



Her King (Eternal Havok Duet #2)

Author: *Jade Marshall*

Category: Fantasy

Description: The prophecy was only the beginning. The crown was never the end.

After surviving betrayal, bloodshed, and a bond forged in fire, Cassandra has become the key to peace—or annihilation. Her soul now bears the mark of three realms: Earth, Runic, and Quietus. And not everyone believes a witch should hold that much power.

As war erupts and shadows rise, Cassandra and Niko must navigate deadly court politics, ancient magik, and enemies hidden in plain sight. With a traitor in the palace and the prophecy unravelling around them, the couple must decide how much are they willing to sacrifice for a peace the realms may not deserve?

Love gave them strength.

War will decide their fate.

And only one truth remains:

To save the realms, she must become their queen. Even if it means breaking everything.

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entirely coincidental.

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DEDICATION

For the readers who believe love should be wild, a little broken, and absolutely worth fighting for. You keep turning pages and I'll keep giving you kings and the women strong enough to love them.

HER KING

Jade Marshall

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Author's Note

H er King contains themes and scenes that may be distressing for some readers. As an author, I understand that trigger/content warnings are necessary.

I have compiled a list to the best of my abilities which is freely available on my website.

Website: www.jademarshallauthor.wordpress.com

Your mental health matters.

For those of you who wish to go in blind, please remember that this is a work of fiction, and I DO NOT condone or wish to romanticize any of the situations or actions of the characters.

Happy Reading.

Jade Marshall ?

Glossary

Alluvium : Better known as Earth. The realm that holds all human life.

Extraordinarily little actual magik is in this realm except for earth magik.

The main users of this magik are witches and warlocks.

Magik is treated as a myth and legend in this realm.

The Covens know that other magikal creatures exist, but humans are unaware of the other magik realms.

Conclave : Meeting.

Consort : Wife to the High Leader / Husband to the High Priestess of a coven.

Curia Regis : Royal council of the High Leader.

Dissolution : Death of a Fae. This happens when they reach seven hundred and fifty years of age.

Eternal Havok : A war that has been fought for thousands of years, being fought between Quietus and Runic for control of Alluvium.

High Leader : King of Runic.

High Priestess : Leader of a coven.

Merging Ceremony : More commonly known as a wedding.

Quietus : Better known as the Underworld. All the darker magikal creatures reside in this realm. Demons rule the realm. They want control of Alluvium to expand their ranks and eventually rule all three realms.

Runic - Better known as Magik Ryk. All the lighter magikal creatures reside in this realm. Fae rules the realm. They want to keep the balance between the realms and allow all species to live out their days in peace.

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Bound By Magik

Cassandra

I never thought magik could be this loud. It hums beneath my skin, curling around my spine like a serpent with nowhere to go. Since arriving in Runic, I've been bombarded by color, sound, and sensation. Everything here is amplified—especially the expectations.

The air outside the palace window smells of honey and heat. Somewhere down in the courtyard, a group of Fae nobles is debating whether I'm fit to stand beside their soon-to-be king. I doubt any of them know I can hear every word.

"She's human-born. That magik is unstable," a woman says.

"She nearly drained herself saving a boy she didn't know," a man retorts, coming to my defense.

"She's soft." Venom drips from the woman's words.

I press my fingers into the stone windowsill. Let them talk, I don't give a shit what they think of me, I tell myself for what feels like the hundredth time. It does nothing to silence the storm of rage brewing in my chest. How could they be so callous about the life of one of their own?

"Niko's Consort should be strategic," someone else sneers. "Not sentimental."

Though, I'm not sure what part offends me more, that they think I'm weak or that they think I'm unworthy of him. They have no idea what it costs me just to stand still here. What it took to leave everything behind.

I gave up everything on Earth and in Bantry Bay—my home, my coven, my business, and my history. All for a future I never asked for and was never trained to survive. Witches don't travel through the realms to marry Fae princes. We marry humans or warlocks if we're lucky.

But I didn't hide. I chose him. I chose this world.

Even if this world hasn't yet chosen me.

Runic is beautiful, blindingly so. The palace alone is carved from living crystal and bone-white stone, its towers veined with gold and lit by spell-fire.

Fae courtiers dress in draping silks and illusions like something from a movie.

The servants speak in riddles, or at least it sounds that way to me.

The very walls of this place carry memories of magik older than anything I learned from my coven.

How the hell am I supposed to belong here?

“What are they saying today?” Niko's voice comes from the doorway. Deep, warm, and dangerous in all the ways that make my knees weak and my pussy flutter.

I don't turn. “That I'm going to ruin you. That I'm too weak to rule by your side and I will be the downfall of the entire realm.”

He chuckles. “They said that about my father’s Consort too. Right before he and my mother rewrote half the laws of Runic.”

I finally face him. He’s barefoot, shirtless, and his chest still damp from training.

He smells delicious even with the space separating us, but that doesn’t make sense.

The smell of his sweat shouldn’t make me want to lick him.

Do Fae even sweat the same way humans do?

Goddess help me, the man is insanely distracting.

His tattoos glow faintly in the low light. They are wards woven together with past lineages, layered in sweeping script across his arms and torso. He is history made flesh. And he is mine, or he will be soon.

He crosses to me in three long strides, his hand brushing mine. The hum of magik flowing through me stills and recalibrates. It is as centered by him as I am.

“Niko...”

His finger rests against my lips, silencing me. “There’s a Conclave meeting tomorrow. We will announce the merging ceremony date.”

My heart lurches. “Already?”

“They won’t stop until we do, and Quietus is growing bolder every day.” His words are solemn. “Besides, we should have already been merged if my mother had not insisted on putting on such a show. The eclipse will only last so long and we need to complete the ceremony before it passes.”

“It’s important to her,” I reply with a smile. “And it’s part of your traditions, your people’s traditions.”

He grins, leaning closer, his breath stirring the tiny hairs at my temple.

“I don’t care what anyone thinks or wants except you.

I will allow my mother to plan the ceremony she thinks is needed, but this isn’t for her or for our people.

We are merging.” His fingertip brushes along my jaw and my eyes flutter closed as his thoughts slam into my mind.

Dark, erotic thoughts. “I also don’t give a single flying fuck if anyone thinks you aren’t worthy because I chose you, and I know you are.

And we will show them true power once the ceremony is complete.”

He always makes it sound so simple. As if power were a fire we could simply hold between our hands without consequence.

I glance back out the window, where the moonlight casts faint reflections across the crystalline rooftops.

There’s a part of me that still aches for my coven, and my home in Bantry Bay, for its dirt and grit, for streetlight flicker and the smell of rain-soaked pavement.

There, I knew who I was. Here, I feel like a story someone else is still writing.

Niko touches my wrist. His thumb circles the spot where my binding rune will be inked. “You’re not alone in this,” he says.

I nod slowly. "I just want to feel like I belong before they try to make me prove it."

He cups my cheek, and for a breath, everything stills. Even the magik. "You already do."

His lips descend on mine in a bruising passionate kiss. His arm wraps around my back and draws tightly against my body, his erection rubbing against my abdomen. His other hand tangles in my hair, tilting my head back and giving him better access to ravage me.

"Forget about those fools," he murmurs, his lips running along the column of my neck. "Let me help you forget."

I know this isn't the solution, but I nod, needing something to take my mind off our problems. I need to feel alive and connected and that is exactly what he is offering. Niko lifts me into the air, and I wrap my legs around his waist as he walks us onto the balcony.

"What are you doing?" I ask softly.

"I've wanted to fuck you in the moonlight since I first laid eyes on you."

"There are people outside..."

"And if you don't want them to look up and see you, you'll stay quiet."

He places my ass on the stone balcony wall, one hand remaining on my lower back. He lifts the skirt of my lavender dress, exposing my underwear to the cool night air. He pushes the fabric aside before running his finger along my slit, gathering wetness until he reaches my clit.

“You’re so wet, Consort,” he murmurs, staring at his hand as he touches me. “Have you been waiting for me?”

“Yes,” I whisper softly, enjoying the way his fingers work between my legs. “Always.”

“You need to be quiet, Cassandra,” he says, freeing his cock. “I’m a very jealous man and I don’t share. Not even the sounds of your pleasure are meant for another.”

I nod, keeping my mouth shut as he notches his cock to my entrance. He pushes into me slowly, inch by torturous inch, until he bottoms out. He stretches me perfectly, filling every inch of me. I bite my lip to hold back the moan forcing its way up my throat.

“You’re fucking perfect,” Niko says, slowly lowering the straps of my dress and baring my breasts. “I could stare at you every day for the rest of my life.”

“Niko, please...” I beg softly.

“Wrap your arms and legs around me,” he directs.

Once I do as he commands, he withdraws his cock until only the tip remains inside me before pushing back in. He fucks me at a leisurely pace, sending my arousal higher and higher.

He growls against my throat. “I’m not going to last.”

“Harder,” I demand in his ear.

He complies and soon both of us are falling over the edge and into pleasure. Niko’s hand covers my mouth as I moan loudly. Once both our breathing returns to normal,

he pulls out of me and helps me down from the wall.

He smiles at me as he fixes my dress. “I’m a lucky bastard. I’ll get to defile you every day for the rest our lives.”

“And I’m just as lucky.”

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The Council's Judgement

N iko

Power doesn't feel like victory. It feels like chains.

As I stand before the Curia Regis, the eyes of centuries bore into me. Most of the council is older than my father was when he ascended. Franklin sits quietly, respectful. Josef is here too, sneering behind a polished goblet, waiting for me to trip over my own confidence.

Cassandra is not with me. Not yet. She won't be allowed to formally participate in these council meetings until we are fully bound.

Not that they wouldn't listen if she stood beside me. They need to hear from their future king, alone, first. And I need them to understand that the time for tradition is coming to an end. I certainly won't be putting any of my future children through this fucking bullshit.

I place both palms on the obsidian council table, making sure to look at each person here before moving to the next.

"As you are all aware, I have chosen my Consort." The silence is instant and tense. If I didn't know better, I would say it is almost reverent.

