face is on, and her blue eyes are narrowed. Her hair is tied back in

a long braid I want to wrap around my fist later tonight.

“That’s good,” Axe calls out, watching us. “Now go a little faster.”

She turns to his voice. “Eyes on me, love,” I demand, and her eyes snap back to me to me. “Never look away.”

I ignore Axe’s low laugh and keep working with her. Afterward, Axe and I demonstrate what it will look like after she’s had a lot of practice. I show her how to use and throw a dagger. After we’ve been at it for a few hours, we call it a day.

When we get up to my room, we shower together, and when she lowers herself to her knees in front of me, I finally get what I’ve been dreaming about all day. Wrapping her braid around my fist a few times, I use it to control her as she takes me into her hot mouth. “I love how you look right now, kneeling in front of me. Fuck. You’re so perfect for me.”

She moans around my cock, liking the praise. She starts to suck harder, taking me to the back of her throat. She then teasingly licks the underside of me.

“That’s it, just like that,” I rasp, letting my head fall against the wall. “No one has made me feel this good before, Milana. You are fucking made for me.”

Her nails dig into my thighs, and that’s enough to send me over the edge. She swallows every drop of my cum, and as she stands up, I lower myself, lifting her by her round ass. Her legs go over my shoulders, and I turn so her back is against the wall. And then I feast, eating her pussy like it’s my last meal.

“August,” she moans, making soft whimpering sounds that have me growing hard again.

I love my name on her lips and my mouth on her cunt.

Favorite-fucking-thing in the world.

Magic swirls around us as she comes, her fingers pulling my hair. I lap up her release, cleaning her with my tongue. Her thighs are shaking when I slowly lower her to the floor, so I don't let go of her. Instead, she melts into me, burying her face into my wet chest. I feel her smile against my skin.

After a few moments, we wash each other's bodies and get into bed.

I'm kissing down her neck when she whispers, "I'm ready. Fuck me, August. Bond me. Give me all of you."

I still. "Are you sure you want this?" I don't know why I'm asking because I've never wanted anything more, but I need her to be sure. It would kill me if she ever had any regrets.

I don't have a royal claim.

I'm not as magically powerful as some of the other men.

I was once a mercenary.

I'm no one her father would have chosen.

But I know I'll love her like no other man in this realm ever could.

And if that's enough for her, it's more than enough for me.

"I'm sure," she replies, sitting up and slowly sliding down on my hard cock. "I've

never been more sure of anything.”

The second we both agree, the magic in the air starts to pulse.

The bond is calling.

And this time, we’re going to answer.

Chapter Fifteen

The way he's looking at me can only be described as primal.

His eyes are dark, hungry, and filled with need. His grin is feral, and his tongue swipes over his lower lip before his mouth crashes against mine in a deep, all-consuming kiss. I break the kiss, only so I have more motion to fuck him. Leaning back with my hands resting on his thighs, I start to move, rolling my hips with abandon. His hands skim my waist before sliding down to my clit, his thumb lazily circling. A golden glow emanates from us, our magic swirling around us as it joins as one.

"Come, love," he demands in a deep, husky tone.

"Yes," I whisper, unable to form any further words.

As we finish together, the bond starts to spark, and a ripple of powerful magic hits me hard. My wrists begin to tingle as the mating bands burn into my skin, a permanent reminder of our commitment to each other. It's more than just our magic joining—our souls are now interwoven. It's the deepest connection anyone can have.

I breathe shakily as I fall against his chest, his arms coming around me, keeping me together. This feeling is so overwhelming but so incredible. I can see why you can only do this once in a lifetime. When the sparks of magic start to die down, I pull back from August's neck to look into his eyes. Traces of magic are still swirling in them, but they are locked on me.

“Milana,” he whispers, planting a soft kiss on my lips. “ Mine .”

“Yeah.” I smile softly.

I can feel him.

And I know I made the right choice.

His hands circle my waist as he slowly starts to move against me, hard once more. I’d bond with him again for his recovery time alone.

“You feel amazing,” he grits out, his throat working as he swallows. “I never knew it could be like this.”

“Me either.”

I wonder if he can boost magic like me now. I never even asked him what his magic could do, but I feel it inside me.

“Most beautiful woman in all eight kingdoms, and she’s All. Fucking. Mine .” He thrusts harder with each word, then rolls us over so he’s on top. Lifting my arms, he grips my mating bands, pinning them above me. He then fucks me hard, kissing my neck until I’m panting.

“August,” I choke out, needing to come.

He covers my mouth and goes extra hard and faster. “You’ll take what you get, mate .”

I seem to like that because I feel a tingle in my spine that turns into another climax, my moans muffled beneath his hand while he watches me with rapt fascination and

heat in his eyes. He follows closely behind me, throwing his head back as he comes.

He spreads my thighs and pulls out, staring down at my pussy. “You look so beautiful with my cum dripping out of your pussy.”

