



# House of Demons and Bones (Shades of Ruin and Magic #5)

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**Category:** Fantasy

**Description:** Sy

I'm no longer a dirty little secret.

Two powerful heirs now know about Barbie and me, but they intend to keep it that way to protect us.

Warned by the oracle, "Follow your heart, lose everything," Killian has yet to decide which woman he'll choose. He can't have everything—he must choose love or the crown.

While Barbie's luck runs out, my star rises with three heirs courting me. It turns out I'm not just a monster that feeds on sex and violence. I'm what the supernaturals have been searching for—the oldest magic in the flesh.

The enemies close in on Barbie and me. And our father is coming.

They say, with the God of Ruin, everything will fall. But Barbie and I will stand in his war path, along with our five princes.

**Total Pages (Source):** 25

# Page 1

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## PROLOGUE

### The Fallen Star

Before everything went wrong, Lilith had shone as brilliantly as Lucifer, her twin, their radiance stretching across galaxies. But Lucifer's pride drove him to challenge Heaven's Throne. When Heaven hurled him down to Hell, Lilith chose to fall to Earth, knowing she'd never again see her starlit home.

No one knew why she fell, and they called her the fallen star. She didn't waste time lamenting her loss. She had one purpose—to eliminate the threat at all costs.

She stepped up to rule the Underworld after Lucifer became a wanderer, roaming between realms.

Ages passed, and she felt no closer to finishing what she'd started.

The endless solitude would have crushed most souls, but Lilith had been born of starlight. That spark inside her kept burning through the longest, darkest nights.

Finally, she found the Maiden, spinner of the thread of life, hiding from their enemy. The Maiden spoke a prophecy meant for Lilith alone—one that, once again, demanded a great sacrifice, carving out another piece of her essence as a tithe.

While she waited, the void in her chest expanded.

She'd taken lovers by the hundreds. Men, women—beautiful creatures who shared

her bed but never touched the frost in her soul. None came close to matching her power, her beauty, her intelligence. None stood as her equal.

Then came Hades's true heir, and desire hit her like lightning to the heart. But he did the unthinkable—he said no. The first man ever to turn down a star, a queen of her caliber.

Deep down, she knew he wasn't hers to claim, but that knowledge didn't dull the wanting. Something about him woke up her ancient heart, made her feel young again. His rejection drove her to the edge, drove her to use her star-born power to bend his will. She'd already fallen once. What was one more sin?

So she forced the bond, betting everything that his heart would eventually be hers.

Then the girl appeared—the one who was actually meant for him.

## Page 2

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1

Sy

The looks on both heirs' gorgeous faces were priceless—pure gold.

Rowan and Killian stared at me, their eyes smoldering with shock and disbelief, like they'd been sucker-punched by reality itself.

I sympathized—couldn't blame them for the mental whiplash.

One second, Barbie had charged between the dueling figures, golden curls bouncing, eyes blazing with determination to break them apart. The next, I stood in her place, grinning with confidence and radiating savage beauty.

Watching sweet Barbie transform into me wasn't your everyday entertainment, especially given our stark differences. Barbie was lovely, all rosy cheeks with lingering baby fat, but I was something else entirely. It wasn't only that I was a good head taller than her. A decade of fighting, eating intelligent beings, and sex feeds had sculpted me into an apex predator. Pure danger wrapped in deadly curves.

I flaunted myself before the two most powerful heirs, thrusting my double-Ds out. Their predatory focus fueled my excitement, so I flashed them my signature grin, all fangs and zero apologies.

I was done living as Barbie's shadow. Here in Mist of Cinder, I could finally be Sy in all my wild, cunning glory. The human world had its limits, but here? I belonged. A

few stolen hours with my sugar some nights wasn't cutting it anymore. Neither was commanding attention at the occasional party. I wanted the spotlight full-time, no more hiding in the dark.

I basked in the princes' attention. Even the chaos prince saw me. It was time to seize more opportunities.

"Hello, hello, lovers," I purred.

We don't want to rile them up further! Barbie's voice rang sharp in my head as she watched the heirs like a hawk, braced for the shitstorm. They're dangerous.

No more dangerous than us. I brushed her off, too pleased with myself to snap at her constant doom-and-gloom. They aren't even snarling. And no one dies today, not on our watch. So I consider it a win. Think about it—we stopped a death duel between the two most formidable heirs.