That is until Josef scoffs, "We heard."

“She is not of Runic,” someone mutters.

“She is not one of us,” another finishes.

I lift my chin. “She is a witch of Alluvium, one of the last true descendants of Salem. She is the woman spoken of in prophecy, the one given to me by the Oracle, and she will be my queen—your queen.”

Josef stands. “You expect us to crown a human-born woman whose own coven wanted to cast her out?”

I want to run a sword through him but I remain impassive, seated. Many long years ago he saved my father’s life in battle. It earned him respect and trust, both of which I am no longer sure he deserves, but I can’t do anything about him until I have proof. Proof I am quietly searching for.

“She saved a child of our realm using magik we couldn’t replicate with ten healers,” I retort calmly even though I don’t feel calm. “And she did it at the risk of her own life. How many of you can say the same?”

“She’s dangerous,” Josef spits. “Even to you.”

I narrow my gaze, slowly losing my composure. “Do you know what true power looks like, Josef? It’s not brute strength. It’s sacrifice. It’s choosing what’s right over what’s easy. She’s done it already. Hell, she continues to do it on a daily basis.”

The room rumbles softly, the very walls reacting to my flare of power. My magik is not quiet anymore. Not since I found her. I could end the meeting there, but I don’t.

I meet each of their eyes again. “Tomorrow, I will announce the merging ceremony date. She will stand beside me beneath the eclipse and anyone who stands against her,

stands against me. I will not tolerate anyone who disrespects her.”

Josef’s smile doesn’t reach his eyes. “So, you’ve chosen your queen. Let’s hope she doesn’t burn down your throne.”

The others remain quiet, but tension fills the room like storm-thick air. I don’t expect applause, but I see the cracks. Not all of them are against her. Not all of them are brave enough to speak yet, but they’re listening.

“This court is not ruled by fear,” I continue. “Not of witches. Not of prophecy. Not of change. If any of you believe otherwise, speak it now.”

Franklin meets my gaze, firm and steady. “We will see her at your side. Then we will know.”

Ever the diplomat, he doesn’t say what is actually on his damn mind. It’s not a yes but it isn’t a no.

I leave the chamber before Josef can hurl another veiled threat. My personal guards fall in step behind me, but I wave them off. I need a few minutes to compose myself and cool off before I turn around and kill that smug bastard. Or snap at someone who doesn’t deserve it.

Outside, the sky has turned that strange twilight blue that only exists between realms. I walk the long corridor back to the eastern wing, every step pulsing with restrained magik.

I’m so damn tired of all this political bullshit. I just want the merging ceremony to be done so I can silence the entire realm. Ccssandra is mine and their bickering and opinions won’t change my mind. Neither will all the fucking gossiping.

For a moment I wish we were regular humans.

Then we could hop in a car and drive to Vegas for a quickie wedding.

I chuckle to myself at the mere thought.

This may have all started as a way to save my realm and fulfill a prophecy, and it still is, but it's more now.

I have fallen in love with Cassandra and my priority is binding her to me, forever.

As I make my way deeper into the palace I can feel her already. Cassandra. The bond we haven't fully sealed yet is already strong and I sense her more every day.

She's close. She's a raging storm and they don't even see it coming. She can end all the realms without any help, but we can't save this one without her.

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Shadows in the Palace

Cassandra

I've been warned not to wander the palace alone. Which, of course, is exactly why I'm doing it now. I hate being told what to do, my mother spent my entire life directing and delegating. Now that I know the truth, I make my own choices, and I will deal with the consequences.

The air in Runic is different, crackling with energy, thick with old magik that coils around my senses and whispers my name when no one's speaking. It's beautiful and unnerving. Like the realm itself is sentient.

My feet carry me toward the northern wing, a part of the palace Amara, the Queen Mother, told me to avoid.

"Not until after the ceremony," she said.

She didn't explain any more than that which means something's in there they don't want me to see. Maybe I should be listening to her warning, but my curiosity has gotten the better of me.

The corridor is dim, lit only by blue flame sconces that flicker as I pass. I don't need a light. My magik is simmering just beneath the surface now, responsive and alive in a way it never was on Earth. It knows I'm close to something important.

Then I hear them. Voices, whispering softly.

“We must strike before the merging. If we wait until she ascends, it will be too late.” The male voice sounds familiar, but I can’t place it. “She will be too powerful.”

“I thought we were promised cooperation, not war,” another man hisses in return.

“The moment she binds to him, the prophecy will activate. She will anchor the realms. Do you want that kind of power unchecked?” a woman cuts in. “Do you really want an outsider with all that power?”

“Alluvium’s rule dies with her,” the first voice says. “It is time for Runic to lead the realms.”

My breath catches. I press my body to the wall, closing my eyes to focus.

There are three voices. Two male and one female.

They are speaking in hushed tones just beyond a side chamber.

I don’t recognize them all, but the first voice is sharp and biting and makes the magik in my bones recoil. One of them is definitely from Quietus.

I should leave. Go find Niko. Tell someone, anyone. But my curiosity and my stubbornness root me in place. A sudden gust of magik flares from inside the chamber.

“She’s more powerful than they know,” the female voice snarls. “Even she doesn’t understand what she is. But we do. And if she merges with him, she becomes immortal. She becomes untouchable.”

The first male replies, “Then she will have to die before that happens.”

The world tilts as the words slam into me. These people are willing to kill me to keep control. I step back too fast and the heel of my shoe scrapes loudly against the stone. The voices stop instantly, silence filling the hallway beyond.

Suddenly, I hear movement. It's fast, almost inhuman.

I bolt. I run like hell back the way I came, every instinct screaming at me.

My heart slams against my ribs, my magik swirling but erratic, like it's just as afraid as I am.

I make it around the corner just as a figure emerges behind me, cloaked and fast, too fast.

"Cassandra!"

I skid to a halt at the sound of Niko's voice. He's coming toward me, concern furrowed into his face. Before I can speak, the figure vanishes in a burst of black smoke, leaving behind the stench of sulphur and blood.

"Someone from Quietus is here," I gasp, clutching his arm. "They know about the prophecy. About us." He holds me tightly as I get my breathing under control. "They were talking in a corridor, threatening to kill me before the merging ceremony."

He grips my shoulders, grounding me, anger sketched across his features. "I know," he says darkly. "And I think they've already started planning."

My heart sinks. "What do we do now?"

"We keep you safe."

He takes my hand and all but drags me back to our chambers. I can feel the anger radiating off him, but he has closed his thoughts to me.

“I know you’re worried...”

“I need you to just be quiet right now,” he says angrily.

That shuts me up. But the moment he has me inside the room, he slams the door and locks it before leaning against it. His breathing is harsh in the silence.

“Where were your guards?” he asks lowly.

“I don’t need...”

“Fucking hell!” he roars, punching the solid wood door before turning to face me.

“You’re in danger, that’s why I assigned the detail.”

His long strides eat up the space between us, forcing me backward until my back hits the wall. His arms cage me in as he glares down at me.

“Do you want to die?”

“Of course not!” I can’t believe he just asked me that.

“Then why do you continue to put yourself in danger?” his voice is lower now.

“I ... I just wanted to have a little freedom.” The words sound silly slipping from my lips but that doesn’t make them any less true. “I feel like a caged bird.”

His eyes soften as he places his hand gently around my throat. He doesn’t apply pressure, just collars me lightly. His lips caress mine softly.

“Once the merging ceremony has taken place, you can go wherever you want, whenever you want. I promise. But in the meantime, I need your guards with you at all times.” His words are even softer this time, almost a caress.

“Please don’t put yourself in any unnecessary danger. I won’t survive losing you.”

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Breach

Niko

I should've sealed the northern wing once I knew Cassandra would be in the palace for a prolonged time before the damn merging ceremony. I should've locked the damn door the second we arrived back in Runic. It's the same wing they used to steal her the first time. I should have known better.

Cassandra is still shaking. I feel it beneath my fingertips as I hold her, her heartbeat hammering against my chest, her pulse quick against her throat. The smell of burnt sulphur lingers in her hair, and I don't need confirmation to know what it means.

Quietus. They've made it inside my walls.

Anger and fear swirl in my gut. I could have lost her today. If whoever was chasing her was just a little faster, or if she had tripped in the corridor while running away... I don't even want to think about what could have happened.

"I need to feel you," I murmur, pressing my lips against the corner of her mouth.

"Niko?"

"I need a physical connection," I say honestly. "I need to feel you around me and breathe you in. I need to know you're really still here. Safe."

"Sex?" she asks with a raised brow.

“Connection,” I reply, dropping to my knees. I lift her dress and throw her left leg over my shoulder. “Why aren’t you wearing any panties, Consort?”

“I wanted to ... surprise you.”

“Hmmm.” I run my tongue through her slit, tasting her essence. “Count me surprised.”

She moans softly and I look up to see a flush spread across her cheeks. I keep my gaze locked on her as I nibble at her sensitive flesh. Cassandra puts a hand over her mouth to stop her sounds from spilling out.

I pull away and wait until her gaze meets mine. “Don’t hide your pleasure, Cassandra. I need everyone to hear you, to know you’re mine. Because I protect what is mine.”

“But you said...”

“And now I’ve changed my mind.” I return to my ministrations.

I suck on her clit harshly, spearing her perfect pussy with three fingers. I thrust into her over and over, nipping and sucking, drinking her down. And when she reaches her peak and falls into her orgasm, it’s my name on her lips for anyone to hear.

“Come with me,” I say, once her breathing has calmed and I have fixed her clothing. I’m bathed in her scent, and I wouldn’t have it any other way.

She places her hand in mine, trust burning in her gaze as I lead her out of our chambers.

I lead her through three hallways and down a spiral staircase until we reach the war room, an ancient chamber built beneath the palace.

These stone walls are enchanted to block any magikal surveillance.

Only the High Ruler and a select few even know it exists.

Hayden and my mother are already waiting.

While she was cleaning up in the bathroom, I sent a messenger to let them know to meet us here. I can't do any of this alone and neither can Cassandra. As we enter, both of them are seated around a wooden table in the corner.