That would make my cheeks heat if I had any shyness left when it comes to him. I’m pretty sure he’s fucked all that right out of me.

His finger traces the outline of my lips before he kisses me. Softly. Gently. Deeply. “I love you,” he whispers, making me gasp.

He cleans me up and then holds me against his body.

Skin to skin.

Nothing between us.

How we were always meant to be.

A love like this can never be caged.

“August? I love you too.”

And with that, I fall asleep with a smile on my face.

All eyes are on us when we head downstairs. I don’t know what the occasion is, but everyone is there.

“Did I forget someone’s birthday?” August smirks, pulling out a chair for me.

“No, my mate won’t stop stressing about Rion, so here we are,” Rave replies, his eyes

slowly roving over me with distaste. I guess he's not going to forgive me as easily as Astrid over the trying-to-kidnap-Vale thing.

Axe's gaze drops to the golden mating bands around our wrists. "I guess we all have something to celebrate after all."

"Congratulations!" Astrid beams, sharing a look with August. Her hazel eyes are filled with emotion. I know the two of them have a history, and for a moment, I almost feel like I'm the one intruding.

I sit next to Pandora, the Witch Queen. I know of her, but I don't know her personally, although I have met her mate, Soren, at a party.

"Congratulations to you both," she says, offering me a small smile. Her violet eyes are stunning, ethereal-looking.

"Thank you." I beam. "And it's so nice to finally meet you."

She clears her throat and tucks her black hair back behind her ear. "Yeah, you too. I'm glad August found his person."

She seems a little awkward, but maybe that's just her personality. However, when August's hand possessively splays on my thighs while he looks across the room at Soren, who is smirking, I know something is up. There's tension in the room, but I don't know why.

"What's going on?" I blurt out, glancing around the table.

Astrid is studying her plate, and Rave murmurs something that sounds like, "Here we fucking go again."

“Just a little karma going around,” Soren mutters softly, then grunts when Pandora hits his chest.

She slides her eyes to the side before looking back at me. “It’s nothing, really, it’s just that?—”

“August took Pandora’s virginity,” Kai blurts out, frowning when Axe slaps the back of his head. “What? It’s better she knows. I’d fucking hate it if everyone knew something except me!”

I stare at them all, slack-jawed, processing this news.

“He’s right. It’s better to get it all out in the open,” Soren agrees, rubbing the back of his neck. “I’m sorry, Milana. I don’t want to hurt you. But every time I think about it, I want to kill him with my bare hands.”

August slept with Queen Pandora.

Took her virginity.

The rational side of me knows that we didn’t even know we were mates then, but the newly mated side of me?

She’s fucking pissed.

I picture draining the woman next to me of all her magic, watching her drop to the floor in a boneless heap.

“Milana,” August’s soothing voice reaches me. When I look over at him, he looks worried, like maybe he’s been saying my name for a while now.

I stand, pushing my chair back and sending it flying to the floor.

Astrid holds up her hands and puts a shield around Pandora, protecting her from me. Smart because one touch of mine could weaken her.

I'm not proud of what I do next. But later, I'll blame it on the mating bond hormones.

They made me crazy.

I slam my palms down on the table, shaking all the plates and cutlery. "So let me get this straight. Astrid and August have some connection, and I was told he used to be in love with her or something, and now I also have to deal with the fact he took the Witch Queen's virginity?"

"Milana—"

I hold my hand up to stop him. "Anyone else I need to know about?" I look at Saylor, sitting there quietly with wide honey-brown eyes. "How about you?"

"She didn't touch him," Bane growls out, pulling his mate closer to him. He shifts his jaw and scowls at the thought.

"But she did fuck Rave," Kai points out. That earns him another slap. He probably won't have any brain cells left after this lunch.

"Wow, what a busy group of friends. Do you guys have any hobbies other than fucking each other?" I mutter, and Saylor's lip twitches like she wants to laugh.

"Yeah, we like to fight as much as we fuck, too." Axe grins as August pulls me back against his chest.

I take deep, calming breaths. It's not like I came to him a virgin, and we've already run into Reef, someone I've fucked. But still!

"You okay?" he whispers into my ear, sending shivers down my spine. "Astrid and I are friends and friends only. The same goes for Pandora. They both have their own mates now, love. You have nothing to worry about. You're the only one I'll ever want."

He's saying all the right things, but I can't seem to control my jealousy.

"I'll be right back," I announce, letting my pettiness win out. In the next moment, I'm back, except this time, I've brought Reef back with me. The merman looks confused as fuck, staring around the table with wide eyes. "Ahh, Milana?"

"Have a seat, Reef. We're all having a meal with people we've fucked, so I thought I'd even the score," I say with a straight face and nod to an empty chair.

The air in the room becomes charged, almost suffocating. I chance a look at August, who is staring at Reef with undisguised anger.

Now he knows how I feel.