My mother smiles sadly, Hayden remaining passive.

"Did you know?" I ask, directing my question at the two of them before Cassandra even sits down beside them. "Did either of you know they were this close?"

My mother Amara's lips thin in displeasure. Whether it's because of my tone or because of the question, I'm not sure. "We've intercepted rumors for weeks. Nothing solid, though."

"It's solid enough now," Cassandra mutters, arms folded tight over her chest, trying to act brave although her voice trembles when she speaks. "They were in your palace. Talking about killing me."

Hayden curses under his breath. "How did they get in?"

"They didn't just get in," I say. "Someone let them in."

That's when the room goes silent.

Cassandra lifts her gaze to mine. “You think someone on your council is working with Quietus?”

“I think someone wants to make sure the merging ceremony never happens,” I reply. “And Josef has always had a deep affection for sabotage.”

Amara shakes her head. “We can’t accuse anyone, especially a high member of the Conclave like Josef, without proof.”

“I don’t need proof to protect her,” I snap.

But Cassandra’s voice cuts through mine—calm, resolute. “I do.” I turn to her, confused. “I don’t want to be locked away until the ceremony like some delicate artifact, Niko. If there’s a traitor here, I want to find them. I want to face this.”

“We already talked—”

She cuts me off. “I said I would allow the guards. But I know you well enough to know if there is another incident, guards or not, you’ll keep me in our chambers under lock and key.”

Even now, after everything, she wants to fight. Goddess, she was forged for a crown.

Amara studies her. “Do you understand what that means?”

Cassandra nods. “Someone, probably you, will need to train me. In magik, in politics, and in war.” She looks at me then, and I see no fear in her. “I need to learn how to be a queen ... your queen.”

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Becoming Queen

Cassandra

They expected me to break. To run, to hide, or to let Niko carry the burden of being a ruler while I smiled and stood beside him like a decorative blade, sharp but untouched.

They don't understand who I am. I am a true descendant of a Salem witch.

I've spent my entire life trapped by invisible chains, my mother's expectations, the coven's traditions, and the betrayal of almost everyone I've ever known.

But I am done being small or acting like I'm powerless, because I'm not.

Amara leads me into the eastern training chamber. It's older than the palace, she says. The stone beneath our feet once knew the first wielders of true magik. Here, spells are heavier. Truer. The walls themselves seem to listen.

"You draw from emotion," she says, her silver eyes appraising me. "That's human-born magik. It's powerful, but wild and inconsistent."

I nod. "I know."

"And you feel your connection to the earth when you heal," she continues.

"Yes."

“But have you ever taken energy?” she asks, lifting a single brow.

I hesitate. “From people?” I’m not sure how I feel about doing that.

She shakes her head. “No. From places. From pain. From memory. There are many forms of energy and magik than you, or even I know.” Amara steps back, gestures toward a tall mirror etched with runes. “Touch it.”

I place my hand against the glass. Cold floods my palm before it turns to heat. Then nothing, until suddenly the room around me fades and I’m somewhere else entirely. A memory not my own.

I’m in a battlefield. Ash falls from the sky like rain.

In the distance screams echo loudly, reverberating through the hills that surround the area.

Fae warriors clash with horned beasts that can only be Quietus-born.

Dark blood soaks into the ground turning it into a muddy quagmire.

And there, in the center of it all, is a woman cloaked in white standing perfectly still, her hands glowing a bright violet color.

She is me.

No. She is not me. She is a future vision of me. And she’s wielding power like a living storm. She gathers it around her like a cloak before pushing it out onto the battlefield to strengthen and protect the Fae-born warriors.

The vision snaps, and I fall back, gasping, my knees hitting the stone. Amara’s hand

is on my shoulder.

“That was a glimpse of what you become,” she says softly.

“I...” my voice shakes. “I was everywhere. My power didn’t just heal or destroy. It commanded.”

“In the vision, you and Niko were fully merged,” she says. “Fully ascended. That’s who you are when you stop hiding and let the realm see the true you.”

I look up at her, breathing hard. “What if I’m not ready for that?” For the first time since I placed my hand in Niko’s, I questioned my decision to come here.

Her smile is sad. “The prophecy doesn’t care if you’re ready, child. But I do. So ... we train.”

I stand in the moonlight on the balcony of our chambers, fingers still tingling from magik. My body aches in places I didn’t know could ache and I am tired in a way I have never been before. Niko appears beside me like a shadow. Barefoot again. Why is he always barefoot?

“You’re pushing yourself too hard,” he says softly.

“So are you,” I counter with a small smile.

We stand there in silence, watching the stars shift.

Then he asks quietly, “Do you regret coming here?”

I don't answer immediately. My eyes fall to his hand, resting on the stone railing. I lace my fingers through his. My fear and trepidation from earlier have long since faded.

"No," I whisper. "But I regret how little time we have left."

His expression tightens. "You know something."

"I saw a version of myself today," I say. "One with so much power it scared me. And it felt ... lonely."

Niko pulls me into him, pressing his forehead to mine. "You won't be alone. Not while I still breathe."

I know he is telling the truth. But what happens when he isn't here anymore? What happens after he dies and I am left alone, untouchable, and immortal? I will be the most powerful being alive in all three realms, but I will be alone and there isn't anything anyone can do about it.

And in the meantime, both of us could die at any minute. The shadows are growing. And somewhere in this palace, a knife is waiting with my name on it.

I turn toward him with a smile. "It doesn't matter what I saw. I think we should start living in the moment." Niko stares at me like I've sprouted a third eye. "Between Quietus and the court killers, there is a chance one or both of us won't survive this."

He tilts his head, cataloguing every inch of me. "And how do you propose to do that?"

"Let me show you," I say, taking his hand and leading him into our chambers.

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The Knife at her Throat

Niko

I've faced death in battle. I've seen it sweep across the battlefield like fog, silent, suffocating, absolute. But this is worse. Death is here, in my halls, wearing a familiar face—and I can't do a damn thing about it.

Not until I know, conclusively, who is plotting against her, me, and the entire fucking realm.

This morning, while enjoying a cup of tea on the balcony of our chambers, someone tried to assassinate my witch.

The blade missed Cassandra by mere inches.

Had she leaned forward a heartbeat sooner, she'd be gone.

I keep replaying it over in my mind, her laugh as she sat beside me after enjoying our breakfast, her cheeks still flushed from our bout of earlier lovemaking, the way she finally looked like she belonged.

Until the teacup shattered in her hand and the dagger embedded itself in the chair's back.

Now she's locked behind three wards in the queen's quarters, and I'm standing over the body of the man who tried to kill her.

He's a kitchen servant. Or rather, he was.

His throat is slit open, magik-smoked from the inside, a Quietus kill mark.

They always destroy their puppets after the performance. No loose ends.

Josef arrives late, of course. He's always late when there's blood.

"What happened?" he asks, glancing briefly at the corpse like it's an inconvenience. I don't answer him, choosing to keep my thoughts to myself.

"Another enemy at the gates?" he prods, smirking. "Or perhaps your Consort draws trouble the way others draw breath."

I grip him by the throat before he sees me move. I slam him against the stone wall of the corridor.

"You'll watch your mouth," I growl. "Or I'll rip it off your face."

He chuckles. "You should be more concerned about who's whispering in your queen's ear. Not everyone in Runic wants a human-born witch sitting on our throne."

I shove him back. "And some don't want you breathing our air."

He pushes my hand away and I allow it. He straightens his robes, glaring and unfazed. "All I'm saying is, if someone wants her dead badly enough to try it right here in the palace, in your quarters no less, what do you think will happen the day she's crowned?"

I don't answer him. Because I'm already asking myself the same thing.

I find Cassandra pacing our room, the hem of her azure blue robe trailing behind her like a comet's tail. She's barefoot, her hair wild from too many frustrated hands running through it as her eyes burn with fury.

She's alive but it's not enough.

"I'm going to kill them," she says, before I even speak. "Whoever did it. Whoever ordered it."

"You can't."

"I will," she counters, her voice flat with her building rage.

Her magik crackles in the air. Books flutter on the shelves and the curtains lift and flutter like they're caught in a storm. I move to her slowly, carefully, until I'm close enough to take her hands.

"You are allowed to be angry," I say gently. "But not reckless. They want you off balance. Scared. Loud."

"I'm not scared," she snaps. "I'm pissed off."

I lift her chin. "Then don't be loud. Be smart."

Her chest heaves. "I hate being a target."

"Then we turn the blade around," I say. "Let's draw them out."

"Meaning?"

“I mean, let’s use the thing they want the most against them. We’re going to trap them by using you as bait.”

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Bait

Cassandra

I was supposed to die yesterday.

I still haven't stopped shaking. Not from fear, at least not entirely. It's something else. A restlessness under my skin. My magik is too full, and my thoughts are too loud. I've walked the length of this room a hundred times and it's still not far enough.

I hear the door open behind me and I know it's him before he speaks. Niko doesn't announce himself anymore. He just enters and the room knows. I know.

"I'm not made for this," I whisper without turning. "The court. The politics. The games. The lies. This wasn't supposed to be my life. I'm not a deceptive person."

His plan from last night runs on repeat through my mind. The risks, the fallout from what we plan on doing.

"It wasn't supposed to be mine either," he says quietly.

His voice is lower than usual. Rough. Like he's been holding something back too long. "I could've died and now you're talking about using me as bait."

"But you didn't die." His hands brush my arms from behind. "Because you're meant to do more. To be more."

“I’m tired of being more,” I whisper.

I feel him press his forehead between my shoulder blades. A breath trembles out of him. “You don’t have to be more right now,” he says. “Just ... be with me. We’ll figure out the rest later.”

I turn in his arms. The look in his eyes is raw. No bravado, no shields. Just Niko, future king, warrior, Fae, man, offering me something I didn’t know I needed. He offers safety. Not from magik but from loneliness.

I rise on my toes and kiss him. There’s nothing soft about it.