Reef awkwardly takes a seat, clearing his throat and eyeing the food.

A weird sound comes from Kai, and when I look over at him, his shoulders are shaking with repressed laughter. "You have something to say?"

He sucks in his lips and shakes his head.

"You know mermen are good in bed, right? They are used to being underwater, if you know what I mean. They can go down for a long time..." Yeah, I'm not proud of

myself, but I'm on a roll.

August stands up, his body visibly vibrating with anger. Rave's shadows seep out from him and hold August back.

Fuck, the things he must be able to do with those.

"Milana," August warns, struggling against his wispy binds. "Rave, let me go! I'm going to fucking kill him!"

Reef clears his throat. "Milana, maybe don't..."

I should listen to my ex-hookup and take the high road at this point, but I don't.

"Do you guys fuck when you're underwater too? Like how does that work?" Saylor blurts out to Reef. "How does your cock come out when you have a fin?"

At this stage, Soren is laughing uncontrollably, and Kai and Axe join him.

"August, calm down," Astrid says, which only pisses me off further.

She doesn't get to tell my mate to calm down!

Now, I'm more upset than angry, and I just want to be alone.

"You know what? I'm not done. I'm going to go and get that Vampire Prince I fucked a few months ago..." I zip away, needing a moment before I do something else stupid like actually bringing that vampire back here.

I end up in our spot in the gardens where we sat yesterday.

It was a simpler time.

Magic explodes out of me, lessening my tension, and I feel a lot better. I get like that sometimes, like the magic I take from others becomes too much pressure and needs an outlet.

We should have been each other's firsts.

But he didn't wait for me, and I sure as hell didn't wait for him.

Knowing it, though, and seeing who he has been with are two different things.

Astrid is stunning, and so is Pandora.

And I'm older than all of them.

"I'm sorry, Milana. I know how uncomfortable you must have felt. Trust me, I've been there," comes Astrid's soft voice from behind me. She walks over and sits next to me.

"I shouldn't have done any of that," I admit with a sigh. "I'm not proud, trust me."

She laughs softly. "You don't need to be sorry around any of us, believe me. I know how our relationship must look like from an outside perspective, and I completely understand if you want August to have nothing to do with me."

"He even has a pet name for you... Star. I heard him when you came down to the dungeons."

"A childhood nickname. I know August, and I'm a seer. I can see his path. If you wanted him to walk away from all of us, he would. He probably would have joined

the rebellion if he had to, to be with you. You have all the power with him. I'm his friend, one he shares a lot of history with." She plays with the end of her braid. "He has taken care of me since both of our parents died, and finally seeing someone give that back to him is all I could have ever dreamed. I love you for him, and I would love to be both of your friends if you'll let me."

"I'd like that. You know, I never knew I was the jealous type until I met him," I grumble.

She smiles, her eyes bright. "Our mates tend to bring that out in us. August is usually the calm one. He's never had a big ego or anything like that. And he's one of the more mentally stable ones out of the lot."

"Milana! If there's another fucking male out there with you, I'm going to drain his magic until he's dead!" we hear August roar.

"Well, maybe I spoke too soon." She smirks, lowering her voice to a whisper, "You know I'm curious about the merman cock situation too."

I burst out laughing.

She leaves before August appears, pulling me against his chest and stroking my back. "I love you, Milana. I don't give a fuck about any other woman. You want to leave here, just you and me? I'll do that. You're all I need."

I realize then that Astrid was right.

He would walk away from it all for me.

He has a past, we all do, but at the end of the day, August is mine .

And that's all that matters.

Chapter Sixteen

I feel like the worst mate alive.

I know I'm asking a lot from her—I even tried to kill that asshole merman when she left, but he went invisible. Of course, that's his magic.

I'd like her to be friends with Astrid and Pandora because they are our allies, and she has nothing to worry about from either of them. Hell, with any woman.

I would never hurt her, and my heart, soul, and dick are all for her.

But if she wants us to leave, we can. I'll do anything to make her happy.

I sit on the chair and pull her onto my lap. There's a residue of magic in the air, and I give her a quick once-over to make sure she's okay.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have let my anger and jealousy get the best of me," she murmurs, burying her face in my neck.

"Look at me," I demand softly. "Give me those beautiful blue eyes."

She lifts her face to look at me.

"We only bonded last night, love. It's expected. I felt the same way when we saw that merman. I think emotions are going to be high for a while."

“I embarrassed you.”

A small laugh escapes me. “If you knew the stories about each of my friends, you would know that no one will have judged you. Soren tried to kill me. Bane tried to kill Rave. Saylor felt jealous of Astrid. It’s almost a rite of passage at this stage.” I take her hands in mine and bring them to my lips. “No one cares, trust me. And the next time we run into one of your exes, I’ll also be losing my shit again. In fact, you can count on it.”

Her lip twitches at that.