His mouth claims mine like he’s starving. Like the world ended and I’m the only thing left worth tasting. I fist my hands in his shirt and pull him closer, until there’s no space between us, only heat and breath and magik flaring under our skin.

When he lifts me into his arms, I don’t resist. When he lays me on the bed, I don’t hesitate. There’s no fear. Just this need—this knowing—that whatever happens tomorrow, I want tonight to be ours.

His hands explore like he’s memorizing me. Not like a lover, like a devotee. Worshiping every curve, every gasp. His mouth trails fire down my neck, over my chest, down to my breasts, nipping and licking my nipples until they are turgid peaks.

“Niko,” I whisper, arching into him, overwhelmed and undone by this moment, by him.

His lips find mine again. “Say yes,” he murmurs against my skin. “Say you’re mine.”

“I was yours the moment I touched you.”

He pushes his cock into me slowly, not fucking me but claiming me. He rocks into me with long measured thrusts that reach spots inside me I wasn't aware I had. His gaze is locked on mine, love shining brightly even though we've never said the words.

He opens his thoughts and emotions to me. I am slammed with images of the future he envisions for us. He sees me swollen with a child—our child—he sees us happy, fulfilled. He sees peace for this realm and the others.

My orgasm crests and sweeps me under dragging him along. For long moments after, neither of us move, just regaining our breathing and drinking in the moment.

His hand palms my cheek. "I love you, Cassandra. And I will do whatever it takes to keep you."

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The Awakening

Cassandra

I wake to silence. A strange kind of silence, too full and too still. The kind that feels like something is holding its breath.

Niko is still beside me, one arm slung around my waist, his breathing slow and steady against my shoulder. The early morning sun filters in through the balcony doors, but the room feels off. Like the magik in it has shifted.

No. it's not the room. It's me. I sit up slowly.

The sheets fall away leaving me naked, but I barely notice. My skin is glowing, softly, faintly, like moonlight caught in a glass jar. Purple-white pulses shimmer just beneath the surface, traveling like veins of stardust down my arms and torso, and down to my thighs.

“What the hell...” I whisper to myself.

I slide out of bed, my feet touching the cool tiled floor. Every step feels weightless. My fingers tingle and when I lift my hand, sparks flicker between my fingertips, elegant and controlled.

And then I hear the whisper. It's not a voice but a pull. Like something ancient and buried has cracked open inside me.

“Niko,” I say, turning back. “Wake up.”

He does, instantly. His eyes are sharp, body tense, all warrior in this moment. His gaze falls on me right before his eyes widen.

“You’re ... glowing,” he says hoarsely, standing slowly. “Cass, what...”

The second his fingers brush mine, a burst of magik explodes around us. Light floods the chamber in a wave. The walls ripple and the air shimmers. The runes above the fireplace ignite, glowing in ancient Fae script I don’t recognize.

Niko curses and rushes to steady me, but I’m not falling. I feel anchored. I feel like I’ve never been more alive. And then, as suddenly as it began, the magik settles. Silence surrounds us and the glow on my skin dims. The room goes still around us, like it’s waiting to see what we will do next.

I look up at him. “What the hell was that?”

He doesn’t answer. Instead, he moves to the fireplace, staring at the glowing runes still etched across the stones.

“They’ve never lit up,” he whispers. “They’re dormant ancestral seals. Magik from the first rulers of Runic.”

“Why are they reacting now?” I ask.

He turns back to me slowly, something between reverence and fear on his face. “Because they’ve recognized a queen—their queen.”

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Shadow of Quietus

Nyx

The scream of the seal hits me like a blade. I stagger in the shadows of Quietus, clutching the edge of the onyx marble altar as ancient power rips through the realm like a warning bell.

She's awakened. The witch. The one from the prophecy. The one we were too slow to stop.

"Nyx?" a voice dares from the doorway.

I turn slowly, eyes glowing with firelight, my breath curling in the sulphur-rich air. She was supposed to be a pawn. A girl with borrowed blood and fading magik, groomed for obedience. But she has ascended, without the fucking ceremony. Without the final rites.

She's bound herself to the High Leader already.

That changes everything.

"What was that pulse?" the acolyte asks, trembling.

I draw a dagger across my palm and press the blood to the black crystal mounted in the altar's center. Visions flood the surface.

The girl glowing like starlight, the palace walls bending to her presence, and the ancestral runes igniting.

“A claiming,” I murmur. “The Fae haven’t seen one in over six thousand years.”

The acolyte gasps. “She’s the true queen?”

“No.” I smile darkly. “She’s the curse we should have buried when we had the chance.”

The prophecy had always been vague, intentionally so. A witch born under blood, forged by betrayal, destined to either bind or break the realms. But the Oracle lied. Or maybe she just didn’t care.

Because what no one told Niko is that if the witch is fully claimed before the merging ceremony, her soul doesn’t belong to one realm. It belongs to all of them. And a queen who is tethered to all three realms can destroy them.

I step back from the altar, the crystal now pulsing in rhythm with her.

“No more subtlety,” I hiss. “No more whispers. We move now.”

The acolyte bows. “And the traitor in Runic?”

“Activate him,” I say coldly. “He has one more chance to earn his place in Quietus.”

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The Real Queen

N iko

I've lived five hundred years. I've fought wars and buried friends and comrades. I've been trained from birth to rule a kingdom built on ancient magik and older secrets.

But not one single bit of that prepared me for her.

Cassandra stands in the center of our chamber, faint light still flickering beneath her skin, and I am struck dumb by what she's become. She is not just powerful, not just radiant. She is perfect ... and explosive.

The ancestral seals, the very heart of Runic's royal line, bowed to her.

Before the Merging. Before a single vow.

As if they couldn't wait for ceremony or council approval.

As if Runic itself was just as impatient as I am.

As if the magik of this realm itself had chosen her before I ever did. And I did choose her.

But this is something else.

"Say something," she whispers.

I cross to her slowly, carefully, like I'm approaching a flame that already knows how to burn me.

"You broke every rule of this realm, of all the realms." Awe coats every word that falls from my lips.

"Is that a good thing or a terrible one?" She looks unsure of how to proceed and so am I. But this doesn't change a damn thing, it only proves I have made the right choice in choosing her.

I take her hand and the power flares again, softer now, like it knows me and accepts me. But it's not just her magik anymore. There's something else in it. Deeper. Hungrier. Older.

"I don't know," I admit. And I hate that answer. "But we will figure it out together, just like everything else."

Because I'm supposed to know. I'm the one with the training, the history, the council, and the crown waiting on a golden dais. She's the wild card. The storm. The fucking prophecy no one else ever tried to fulfill. And yet, I'm the one spinning now.

"You're scared," she says quietly.

"I'm cautious," I correct.

She tilts her head, eyes searching mine. "What aren't you telling me?"

I should lie. I should tell her everything's fine, that the magik just jumped the gun, and the prophecy is right on track. But I remember the Oracle's warning: Don't lie to her. You'll regret it. So, I tell the truth, trusting her.

“The magik that activated today, those runes, they don’t respond to bloodlines. Well, they do but not exclusively. They respond to power. And allegiance.”

She frowns. “What does that mean?”

“It means the magik thinks you’re already Queen,” I say slowly. “But not just of Runic.” Her brows pull together, and I step back, afraid of my own conclusion. “I think the realms are tethering to you. All of them.”

Her breath catches. “That’s impossible. I haven’t been to Quietus...”

“You don’t have to. If the prophecy’s true—if you’re the one it speaks of—then your soul was always meant to bind the realms. But we thought that meant peace.”

Her eyes widen. “What if it doesn’t?” she whispers. “What if it means control? What if it means collapse?”

The power humming in the room pulses once, like a heartbeat. “When the ancestral seals lit up, there was a second flare,” I say slowly.

“A second flare?” she echoed.

“Like a heartbeat layered beneath yours. Faint and echoed but still there.” I shake my head, like I’m trying to shake the memory loose. “It could’ve just been a magikal aftershock,” I murmur.

But I know it was more, I’m just not sure what it means. But a sudden realization dawns on me. We didn’t trigger the prophecy and we aren’t meant to fulfill it. We woke it up. Just like we were destined to.

“What do we do now?” she asks.

“I’m not sure,” I say with a sigh. I hate those fucking words. “But I do know we won’t have to set a trap for those that want to kill you. I don’t think they could do it now if they tried.”

I can see the relief on her face the moment I say the words, and I know it has been weighing on her more than she was saying. I take her in my arms and kiss her until we are both breathless.

“You are beautiful, Cassandra,” I say with reverence. “No, you are spectacular.”

“Flattery?” she asks with a raised brow.

“Is it flattery if it’s true?” I grin with a wink, trying to alleviate the tension.

She laughs freely for the first time in days, and I lose myself in the sound. My lips meet hers again but this time with passion. I kiss her until she is writhing against my body, my erection already begging to be set free.

I push her back onto the bed, following her. I raise on my elbows, smiling down at her.

“Before I met you, I was afraid to choose a Consort.” She frowns, so I continue. “I thought I would end up with someone I had nothing in common with, a vapid woman who was only after the crown. But now...” I kiss her hard. “Now I know my future is filled with so much more.”

She cups my cheek. “You make me feel more alive than I ever have before.”

We don’t share any more declarations of love or the future. We lose ourselves in each other. Hands, lips, skin-on-skin contact. My cock is buried deep inside her, her breasts trembling with every thrust of my hips. A blush blooms across her chest and

cheeks as she crashes into an orgasm.

She moans my name loudly, scratching her nails down my back as I reach my own peak and pump her full of my seed. If I'm lucky, she will be pregnant before we even formally merge.

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The Weight of a Prophecy

Cassandra

They said I would be powerful. They didn't say I would feel haunted.

I sit alone in the royal garden, barefoot with my knees hugged to my chest, surrounded by glowing flowers that pulse with gentle magik.

The world here is too alive. And I can't escape the way the magik follows me now.

It's in every leaf that turns toward me, every gust of wind that shifts direction when I breathe.

Runic is watching me. And something else is watching through it.