“And yeah, I did have a crush on Astrid a long time ago, but I don’t feel that way anymore, and she never felt that way about me. We shared one kiss before she met Rave, and that was it. She’s family to me, and she will be a good friend to you. I only slept with Pandora once. And there wasn’t any emotional attachment involved. It was more a friends-with-benefits type deal.”

I don’t want to hurt her, but I want to be honest with her. I want us to be able to talk about everything. Communication is so important, and she’s my fucking mate. She needs to know where she stands with me, which is in first place every damn time.

She comes before everyone, including myself.

I can survive without anyone other than her.

She’s irreplaceable.

“Astrid spoke to me, and she seems very nice,” she admits, dragging her teeth across her bottom lip. “And beautiful. They are both very beautiful.”

I have no idea how someone who looks like her can feel insecure around any other

woman, and I don't like that she feels that way. "Their beauty doesn't take from yours, love. To me, you are the single most beautiful woman in the realm."

And I mean that.

"You have a cute pet name for her."

My brow furrows. Pet name? Oh. Star. I had no idea that would upset Milana, but I'm glad she has told me. A name isn't worth her being uncomfortable.

"You don't like me calling her Star, then I won't use it anymore."

"Just like that?" she asks.

"Of course."

"No, you can use it. I just wish we'd had this chat before." She sighs, leaning forward and cupping my face, my stubble brushing against her palms. "I could have braced myself instead of making a bad first impression. Anyone else I'm going to have to be friends with who's had what's mine?"

I turn my face and kiss the palm of her hand. "I don't think so. And I didn't know they'd all be there this morning. They all have no boundaries, so I should probably warn you of that right now."

She rolls her eyes and kisses me sweetly. "I like your family. I mean, I wish you hadn't fucked?—"

I cut her off with my mouth and tongue.

"What sort of power is invisible anyway? I bet he has a little invisible dick too." I

suddenly growl, thinking of her ex back inside the castle.

She smirks. “If you must know, your cock is bigger.”

Thank the fates.

I zip her right into bed. “Let me show you who I want, Milana. Who I love. Who belongs to me.”

Impatiently, I undress her before stretching my arm over my head to tug off my shirt. Her eyes roam over my chest and abs, and a smile tilts my lips. I love having her eyes on me. I kiss her mouth and then all down her body, paying special attention to her perfect pink nipples. She whimpers when I bite down a little harder, then kiss down her flat stomach until I reach her pussy. Glancing up between her legs, I command, “Keep your eyes on me. You look away, I stop. Oh, and Milana, don’t come until I tell you to.”

She swallows hard but nods.

Her hips buck at the first swipe of my tongue, so I pin them down while I suck and lick her sweet, hot little pussy.

“August,” she moans, gripping the sheets. “I need to come.”

“Not yet.”

“Please,” she begs, now pulling on the ends of my hair.

I pull back when her thighs start to shake and nip her inner thigh. She takes deep breaths until I lower my mouth again and continue to feast on her.

“Baby?” she whimpers, and fuck, I love her calling me that.

She keeps her eyes on me this entire time like the good-fucking-girl she is.

“Okay, come now,” I demand, and her body listens, her back arching as she screams.

I’m so fucking hard and ready for her to get on her knees and take what she wants from me.

Chapter Seventeen

The bed shakes, the room spins, and my ears start ringing. My orgasm goes on and on, and August doesn't let up until he's wrung every last ounce of pleasure out of me.

When he suddenly lifts his head and growls out, "Fuck," my brow furrows.

It takes me a moment to realize the reason the bed is shaking is not from his ten-out-of-ten oral sex skills.

We're under attack.

"Get dressed," he urges, standing and throwing his clothes back on.

I do the same.

He then goes to the corner of his room and starts arming himself with a sword and multiple daggers. Then he bends down in front of me and puts a sheath around my thigh, sliding a dagger into it. "Stay with me."

"I will," I promise, following him out. "Do you think it's Rion?"

We start rushing down the stairs. "Yeah, I do. The information he was trying to get from me was about the castle's layout and how to get in. He wanted to break down our defenses. And going by that blast, he decided on explosives."

Kai is storming by us as soon as we get outside, still doing up his pants. "What the

fuck is going on around here?”

“They’ve surrounded the castle... they tried to blow up the northern walls,” Astrid explains, zipping out of nowhere. She’s dressed for battle in all black, decked in silver weapons. This woman is all badass.

“How many?” August asks her, taking my hand in his.

“Two hundred or so,” Astrid replies, crossing her arms over her chest. “I don’t think they know who they are dealing with. We could beat them with Pandora’s undead army alone.” She glances at me and winces. “I’m sorry, some of your friends are probably in there?”

I shrug, shaking my head. “Halia is my only friend, and she stays away from all that.”

“The Mermaid Princess?” Astrid frowns, pursing her lips. “Rave’s ex?”

Glad it’s not just me who gets jealous. “Yeah, that would be her.”

“Bloody small realm,” she grumbles, turning her head when Rave storms over to us. His shadows are following behind him. At least, that’s what it looks like. He’s pretty intimidating, especially with that scowl on his handsome face.

“What’s wrong?” Astrid asks him, sliding up next to him.

He wraps his arm around her and points his finger to where Soren is standing with Vale. He’s grown since I last saw him, a little taller, a mini replica of his father. “Our son doesn’t listen.”

“Wonder where he gets that from?” Astrid smirks.

Vale runs over, and his grin widens when he spots me. “Milana!” His legs move even faster, and he all but jumps into my arms. “I haven’t seen you in so long!”

“I know. How have you been?” I ask him, kissing the top of his head.

“I’m good! I overheard my Uncle Nico getting the army ready for war, and I knew I didn’t want to miss this one. You know I can help, right? I’m as strong as my dad. I don’t have shadows, but I am a void. You can’t beat me,” he rushes out.

I try to hide my grin. “Well, I guess I’m lucky to have you here then.”

He beams, puffing out his chest. “Damn right.” He eyes my wrists and frowns. “You got mated? Why? I was hoping you’d wait for me.”

August chuckles from beside me. “She’s mine , Vale. You’re going to have to find your own mate.”

“But I want that one,” he grunts, his blue eyes narrowing.

“Vale,” Rave sighs, pinching the bridge of his nose. “Milana is taken, and you are a child. You shouldn’t be here. You know if you get hurt, Astrid can’t even heal you because you are a void.”

He shrugs, pulling out his sword from his hip. “I live life on the edge. You know this, Dad. I’m just like you.”

Astrid looks up at the sky as if praying for patience. “Vale, stay with your father. You don’t go anywhere alone, you hear me?”

“Yes,” he agrees.

August's hard body presses against me. I use the connection to boost his magic, giving it all to him. His head snaps to me, realizing what I'm doing. "Milana?—"

"Take it. You need it more than me."

Another blast hits, and the earth trembles.

"They're not going to get in," Axe comments as he zips in with Zython by his side.

"Everyone ready for this?" Zython asks, pulling out his sword.

"I was born ready!" Vale replies, making everyone laugh.

Pandora and Soren zip in with one of Pandora's cousins, an attractive wizard named Kainan. He looks like he'd be Halia's type—dark-haired, tall, strong, and built like a warrior.

I'm surprised when Salem joins us with his triplet brothers, Silver and Sage. Shadow, another of their brothers, appears with his mate, the famous seer, Laurel.

How did we think we could ever beat them?

They have power, connections, and most importantly, loyalty and friendship.

You can't win against that.

Sage's long black hair is in a braid, and he's playing with his lip ring as he studies me. "And what do we have here?"

August steps forward protectively. "This is my mate, Milana."

“You standing on the right side of the wall, Milana?” Laurel asks, staring at me like she can see right through me.

“Yes, I am,” I say with certainty.

She nods and smiles at August.

“What’s the plan, Lolly,” Shadow asks his mate, his hand on the small of her back.

She stares out at the mountains. “We’re going to kill Rion. And many of his army. And then they will disband and give up. Declan is gone. Milana is gone. They have no hope or direction left.”

She turns back to August. “If Milana were standing on the other side with Rion, this war would have a different outcome. Declan wasn’t just a leader. He was everything the rebellion stood for, and with him gone, that now fell to you. Without you, there is no rebellion.”

My eyes widen. I don’t know how I could have made such a difference in a war. I don’t even know how to fight yet. I guess, in a way, because of my father, I was used as the poster child for it. Without me, maybe they feel like they have nothing to fight for.

Without my father, there is nothing.

Rion is fueled by revenge, but honestly, I don’t even know why. I know my father took him under his wing and that he wasn’t always so full of hatred.

All I know is that now, I stand with my mate.

Where I should have always been.

Chapter Eighteen

Laurel said something bad would happen if Milana didn't come to our side. I honestly forgot all about that. I was working hard to get her for me, not for some bigger purpose, even though that pushed me to go and fight for her.

"I love you," I say, pushing her long, blonde hair off her face.

"I love you more," she replies, looking up when Zython stands in front of us.

"The royal guard is approaching them from behind. We will go out the side gates and cage them in. Let's do this," he calls out, and everyone cheers.

One of the guards brings me Bear, my horse I've had for as long as I can remember. "Milana, this is Bear. Bear, this is my mate. Look after her."

He neighs like he understands. I lift her on him first and then jump up beside her. "You ready for this, love?" I consider asking her to stay behind, but I won't be able to focus if I don't have my eyes on her. No one will let anything happen to her, and even though she's still learning to fight, she's still magically powerful.

I smile when Astrid casts her shield over us all, another reason I won't have to worry.

When Rave's shadows start to appear, suffocating the air beyond the walls, we ride through the side gates and toward Rion.