I close my eyes, trying to slow my breathing, and the scent of the garden fades into something older. The memory surges unbidden, like magik finally uncoiling.

I was sixteen the first time I met her. The Oracle.

It was after my initiation ceremony, when the coven elders thought I was asleep. Arabella woke me in the middle of the night, her eyes strangely distant.

"She's called for you," she'd whispered.

Arabella took me through the root-path beneath the mountain chapel, into a part of

the coven grounds I didn't know existed. There, in a circular stone chamber with no windows, a woman waited.

She wasn't old and that shocked me. Her skin was dark and smooth, her eyes cloudy but ageless. Her body was draped in vines and bones that clinked softly as she moved.

She didn't speak at first. She just stared at me with those silver, sightless eyes.

Then she said, "You're the one they will all lie to."

I blinked. "What?"

"They'll say you were meant for one realm," she continued like I hadn't just spoken, "but you are a child of three. You bleed with Alluvium, you breathe with Runic, and your soul was touched by Quietus before you ever drew your first breath."

I backed away. "That's not possible."

She tilted her head, as if listening to something I couldn't hear. "You'll fall in love with a king, and you'll become a queen. But you will never be just his. The realms will want you, curse you, praise you ... or burn you."

I wanted to run. I remember that clearly. I wanted to scream, to tell Arabella we had to leave, to curse at her for brining me here. But then the Oracle took my hand, and I saw it. The eclipse. The fire. The blood. A blade made of shadow and a child with eyes like stars.

"You'll change everything," she whispered. "But only if you choose to do so. You are not fate's servant, Cassandra. You are its sword."

I woke in my bed the next morning, unsure if it had even been real. But now I know it was.

Niko says I might be tethered to all three realms—Alluvium, Runic, and Quietus. But I don't know what that makes me. A bridge? A queen? Or a weapon?

The prophecy never promised peace. That's what scares me most. It promised balance. And balance always comes with a price. Sacrifice is always needed to achieve what we want most.

I touch the center of my chest where my magik now coils like a second heartbeat. It doesn't hum anymore. It throbs. Like it's growing or waiting, except I'm not sure for what.

"Cassandra."

I flinch at the voice. It's soft, familiar, and wholly unexpected.

Arabella.

The elder witch from my coven steps out from between two willow trees, her pale hair catching the sunlight, her expression unreadable.

"I thought you were back in Alluvium," I whisper.

"I came through a hidden gate," she says. "I felt the rupture the moment your soul linked to this realm. To all the realms."

She kneels beside me, brushing a strand of hair from my face like a mother would, something my own mother never did.

“You were never just a High Priestess in waiting,” she says. “You were a key.”

“A key to what?” My voice trembles.

“To unlocking the power that binds worlds,” she whispers. “But, child, you have to choose what kind of door you open.”

I shake my head. “I don’t know what the hell I’m doing. I didn’t ask for any of this.”

“I know.” Her face is solemn. “How does the old adage go ... something about greatness being thrust upon us.”

I chuckle. “I know what you mean. It doesn’t offer any comfort, though.”

She presses something into my palm. It’s a stone, rough around the edges and glowing faintly. There are Fae runes, coven glyphs, and something darker etched into one jagged side.

“This came from the Oracle,” she says. “It’s a trinity shard. You’ll know when to use it.”

I close my hand around it and feel all three magiks surge through me. Runic feels light, Quietus feels like twisting shadows, and Alluvium has a wild pulse of freedom. My nose starts bleeding, and I wipe at it with my sleeve.

Arabella cups my cheek. “You must learn to control it before it controls you.”

“But how?”

“You stop waiting to be given power,” she says, rising. “And you start owning it. The shard isn’t just power,” Arabella murmured as she turned to go. “It’s a key. And

perhaps a promise.”

I frown. “A promise of what?”

She smiled without answering. “That remains to be seen.”

I stare at her for long, tense moments, not knowing what I am supposed to say or how she expects me to react. All I know is that she knows more than she is telling me.

“What do you know?” I ask, my gaze connecting with hers. “I don’t have all the information, do I?”

“Have you ever heard the full prophecy?” she asks softly.

“No,” I reply with a shake of my head. “I only have the bits and pieces I gathered from Niko.”

“Here,” she says, pulling an old grimoire from inside a large bag she is carrying. She flips it open and turns the old pages before she finds what she is looking for and hands the grimoire to me.

“When blood and bone are severed from land,

A witch of wandering soul shall stand.

Born beneath the weeping moon,

Forged in grief and cast too soon.

She walks in shadow, bound by none,

Yet tethered to what must be done.

Her power comes in trinity,

Of earth, of light, of calamity.

One realm shall fear her,

One shall seek her,

One shall bleed for her.

If crowned before the moons align,

The realms will bend, not break the line.

But if her soul is severed first,

The realms shall drown beneath the cursed.

She may bind the realms or burn them down,

Ascend as Queen or steal the crown.

The choice is hers, but not alone,

For even queens must choose a throne.”

A shiver runs up my spine as I read the passage three times. How the hell am I supposed to live through this?

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The Shard

Niko

I find her in the garden, seated on a low stone bench, moonlight curling around her like a crown of silver. She doesn't flinch when I approach, not this time. Her power rolls off her in steady waves now. It doesn't lash out or spark anymore. It breathes with her, swelling and receding.

"You're not the same woman I met in Bantry Bay," I say, stopping a few paces behind her.

Cassandra looks up. "I'm not even the same woman I was yesterday." She chuckles but the sound is flat.

Her voice is calm, but there's something sharper beneath it. Resolve perhaps? She holds up her palm, revealing the shard, and my breath catches.

"Where did you get that?" I ask.

"Arabella brought it," she replies. "It's a trinity shard. I felt the realms in it, Niko. All three realms. I don't think I'm becoming their queen. I think I already am."

Silence stretches between us. Not uncomfortable, just heavy. This is real and scary.

"There's something else," she says. "I can feel them pulling at me. Earth. Runic. Even Quietus. Like they all want me to choose."

“You can’t choose,” I say. “You don’t belong to one realm anymore.”

She nods. “I know and that’s what scares me.”

I move toward her and kneel in front of her. I take both her hands in mine, pressing my lips to her knuckles.

“Then let’s stop reacting,” I say. “Let’s move first. Let’s stop waiting for the prophecy to crush us and start using it to our advantage.”

Her eyes flicker with light, her gaze colliding with mine. “What do you mean?”

“I mean it’s time to end this game of shadows. We announce the merging ceremony, and we do it publicly. No more secrets and no more damn delays.”

“They’ll try to stop us.”

“Let them,” I say. “Let them try and fail.”

“And if they don’t fail?”

I rise and pull her to her feet. “They will. And in the process, they will reveal themselves. Then we will know who is against us.”

She doesn’t smile but she does step closer. “I want to do this with you,” she says. “Not just the crown or the ceremony. I want all of it. I want to build something new with you.”

I cup her face. “Then stand with me.”

She lifts her chin. “I already am.”

The next day, a royal decree is issued across all three realms. It is sent out on parchment wrapped in magik.

The Merging Ceremony

of

Cassandra Elise Ravenwood

Salem Descendant Witch of Alluvium

&

Nikolas Merrick Maximus

Highborn Fae and Future Ruler of Runic

will be held under the eclipse of the twin moons where they will bind their souls and their realms. Those who oppose the union will not be given mercy.

The Traitor

J osef

I always knew it would come to this. Not war ... but revolution. Not with swords and banners, but with blood. Quiet, deliberate, and necessary.

They've all been so blinded by her—by the light, the prophecy, and the crown promised in whispers. Cassandra of Alluvium. A witch who should have burned, now cradled in our halls like she's divine.

But I've seen divinity. It's merciless.

I light the final rune, and it glows crimson on the underside of the High Council table, hidden beneath centuries of dust and misdirection. Seven others pulse in rhythm with it, each one a key. Together, they form a ward-breaker. Enough to unravel Runic's palace protections from the inside.

The gate will open before dawn and the palace will be overrun.

Quietus is ready for what is coming. All I have to do now is remove the queen before she becomes untouchable. She is the only thing keeping Nyx from ruling all.

I draw the ceremonial dagger from my belt. It is made of centuries-old Fae iron and sharpened with intention. It has been etched with Quietus spell work. One cut would sever a soul-thread. Permanently.

My last message from Nyx was clear. If she merges, we lose the realms. If she dies before the bond is sealed, the prophecy collapses.

She sleeps in the eastern wing now. Guarded, yes. But that's not enough. Because she trusts me. Niko still sees me as a thorn, not a dagger, and that will be his final mistake.

I press the rune on my wrist disguised as a council sigil. The palace shadows shift around me, cloaking me in silence.

Tonight, Cassandra dies.

N i k o

I've trusted too many people for too long. That thought echoes through my skull as I pace the council's inner sanctum, the torchlight flickering off gold-etched walls and old stone.

The palace is still recovering from the Quietus infiltration, and our enemies are quieter now but not gone. And something gnaws at the edges of my thoughts. A whisper of unease. I almost have it figured out when footsteps approach.

Hayden walks in, his aura dark and his brow furrowed. When he reaches me, he places a leather-bound ledger in front of me.

"It was hidden behind a false panel in Josef's quarters," he says grimly, pushing the thick, rune-sealed book closer to me. "Only blooded council can access it."

I press my hand to the binding rune in the center of the cover and feel it unlock. The

rune pulses warm beneath the skin of my palm. Inside, the pages crawl with coded entries—dates, names, notes. But one sheet is different. A letter. Scrawled in Josef’s unmistakable handwriting:

To Nyx, Lady of Shadows, Architect of Truth

You were right. The girl has them all fooled. She wears power like a veil, and they worship her for it. Niko sees only her smile, not the storm underneath. He thinks she brings unity. But I see the truth ... she brings dissolution.

When the realms merge, Runic will become weak while Alluvium gains power. And Quietus will be all but forgotten. But your chaos is holy, and our plan will not fail.

I have placed the runes. The wards will fall. And when they do, I will be the blade in her back.