I jump off Bear when I see Rion's army and help Milana down. I draw my weapon

and put her behind me. Axe and Kai are soon at my side, and we all run into the thick of it, standing around Milana in a protective circle. When Axe reaches out and drains the magic from a vampire, he spins around and flashes a smug grin at Milana, whose eyes widen.

“I’ve always wanted to try that,” he states.

“You’re a booster too?” She gasps, surprised.

“No, I’m not,” he replied, smirking.

Her brow furrows, confused. Then her eyes widen with realization. “You’re a mirror?”

It’s a rare magic that lets Axe copy magic from someone nearby.

Axe simply shrugs, like the cocky shit he is, while Milana stares at him in surprise. I hope she’s not thinking that maybe they were a good match after all, with their magic being somewhat similar. They both use other people’s powers against them by channeling their gifts.

Rion steps out into our view with those same men who came into my cell with him at his side.

“Milana!” he calls out, sparks flying from his palms. “Your father would be turning in his grave if he knew what you have done.”

She shifts on her feet. Even though she’s done the right thing, I know this must hurt her.

Astrid zips in next to me, staring down at Rion. “Rion, I’d say it’s nice to see you, but

that would be a lie. And to think I thought we were friends after I saved your mate from the vampires.”

“Don’t speak about her. A lot has happened since then,” Rion replies, his red eyes flickering with something that looks like pain before he can mask it.

“Leave now, Rion, or you’ll be the reason for many unnecessary deaths,” she says to him, a ruby-hilted dagger in her hand. “The rebellion died with Declan. Milana is safe with her mate. There is no reason for this to continue.”

“Hand over Milana, and we will be on our way,” he replies.

“She’s mine,” I bark, gritting my teeth. “She’s not going anywhere.”

Milana steps forward, bracing herself for a fight. Her legs are in a stance like I showed her, and her fingers clasp a blade. “It’s over, Rion. I’m where I’m meant to be. Please, just leave so no one else has to die.”

Rion laughs, and it’s an ugly sound. It’s only then that I notice his wrists. The once gold mating bands, like mine, are black. I remember noticing that when he was torturing me.

He lost his mate.

That explains the crazy glint in his eyes because no male would be sane after that.

Death would probably be a kindness to him.

“What happened to your mate?” I ask, and everyone goes quiet, the tension picking up.

Rion roars sparks flying in every direction. “She died defending her kingdom. She died when you all returned to the Demon Kingdom. It’s your fucking fault! Bane wanted to kill his brother, Xan, and in the process, I lost my fucking mate.”

Pain and torment radiate from him, and the thought of losing Milana sends a cold shiver through me. It would be the only thing capable of breaking me—and despite everything, a flicker of sympathy stirs in my chest.

“I’m sorry you lost her, Rion,” Milana says, tears gathering in her eyes. “I had no idea. But surely you can’t expect me to leave my mate, to know that pain, to fight in a war I don’t want to be a part of. I’ve found my place, and now you need to find yours. Let all your soldiers go. Tell them to leave before they get hurt. Save their lives!”

Rion simply fires his magic at Milana, but Astrid’s shield blocks him. I zip in front of her, pushing her behind me.

When the shadows start drifting from the ground upward, I know shit’s about to get real dark.

Before they start to distort my vision, I rush forward at Rion.

I’m going to make sure my mate never has to hide again.

Chapter Nineteen

As the shadows close in, I watch August run forward with his sword in his hand and a warrior's roar on his lips. Metal clashes against metal as they fight one on one. Rion slashes August across his stomach when he doesn't move away in time, and my heart is in my throat.

I feel better knowing Astrid is here, and I never thought I'd be saying that, knowing she can heal him. Still, August doesn't stop fighting until he gets the upper hand and slices Rion across the throat. Rion falls to his knees. And then, with familiar magic, August puts his hand on him and drains him until there is no life left.

It's over.

He's dead.

August killed him.

And he clearly got my booster magic from the bond.

I wonder if I can walk through any ward like he can. If so, that will come in handy.

The fight continues until their remaining army gives up and leaves, most of them zipping away from the chaos.

Bodies cover the grass, and with them, a sadness fills me.

Such a loss of life, and for what reason?

I now sit in our room, holding August's hand as Astrid heals the deep cut on his abs. We won the war, but it's hard to celebrate. I knew a lot of those people. We might not have been close, as my father kept me away and isolated, but they were familiar faces.

And now they are dead.

I hope some heard my warning and left, choosing to turn their back on Rion.

Seeing him in battle, though, my mate is a warrior, through and through. His sword skills are so impressive, and his body is a weapon in itself. And then to use our magic for the first time with no practice?

He was incredible.

Now I have to sit here and watch Astrid with her hands on his bare bicep as she heals him. His ripped muscles are all on show, and I know that shouldn't bother me considering the situation, but it kind of does. I don't want her seeing him like this.

August doesn't let go of his touch on me, keeping us connected. After seeing her on the battlefield, I know how incredible she is. It's hard not to feel a little intimidated by that. But now that I can feel some of August's emotions through the bond, I know that what he feels for her isn't romantic. It's a solid friendship built on years of history.

But it doesn't change the fact that he once wanted her.

The cut seals up in front of my eyes. Astrid opens her eyes and lets go of him. "There you go, as good as new."

“Thank you,” he comments but keeps those warm chocolate depths on me.

“I’m going to go and help anyone else who needs it,” she says, turning to me and offering me a small smile. “You’re free, Milana. I see nothing but happiness for you both.”

She zips away, and August pulls me closer to his body so I’m draped over him. “She’s right, you are free now.”

“I’m right where I want to be,” I reply, pressing a kiss to his hard chest. “I want to keep training, August. I want to be able to fight next time.”

“We’ll keep training you,” he promises me, kissing my temple. “You’ll be a warrior in no time.”

My lip twitches. “How did it feel using our magic?”

“Powerful,” he admits, rubbing soothing circles over my back. “I don’t know. It just felt natural. I could feel it there under my skin, begging for me to use it.”

I hum in agreement, knowing exactly how he felt.

Suddenly, the door opens wide, and I glance up to see the last person I expected to see here—my best friend, Halia.

“There you are,” she calls out, walking over to me and giving me a once-over. “You’re okay? When I heard what was going down, I came straight here.” Her eyes move to August, checking out his ripped body. “Damn, I hope my mate is as sexy as yours.”

August smirks. I roll my eyes and move to hug her. “August, this is Halia. Halia, my

mate, August.”

“Nice to finally meet you,” Halia says, offering him a wide smile.

“Same to you.”

“You missed all the action,” I say, happy to see her. My mate and my best friend are with me. It doesn’t get much better than this.

“Typical.” She grins, flipping her long red hair over her shoulder. “By the way, Rave didn’t look very happy to see me.”

A bubble of laughter escapes me. “Just stay away from him. I’ve had my quota of drama for the month.”

She rolls her eyes. “I’m not even looking in the direction of anyone who’s bonded. I wouldn’t mind asking Astrid if she knows who my mate is, though, because I’m getting tired of waiting around for his ass.”

When we head back downstairs, Astrid is sitting on the couch talking with Salem while Rave stands in front of them, watching closely.

“What’s that about?” I ask August, who shrugs. He’s taken a shower and dressed in a white shirt. His curly hair is damp, and he looks so good I don’t want him to leave the room.

“He’s hot,” Halia comments, checking out Salem.

“No,” August and I say at the same time.

“What? Why? I think a tear just ran down my leg,” she whispers.

I make a choking sound while August throws back his head and laughs. This gets everyone's attention—all eyes now on Halia.

Rave looks annoyed.

Astrid throws a dirty look at Rave.

And Salem licks his lips.

“Multiple tears,” she moans, and I shake my head. My best friend is crazy. She's always balanced out my perfectionist and sometimes uptight personality.

Salem stands, stretching to his full height and stalking toward us, his muscles rippling with each move.

He's huge.

Easily the biggest male I've ever laid my eyes on.

I have to look up and up to stare into his dead, light-green eyes. A cold smirk curls on his lips and when he speaks, his voice is menacing and calm but with an edge to it. “She won't tell me who my mate is. You might do until then.”

“At least he's giving up on Pandora,” August mutters, pulling me closer to his side.

Salem's eyes cut to him. “Once mine, always mine,” he fires back, picking up a lock of Halia's hair and enfolding it through his fingers. “I like this. A lot.” He lowers his face to smell her.

She looks at me with a clear what-the-fuck look in her blue eyes. She clears her throat, and I quickly grip her arm and pull her away. “Stay away from him,” I

whisper-yell, and she laughs.

“Yeah, I’m impulsive, but I’m not insane,” she replies, stopping when we reach the dining room where Axe is sitting on the table, shirtless, drinking some ale. Ripples of muscles line his abs.

“Chaos is hot-guy central.” She swoons, fanning her face.

August overhears that and grips the back of my neck. “You better not be noticing that, love.”

“I only have eyes for you,” I reply, turning around and pulling him down for a quick, closed-mouth kiss.

Although I’m not blind, Halia is right.

I share a look with her that says so, and she grins.

Bane decides to walk into the room next, dressed in all black. His inked neck and hands are on show.

“Wow,” Halia mutters.

Bane is then followed by Soren, who rakes his hand through his blond hair, his biceps bulging in the shirtless black tunic he’s wearing. I know she’s met Soren before.

Silver and Sage then step in, followed by Shadow.

The brothers are all so alike, yet so different.

I can hear Halia gulp. “Going to need to change my panties.” She then pauses and

asks, “What the fuck is my cousin doing here?”

Ah shit, I totally forgot about Reef.

“Long story,” I mutter.