All hail the fall of the false queen.

— J.

My hand trembles, rage crawling up my throat like wildfire. This wasn’t just a simple betrayal. This was premeditated, precise, and chilling.

He called Nyx “holy.” He was never one of us. But now I know.

“Bring him to me,” I command my second and best friend.

“There’s a problem,” Hayden says with a frown. “I’ve searched high and low, even used a tracking spell. He’s vanished. He’s not even in Runic.”

Fuck. How am I supposed to protect my Consort, my queen, if I can’t find the person

posing the biggest damn threat? My head pounds and I know it will become a migraine soon enough.

“Make sure the wards around the palace are reinforced,” I say, my hands folded across the damn letter. “And don’t stop looking for him. Get as many people on this as you need.”

Hayden nods before he stands and leaves. Ready to do what I command. And I’m left here stressing, praying to any and all deities to watch over Cassandra just long enough for us to complete the merge.

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The Attempted Assassination

N iko

I never should have gone to sleep but my head was killing me.

From experience, I know the best cure for a migraine is to sleep it off.

And it works until the moment I jerk awake.

It feels like something, or someone, tears me from my sleep, claws streaking down my spine.

It's a soundless alarm, a pulse of magik not my own. It's not a dream or a vision. It's her.

Cassandra.

I throw on my tunic and sword belt, my heart hammering in my chest. The air in the room is off. Wrong. The wards on the window are frayed and faint. Almost like ... I push my palm to the wall and speak the activation rune.

Nothing.

The protective barrier should've flared blue, but it doesn't. Fucking hell! The palace wards are down.

I'm running before I finish the thought. I move down the eastern corridor and past the sleeping guards who are too still, unmoving and unnatural. A spell or maybe poison. Maybe even something worse.

The smell of copper hits me as I round the corner and then the silence breaks. A sharp crack sounds, like magik ripping through stone.

“Niko !” Cassandra screams my name, fear coating the single word.

I round the last corner to see the door to her chambers shatter outward, a blast of violet magik blasting the frame into jagged shards.

I never should have left her alone. It's a ridiculous tradition for us not to see each other before the ceremony. But it was the only tradition she wanted to keep from the human ceremony, and I couldn't say no to her.

And now she is alone and in trouble. But at least she's awake and she is fighting.

Inside, I see him—Josef. He's cloaked in Quietus shadows, his dagger raised, as his mouth whispers some cursed incantation.

And then I see her, my beautiful Cassandra, barefoot and bleeding from her forearm, but alive.

Her power is coiled around her like a storm in waiting, gathering power by the minute.

Josef turns, just as I charge. Our blades clash midair, Fae steel to poisoned iron.

“You snake,” I snarl, driving him back.

He smiles. “Still too late, Your Highness.” The words drip with venom.

He throws a shadow spell that burns through the wall behind me. I duck, roll, and come up swinging. But he’s fast, faster than I remember, but he’s never fought like a man with something to lose. Because he’s never had anything worth protecting.

I do.

Cassandra doesn’t scream because she is not afraid. She’s already summoning the shard, calling the threefold magik into her palm. The magik glows, pulses, and wraps around her.

“Don’t let him speak,” she says, her voice tight with command. “The next incantation will sever the tether.”

Josef laughs and says the first word of a death curse. But she’s faster. Cassandra flings the shard. It screams through the air and slams into his chest. Josef howls in pain before collapsing to the ground in a writhing mess.

I watch in fascination as light erupts from the wound. But it’s not just light, it’s aether. The combined magik of all three realms, drawn from her blood, from the prophecy, and from something older.

Josef vanishes in a burst of ash and flame. He’s gone, dead, just like that.

Silence crashes down around us. We’re both panting from the fight and her arm is still bleeding. I cross to her in three long strides, pressing her to my chest and burying my face in her hair. I breathe her in and feel her tremble in my grasp.

“It’s okay. You’re safe,” I whisper. “You’re safe now.”

But she pulls back, her hand trembling in mine.

“No,” she says. “I’m not safe. He almost did it.

He almost killed me. And if he had, everything would’ve broken.

” She lifts her eyes to mine, fierce, wide, and shining.

“No more waiting, Niko,” she says. “We need to do the ceremony. We can’t let this delay the ceremony any longer. ”

“We won’t,” I assure her. “But you’re sleeping with me tonight.”

“I can handle that.”

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The Merging Ceremony

Cassandra

The eclipse rises. Twin moons crossing in perfect silence over the Runic sky. One yellow-gold, the other a dark crimson. A celestial omen that hasn't occurred in three thousand years, last seen the day the Eternal Havok began. Now it marks our attempt to end it.

I stand alone in the preparation chamber. My gown is woven of elemental silk, dyed in the color of each realm. Green for Alluvium, silver for Runic, and black for Quietus. The fabric hums with power, enchanted to protect and amplify. My skin is bare beneath it, save for the markings.

Amara and Arabella painted them onto my arms, my throat, and my spine. They are spells, wards, and a legacy of all bloodlines before me.

Each one burned when they applied them, but I never screamed. Because this is who I've become. I'm not a girl or even a witch. I am a queen of three realms and the moment I walk into the merging circle, there will be no going back.

The high sanctum is carved into the cliffs overlooking the wild sky.

Ancient magik pulses through every stone, singing a song all their own as they welcome us to this sacred site.

Runes glow along the edges of the merging circle, symbols from each realm woven into a pattern older than any known language.

Niko waits at the center. He is dressed in ceremonial armor, but there is no blade at his hip.

He doesn't smile when I enter. Instead, he bows.

Something in me fractures, because this man, this warrior, chose me.

Not for a prophecy. And not for peace. But for me.

This journey may have started as a way to end the Eternal Havok but either of us could have walked away a long time ago.

We could have taken the easy way out and just let the chips fall where they may.

But we chose this, each other. We chose to fulfill a destiny neither of us was ever ready for.

I step into the circle and the magik locks around us with a shiver of the wind. Three elders, one from each realm, stand at the edge of the ring. Slowly, they begin chanting the incantation.

"Let the soul of Runic find its tether," the Fae intones.

"Let the daughter of Alluvium bear the balance," Arabella says.

"Let the night not claim the light," murmurs the Quietus defector priestess Amara recruited on the last full moon.

Power floods the circle and we turn to face each other.

Niko reaches out, clasping my hands in his. “Cassandra of Alluvium, will you merge with me? Not as a bond, but as an equal? Will you be Queen not by fate but by choice?”

I clasp his hand tightly. “I will.” The moment the words fall from my lips, the ground trembles beneath our feet.

“I, Nikolas of Runic, bind my soul to yours,” he says. “In strength. In light. In love.”

“I, Cassandra of Alluvium,” I say, repeating his words, “bind my soul to yours. In power. In shadow. In truth.”

Our foreheads touch and the final rite begins. The runes around us erupt in flame. The air around us twists and a shock wave of magik shoots into the sky. Gold, green, and obsidian streaked with purple, all spiralling as one.

We fall to our knees, our hands clasped and our breaths ragged. The prophecy doesn’t whisper, it screams. In my bones I feel everything come to a standstill, the realms all paused, waiting to see what will happen next.

I feel it then, a double beat. Not my heartbeat and not Niko’s. But something new. It’s somehow distant but still present. Like something old magik had already begun to awaken inside me, and I pressed a hand to my belly without knowing why.

The sky shimmers and the earth groans. The merging is complete. Now, we need to focus on the war that is coming.

Council of the High Coven, Cape Town

I stand at the center of the crystal dais, High Priestess Lenora, my knuckles white around my staff.

I've lived through three eclipses, a spell keeping me alive eternally, seen war flicker on the edges of prophecy like a snake poised to strike, but I never expected to see this.

Hell, I wasn't even sure it would ever happen.

The realm cracked wide open the moment the ceremony concluded. A pulse of light and magik unlike anything any coven has ever known surged across Alluvium like a tidal wave. Wards flared and ancestral spirits wept. And then ... silence. Deafening, unending silence.

But now, news has arrived. What we never thought possible has been confirmed.

Cassandra Ravenwood had ascended, not just as a Consort, not even as Queen of Runic. No, she had become the Threefold Queen.

"She was one of us," I whisper, almost in disbelief. "Born in our soil, trained in our rites. And now the realms bow to her."

"Or bend," a younger priestess mutters. "Some say she stole that power."

"Power like that can't be stolen," Arabella replies coldly, stepping into the chamber like she hasn't been gone for months.

Murmurs break out. Half the room turned to her in awe, the other half with veiled contempt. "You knew," I accuse.

“I suspected,” Arabella replies, her chin lifting in defiance. “And now we face a choice. The realms are bound and magik flows freely. We can resist it or we can evolve.”

The silence that follows is heavy with fear, uncertainty, and animosity.

An older warlock speaks from the shadows. “What does that make Alluvium now, if our High Priestess-in-waiting now rules all?”

Arabella’s eyes glitter. “It makes us part of something greater. Whether we like it or not.”

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The War Breaks

N iko

The moment the final rune sealed our bond, I felt it.

The magik didn't settle, it shook. Like a pulse too strong for the vessel that held it.

The sky over Runic split into three bands of color—green, violet, and gold.

The crowd below the cliffs falls silent, waiting with bated breath. Even the wind stopped.

And then, an unknown sound. Low, trembling, and out of place. A crack like thunder echoes from the mountain pass, followed by a shadow bleeding across the land like spilled ink.

“Shields up!” I shouted, blade in hand before my feet even moved. “Now!”

But I'm too late. We couldn't get the runes around the palace up again, the ones Josef has ripped apart, before the ceremony started. And now, the final gate of Quietus has opened, and the war is upon us.

They came from the sky. Not soldiers, but wraiths. Winged, eyeless creatures forged from a blood oath and death magik. Nyx's personal war-forged army. Bound to nothing and fed on fear.

They tear through the flimsy outer ward we set up in minutes and now they're here. In Runic, in the citadel, in our home. And I'm fighting to keep my queen alive.