“Tell me,” she demands. “Pretty sure his ass is meant to be in Shelly.”

“It was bring-your-ex-to-lunch day.” I smirk.

She gives me a knowing look. “You’re the queen of petty, Milana. That’s why you’re my best friend.”

I suppose she’s right. I did put August in a cell because he did it to me first.

I smirk and glance over at Reef to see he’s having a drink with Axe and Kai, with Saylor nearby, probably wanting to ask him about his cock.

August growls at the mention of Reef, kissing the side of my neck. He might not have anything to worry about, but that doesn’t mean I don’t like his possessiveness.

It gets even better when he suddenly zips me right into our bedroom, undresses me, and pushes me up against the wall.

“Keep those eyes on me while I fuck you, Milana,” he growls, sucking on my neck.

“Halia is?—”

“She’ll be fine. Right now, you need to take care of your man,” he replies, pushing down his pants. He slides the head of his cock against my entrance, then pushes in a few inches and pulls back out before slamming all the way in.

“I only want you, baby,” I pant.

He fucks me harder. “You’ll only get me.”

My legs wrap around his hips. He changes the angle and keeps driving into me, his lips lowering to my nipples. He sucks and bites them just how I like it, and my fingers tangle in his curls I love so much.

“Come now, love,” he moans, and I let go, coming all over his hard cock. He curses as he finishes with me, stilling and giving me a gentle kiss when he’s done. “I love you.”

“I love you, too, August. You’re the first person to love me for me.”

He set me free from my cage.

No more expectations or pressure.

No more being used.

He loves me simply because I am me.

Unconditionally.

He carries me to the bed and lays me down, still inside me. He peppers kisses all over my face and neck. When I feel him getting hard again, I know Halia might have to amuse herself for a little longer.

But knowing my best friend, being blinded by all those abs, it won’t exactly be a hardship.

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“You’re too unstable, Salem. I’m sorry, but The Assassins’ Academy has decided to indefinitely cancel your employment here. Don’t bother to try and appeal again.”

The words replay in my mind as I walk over to Peach’s Bakery. I need to cheer myself up after hearing that I won’t be given any assignments again.

Ever.

Which separates me from my triplet brothers, leaving me the odd one out. They’re on an assignment right now, and I fear missing out.

It fucking sucks.

Killing is the only thing I’m good at, and I’m going to be doing it whether or not they pay me. Why can’t they see that?

In fact, I almost killed the director who told me the news. The only reason I didn’t is because I knew that Sage and Silver would be pissed.

I’m different than my siblings.

I don’t feel remorse often, and I don’t care about people outside of my circle. Which is pretty much only my brothers and sister. Everyone else can get fucked.

Opening the door to the bakery, I close my eyes as the sweet smell of sugar hits my nose. The bakery is huge with rows and rows of treats just waiting for me to eat. My brothers have been going on about this place, and I, of course, had to come and check

it out for myself. We are known for our sweet-tooths.

I stop when I see a strawberry cheesecake, my favorite, but I'd almost be betraying my sister by eating them from here. She makes them for me, and it's our thing. She doesn't need to know about the one I ate when I was in the Mermaid Kingdom.

Fuck. When it comes to desserts, it's hard to be loyal.

A cherry one catches my eye, and I'm about to call out when a woman steps out from the back.

Not just any woman.

My woman.

My mate .

The pull to her is unlike anything I've ever felt, the magic sizzling between us.

She's a shifter with long red hair, green eyes, and the cutest splatter of freckles on her nose. She has a curvy body that I won't have to be careful with when I fuck her and heart-shaped lips that I want to see wrapped around my cock.

She's fucking phenomenal.

And she's the best baker in the kingdom.

And I love to fucking eat.

I'll start with her little pussy, and then move to one of those little cherry cheesecakes.

"Peach?" I rasp, and she nods, swallowing hard.

“You’re my... my mate?” she asks, brows pulling together. She steps around the counter and walks over to me, reaching up to touch my face. “Who are you?”

“Salem,” I tell her, kissing her fingers before sucking one into my mouth.

Too soon? I’m not known for being subtle.

“Salem?”

I nod, licking my lips.

Fuck, I like my name on her mouth.

I want her mouth somewhere else.

Her brows raise. She must recognize my name because she steps back from me.

I don’t like it.

“Please leave, Salem,” she whispers, and I frown.

“Why, what’s wrong?” I ask.

My mate is rejecting me?

“You tortured my brother. You don’t remember?” she asks, her beautiful eyes filling with tears.

Before I can admit I don’t know who her brother is, and she’s going to need to be more specific because I’ve tortured more people than I can remember, she zips away, leaving her business trying to get away from me.

Shrugging, I help myself to the cherry cheesecake.

She's coming home with me whether she wants to or not.

Because one thing about me?

I like the chase.

And the cheesecake?

Fucking perfect.

Continue in... Dark Obsession , releasing on November 28, 2025.