Cassandra's magik crackles beside me, no longer wild but fierce. She throws a wave of force that rips two wraiths clean from the sky. Within minutes, her gown is torn, and the crown gone. There is nothing soft left in her. Now, she is only fire.

"Niko!" she shouts. "The north wing, they're breaching the Conclave Hall!"

"I'll hold the stairs!" I call back. "Go! Protect the seal!"

She nods once and runs. Gods help anyone in her way.

Cassandra

The citadel burns behind me. Flames dance along the spires, and smoke curls into the fractured sky. I leap the final stairs to the upper terrace, my breath catching as I see it. The merging seal, the magikal crest formed from our union, is cracked and flickering.

Nyx is here. Not in body but in essence. She hovers above the seal like a shadow given form, her voice echoing like wind across a canyon.

"Did you really think a union could stop me? Silly little witch."

I raise the shard, and it glows in my palm like lightning barely contained.

"We didn't merge to stop you," I snarl. "We merged to finish you."

She lunges and the world explodes into battle.

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The Final Seal

Cassandra

Nyx is not flesh.

She is a shadow-made will, smoke shaped into a scream. Her voice fills the terrace like a storm, echoing with every step I take toward the flickering seal.

“Look at you,” she hisses. “Crowned in stolen magik. Wearing a throne that wasn’t made for you.

” Nyx circles me, her form flickering at the edges like a dying flame desperate to survive.

“You think this is about prophecy? About power?” Her voice drops to something low and vicious.

“It’s about survival. Quietus doesn’t thrive in balance.

We are the shadow. We are the hunger. If peace takes root, if you bind the realms, we will vanish. ”

I freeze. She’s not just afraid of me. She’s afraid of what I represent.

“You feed on chaos,” I murmur.

“No,” she snarls. “We are born of it. Without it, our magik fades and our identity dies. You want harmony, False Queen? Harmony means extinction for us.”

I don’t want to be the person to destroy an entire realm, but I know I need to do this, I can feel it in my bones. Once the prophecy is fulfilled, I know everything will work out. Besides, there will always be chaos, even in times of peace.

I raise the shard, my blood still warm on its surface. “You can stop trying to convince me not to do this. I’ve already made my decision.”

The runes beneath us pulse erratically. The tether is breaking. She’s unravelling it, thread by thread, forcing the realms apart. If she finishes the spell, the merging collapses and this war will never end.

The prophecy will die. And God only knows what it will do to Niko, or me.

“Cassandra,” she snarls. “You were meant to balance the realms. Not bind them. That is the truth the Oracle never told Niko or anyone. Too much power in one vessel will break the weave.”

She sweeps a hand through the air and a wave of black flame rushes at me. I raise the shard instinctively and it absorbs the fire. The magik inside it crackles and the shard glows brighter.

I feel it then. The shard isn’t just a weapon. It’s a key. One final choice. It was created for one use, and it will only obey one command. To seal the realms together or to sever them permanently.

Every other time I have used it, it was nothing more than a shield, working at a fraction of its true capacity. But now it will do what it was intended for.

My hand shakes and my magik flares.

“Your bond to the prince is a noose,” Nyx growls, circling. “Cut it. End this. Walk away free.”

I laugh, breathless and trembling. “You think I want to be free?”

I raise my other hand, and my own magik roars out, not to strike, but to summon. The spirits of Runic flare to life around me. The guardians, the ancients, and all the old queens before me with glowing eyes and battle-scarred skin. They gather behind me like a memory of power.

I feel the earth beneath my feet and Runic at my back. And, gods help me, even Quietus in my blood.

“I don’t want to be free,” I say. “I want to finish this.”

And then I throw the shard straight into the seal. A shriek vibrates through the air, and it sounds like the world splits. A wave of light erupts, not white, but all colors of the universe. The stones crack beneath my feet.

Nyx screams, her form unravelling as the merging completes. Not gently and not softly. But with violence and finality.

The shard melts into the seal, fusing the realms and our bond with a final burst of magik. Three runes burn into my skin, painfully, one for each realm. And then ... silence.

Nyx is gone and the tether holds.

I collapse to my knees, my chest is heaving, and my hands are scorched. My heart is

pounding so hard I can't hear anything else.

I don't know if I've won but I do know I've survived.

Footsteps echo behind me before arms wrap around me. He lifts me from the ground and turns me around. Niko wraps himself around me, forehead to mine, his voice broken with relief.

"You did it," he whispers.

"No," I breathe. "We did."

And outside, from the ashes of battle, the first real dawn breaks.

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Six Months Later

Cassandra

The realms did not end. They didn't break under the weight of prophecy or burn beneath the fury of war. They bent and shifted, breathed, and began again.

The merging held. Alluvium, Runic, and Quietus now exist in a fragile harmony, not unified but woven. Trade flows between them and magik is shared instead of hoarded. The borders are no longer walls, but thresholds.

Peace, it turns out, is not quiet. It's work. Every. Single. Damn. Day.

The air in Quietus feels different now. It is no longer tainted with raw malice or unchecked hunger, but it is still thick with old magik. Shadows cling to the jagged mountains like memories, and the black stone citadel looms ahead, half-ruined, half-reborn.

Niko stands beside me, one hand resting at the small of my back, the other holding the sealed charter. The Threefold Accord. The agreement that will finally stop the cycle of silence, blood, and war between our realms.

"They're waiting," he murmurs, nodding toward the long ceremonial hall where the Quietus-born are gathered.

Demons, shade-walkers, and things that once lived only in nightmares. Now, they kneel. Not in fear but in respect. Maybe acceptance. Or perhaps in curiosity. After all, they've never had a queen who didn't want to erase them.

I raise my voice. "Quietus will no longer be exiled." The words ring out like truth. "Your magik is not a curse, it is necessary. Chaos balances order. Shadow sharpens light. I do not come to rule you but to recognize you. As equals. As a realm with its own crown, its own voice."

The crowd doesn't erupt. No, it holds its breath.

Behind me, the new leader of Quietus steps forward, Riven, a shadow kin born of dusk and wrapped in diplomacy, and once Nyx's apprentice, now unbound from her legacy.

He bows deeply. "In the name of Quietus, I accept the Accord."

The moment he signs, magik seals the document. A ripple spreads through the air binding Quietus, Runic, and Alluvium in shared law and open travel.

An hour later, from the cliffs of Quietus, we use a portal to travel to a quiet, little town in Alluvium.

The Coven meets us in Bantry Bay, where magik now sings through the streets.

Earthbound witches and Runic scholars greet one another with cautious hope.

Trade vessels shimmer into existence across new ley lines, carrying spell-linked contracts, enchanted grain, blood-metal, healing dust, peace, and more.

Amara watches beside me. "You did it."

“No,” I say softly. “We all did.”

And for the first time in three thousand years, the realms are not at war. They are in communion.

I walk through the gardens of the new Citadel, barefoot, as I’ve come to prefer. Magik hums in the air, not dangerous or wild. Just present. Like a living entity.

Children train with tutors from all three realms. The council chambers are rebuilt, much smaller now, intentionally so. Niko insisted that no throne ever be too high to hear a citizen’s voice.

I kept the scars. Not just the ones on my skin but the ones magik left behind, carved deep into my soul. The ones that remind me what it cost to get here. What it cost to win.

Niko finds me under the tree where we first kissed after we chose each other. He still walks like a king, but now he smiles like a man who never wanted to be one. He wraps an arm around my waist and pulls me in close.

“I’m told your speech to the Alluvium delegation made half of them cry,” he says. He wasn’t present for the speech, having snuck off to see Jolene at my old café, the one she took over, and get his favorite sweet treats.

I laugh. “They were sandwiched between a demon-born general and a Runic historian with opinions about hand gestures,” I say. “They didn’t stand a chance.”

He laughs softly before he falls quiet.

I lean into him. “What is it?”

He presses his palm to my stomach, gentle. “Nothing,” he murmurs. “Just listening.”

And there, barely more than a flutter, I feel it too. A spark. Small, warm, and new. A new fluttering heartbeat. I look up at him, my breath catching.

“You knew?”

“I hoped.”

L ate at night, after Niko falls asleep with his palm on my stomach, I sit and marvel how far we have come. I started this journey in Bantry Bay, just a regular witch with a bakery living her boring little life. And then I met a Fae prince, found out about a prophecy, and upended my whole life.

Now I’m a queen. One queen ruling three realms. Not because a prophecy said so but because I chose to be. And now I get to choose this. Peace, legacy, and a future not written in fire or stone but in blood and in love.

The fire dims and the castle falls quiet, and just before I close my eyes beside Niko, I hear her voice. Not in the room and not in the wind. But deep in my mind, soft and certain.

“One prophecy ends... another begins. The child of the Threefold Queen shall not bind the realms but awaken the stars.”

I sit up, my heart racing, my hand instinctively resting over our unborn child. A girl, I know in my heart of hearts. Deep down I also know she isn’t just a future queen.

She is the spark that will light the next fire.

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Crown of Peace

N iko

The baby's cry is soft, but it echoes like music through the Great Hall.

I stand beside Cassandra, one hand resting on her shoulder, the other bracing the curve of her back as she cradles our daughter against her chest. Our daughter. Her skin was warm, her hair dark, and when she opened her eyes for the first time, I swore they glowed faintly gold.

"She's perfect," Cassandra whispers, tears slipping down her cheeks.

She is. Fiercely, utterly perfect.

The doors open gently. Amara enters first, followed by Merrick.

My father moves slower now, the lines on his face deeper, and his once-mighty shoulders stooped slightly.

His dissolution is drawing closer by the day and soon he will be gone.

But when he sees Cassandra standing strong, our daughter in her arms, something like youth returns to his expression.

He crosses the room in silence and looks down at the tiny bundle. "A girl," he says quietly.

“A queen,” Amara corrects with a smile, brushing a hand across the infant’s brow.

Merrick lets out a slow breath. “She’s beautiful.”

Cassandra looks up at him. “Would you like to hold her?”

His eyes widen, then soften. “May I?”

She places our daughter in his arms, and I watch as the last High Ruler of Runic cradles his first grandchild with trembling hands. Merrick looks into her face, then up at me.

“She has your fire. And Cassandra’s eyes.”

“And she’ll have your legacy,” I say.

He nods, then presses a kiss to the baby’s forehead. “Then I can rest.”

He hands her back with reverence, steps toward me, and places a hand on my shoulder. “I’m proud of you, Niko. Not for what you’ve fought, but for what you’ve built.” And then he turns to Cassandra. “And you ... you’ve given us all more than peace. You’ve given us a future.”

He leaves us with those words and later that night, he passes quietly in his sleep.

One week later, my coronation takes place beneath a sky free of blood, war, or shadow.

The three realms are represented. Runic, Alluvium, and even a peaceful envoy from what remains of Quietus. The Garden of Ancients blooms brighter than ever, and as I

step forward to take my vow and my place on the throne, I feel the magik move through me and weave into my soul.

A new era has begun. Not through conquest but through choice.

Cassandra and I will rule as partners, as parents, and as peacekeepers. And in the years to come, when our daughter or her future siblings ask how the world changed, we will tell them.

Not with swords but with love.

The End

About Jade Marshall

Jade Marshall was born in South Africa where she still resides with her husband, daughter, and four dogs.

Although her first love has always been writing, she is a certified CCTV technician, traveling the country and getting to know new people every day.

Since 2020 she has had over twenty novels published as well as stories featured in several Anthologies.

Jade is best known as the author of the Katu Wolves series, The Gypsy Bastards MC series, and the Cammareri Family and she is currently working on several projects simultaneously.

When not working or writing she enjoys photography, reading, first-person shooter games, and watching horror movies.

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BONUS SAMPLE CHAPTER

THE WOLF

Gypsy Bastards MC, 1

Jade Marshall

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Sample Chapter

Hadley

I hate my job.

It isn't something I say to get people to pity me.

I genuinely hate working at Mary's Rib Shack .

I hate the mauve one-piece uniform, made of an awful, itchy fabric.

I hate that the owner likes us to show off our assets, which means our uniforms are short around the legs and low around the neck.

I don't particularly enjoy showing off my barely-there B cups, especially not to our clientele.

I hate that Mary's is in downtown Gypsy Falls and the people who show up here are sketchy at best, but most are completely creepy.

But Mary pays in cash and I need to stay off the grid.

This isn't something I've done out of choice but more out of necessity.

Growing up around an outlaw motorcycle club, which I then managed to piss off—through no fault of my own, might I add—means running and hiding to stay alive.

If King were to ever get his hands on me, I wouldn't survive.

Knowing that death chases me daily and could catch up with me at any moment ensures I always keep my head down.

The area where the diner is located is far from ideal, with drug dealers on every second corner and a nonexistent police response rate.

From the linoleum flooring that's cracked and peeling in places, to the faded leather booth seats, and the god-awful music, there isn't a single thing about Mary's Rib Shack that I don't hate.

I work the evening shift until closing time, from four in the afternoon until around midnight. I want to be able to work my way out of this hellhole and provide a better life for myself. I have aspirations and being a waitress isn't one of them.

One day, I want to be able to open my own tattoo parlor.

For as long as I can remember, I've loved drawing and through the years, I've honed my craft.

Add to that the fact I did an apprenticeship at a tattoo parlor, learning from one of the best, and you have my dream.

The only thing I want to do for the rest of my life.

"Hey, can we get some more coffee over here?" the man with the biker's cut sitting in my section all but yells at me.

Earlier, I saw them enter and a chill ran right down my spine. My first instinct was to run, to get the hell out of here as quickly as my legs could carry me. After catching a glimpse of their patches and not recognizing their club, I was able to calm myself.

My hands shake, and my legs feel weak as I make my way to their table. Bikers

terrify me. Not some bikers, but all bikers.

The three other guys with him seem rather normal-looking although anyone with eyes can tell that's not the case.

One blond and two with dark-brown hair, all of them with protruding beer bellies.

The fourth man, the one who just spoke and whom I'm assuming is the leader of this merry band of misfits, gives me the straight-up chills.

He's large, burly, and bald, with a snake tattoo running down his arm to his wrist. It's garish and badly done with absolutely no detail.

The man looks me over with eyes the color of mud as I refill the cups.

There's no depth to his eyes, just a flat deadness, and I try to avoid eye contact at all costs.

I refill all four cups and start to move away when a large hand clamps around my wrist and pulls me back.

Again, I feel this crawling sensation running over my skin.

It takes everything I have within me not to pull away from his grip.

"Why don't you sit down with us for a minute, darling?" the leader drawls at me.

"I can't. I'm on shift and have to get back to my customers," I reply while trying to pull my arm from his grip.

My breathing becomes shallow and a shiver works its way through my body. The need to get his hands off me is almost overwhelming.

“Well, now, Mary won’t mind, and the other waitress can see to your customers while you have a seat with us.”

He uses a tone that’s supposed to be reassuring but simply serves to creep me out even more. He yanks on my arm and I lose my balance, toppling forward and pouring half the remaining coffee down the front of his pants.

“You stupid fucking whore,” he bellows.

Before I can react, he backhands me across the face, causing me to fall.

My head connects with the counter and then the floor with a resounding thud.

Lying on the floor, all I can think is this is it, my last day at Mary’s .

I would rather live on the fucking street than work here one more day.

Regaining my senses and opening my eyes, I find complete chaos around me.

All the guys from the table are on their feet.

The two dark-haired men are holding back the guy who just slapped me.

He’s doing his best to pull away from their grip and has his eyes trained on the front door to the diner.

Storm, my best friend, stands in the doorway.

She’s a petite Asian woman with long black hair streaked with purple, full sleeve tattoos—courtesy of myself, a small waist, and an awesome set of all-natural C-cup breasts.

Storm knows how to defend herself from the time she spent living on the street.

She may be a stripper, but she will never let a man get the upper hand again.

Apparently, she learned a painful lesson and quickly found someone to teach her how to defend herself.

In three-inch stilettos with her gun pointed straight at him, she stands her ground in front of this monster of a man.

“Viper, why don’t you take your little cronies and leave?” She’s deadly calm in the face of this man and for a moment, I envy her confidence. I haven’t moved from my spot on the floor and simply watch their exchange like the coward I have become.

“You know good and well that your kind isn’t welcome around here. Or do I need to make a call?” She appears calm while taking her phone out of the back pocket of her jeans.

Viper tries to charge at her again but the blond man steps between them.

“Time to go,” he says, and the other two men start pulling Viper toward the door on the other side of the diner.

“I’m gonna get you. You and your little waitress friend. You’re gonna pay. You hear me, Storm? You and that little cock tease!” he bellows as he’s dragged out. “That pussy club ain’t gonna save you.”

As soon as they are on the motorcycles and roaring into the distance, Storm puts her gun back in her purse and rushes over to me. “Oh, sweetie. Are you okay?” she inquires while pushing my hair from my face to inspect the damage.

“Hurts like a bitch but I’ll live. Gonna be blue tomorrow and I’ll probably have an

egg on my head later, but I'll be fine," I assure her as I push up from the floor. "Thanks for the help."

Storm looks at me with sympathy in her eyes, something I despise more than I can ever explain.

I hate being seen for the weak, broken, scared little girl I become once I am faced with something that triggers my past. My past affects me more than I would like to admit, even to myself.

So many things can trigger me and have me turning back in on myself.

For years, I have secluded myself from people except for a select few.

My friendship with Storm often pushes my boundaries and I feel like she is helping me rejoin the world again, one little push at a time.

As she opens her mouth to respond, Mary comes shrieking around the corner.

"You stupid bitches. Do you know what you've done?"

Her face is blood red from the lack of oxygen during her rant and her over-styled, bleach-blonde hair flies all over the place.

"Those assholes are gonna burn my place to the fucking ground because of the two of you!"

"What the fuck is wrong with you?" Storm turns a glare on her. "One of your staff members was just attacked, and all you can worry about is your business? What kind of person are you?"

Mary stares daggers at Storm as I pull myself to my feet.

“What’s wrong with me?” Mary continues shrieking. “Do you know who the fuck those guys were and how bad it can get when you fuck with them?”

“Yes, I do,” Storm says calmly. “Those are the limp-dick Mongrels MC and ain’t shit gonna happen to anyone. Pope is gonna lose his shit when he hears they were in his territory.”

Mary pales when she seems to realize Storm actually knows what she’s talking about.

“Now,” Storm says, looking back at me over her shoulder, “I am gonna take Hadley home and get some ice on her face. You’re gonna cover her tables and still pay her for the hours she’s missing. Because that’s what a good boss would do.”

“Oh, go choke on a dick, Storm. You won’t be telling me how to run my goddamn business. Why don’t you and Hadley just get her shit and get out because I don’t need to draw any more attention.”

She calmly turns to me and, looking me in the eyes, says, “You’re fired.”

Before I can think it through or contemplate my actions, my fist flies out and connects with Mary’s nose.

She gives an undignified shriek as she cups her nose. “You cunt! You broke my fucking nose.”

I stare at her before regaining my footing. Today may have been my breaking point. I have never—and I mean never—in my life laid hands on another person. “Oh, bite me, Mary. You’re a fucking bitch and I quit.”

Between hitting Mary, telling her to piss off, and quitting my job, I feel like I’m on top of the world. For the first time I can remember, I stood up for myself.

With what I'm sure is a seriously crazy smile on my face, I turn away from her.

I head to the back of the diner where my personal effects are in a locker and change out of my shitty uniform.

Taking a deep breath, I realize what I have just done.

I stood up for myself but in the process, I've quit the only job I have.

How am I going to pay rent, buy food, or pay for my damn car repairs? I am so fucked.

Instead of lingering on that, I square my shoulders and walk out to the front.

People are crowded around Mary while Storm is smirking from her spot at the front door.

Looking back at Mary, I smile. As I walk out of the diner, I give a single finger salute in farewell, light up a smoke, and walk home.

End of sample chapter

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