The air, thick with blood and violence moments ago, now hummed with mystery, all orchestrated by me. The thrill of power buzzed in my blood.

And look, they're both so smitten with me that they're speechless, I pointed out to Barbie.

They aren't smitten. She tried to claw her way to the surface, but I held firm. They're having a hard time processing this shitty reality.

Nothing shitty about me shining, I protested.

"What the fuck?" Killian spat, darkness flashing in his bloodshot eyes.

"You disappoint me, Prince Chaos," I said, eyes half-lidded. "That's all I get after

saving your royal princeling butts?”

“Sy? Is it really you?” Rowan stuttered. “What’s going on?”

“Sure is, sugar,” I said, giving Rowan a little sultry wave.

He tried to walk around me to insert himself between the chaos prince and me, but the second they faced each other, these two would be at each other’s throats again.

We wouldn’t want that, Barbie agreed.

I threw up a hand sharply to stop his advance.

Wild cat’s out of the bag. Barbie pressed her fingers to her temples. Fuck.

“Wild cat’s out of the bag, fuck,” I echoed, delighted. “And I’m the wild cat who’s been sleeping with sugar Rowan while Barbie watched in fascination from the sidelines.”

Barbie kicked my shin, and I dodged.

“Barbie and I are like day and night,” I drawled, twirling a finger for dramatic effect. “We’re two badasses sharing one body. Two peas in a pod. To keep these gorgeous forms”—I gestured at my body— “we need constant feeding.”

The killing rage in Killian’s eyes dimmed, and the furious rumbling from his chest faded. He glanced at Rowan, who glared back. But both heirs’ murderous intent had drained away.

They finally got it.

Rowan's silver gaze slid from Killian to me. "So every time we fucked, Barbie was watching?"

"Watching in fascination," I purred. "But she always cut our fun short. Had Underhill kick you out, even when Underhill told her you weren't finished."

"Cockblocker." Rowan's voice dropped to a dangerous whisper, his eyes darkening.

Shit, he was so hot when he got like this!

I flashed him a wicked smile. "We had to bribe her with pink diamonds just to get some peace. See, Barbie only speaks one language."

Rowan and Killian both raised an eyebrow, waiting.

"Gold," I drawled. "Or in our case, diamonds."

Barbie's lips curled into a sulky pout.

"Now I get why my house let you in," Killian said, his eyes narrowing thoughtfully. "It mistook you for Barbie." He shook his head with a dark laugh. "And here Silas thought Barbie was a shifter."

"Not his kind of shifter," Rowan said, running long fingers through his dirt-and-glass-speckled silver hair. "I've had my suspicions ever since I first scented Sy on Barbie." He shot Killian a hostile look, old anger flickering. "Like you said, who'd have thought they were sharing one body?"

"I need to talk to Barbie," Killian said, his icy eyes sharp as glass. "Change back."

"Sy stays. Period," Rowan countered.

I preened at my sugar's defense, but Barbie rolled her eyes at the alpha male showdown.

Do they really think they get to decide for us? she huffed. Assholes.

The building shuddered, and it wasn't our princes doing the shaking. Another tremor hit, and my enhanced hearing caught the whine of the glass elevator.

"Fuck," Killian growled. "The other heirs broke our blood ward."

"Barbie must've weakened it when she came up," Rowan said.

"We need to move before those pests get here," Killian said. "We'll sort this mess out somewhere else without their drama."

Rowan nodded, his eyes locked on me, fierce and protective. "And we must keep Sy's secret—Barbie's too. They saw Barbie come up, and now?—"

"Now I am here." Barbie's voice ripped from my throat before I could stop it.

I wasn't ready to give her back the reins, but a flash of dark light exploded in my head, hot pressure crushing my chest—the usual shit when Barbie took over. Two blinks and I was falling as she surged forward.

My claws touched soft grass, but I had no time to settle. Heart pounding and aching for my sugar, I pressed close to Barbie's skin, peering through her eyes as both heirs stared at us. Yeah, watching Barbie and me swap would take some getting used to.

"Little scorpion." The chaos prince exhaled, his face softening at the sight of his true love.



He melted for her, but Barbie's bright eyes held no forgiveness as she met his gaze.

"They're coming," Rowan called. His eyes darted to the elevator as he stepped in front of Barbie, shielding her just like he would for me.

"I'll handle it," Killian said.

The air rippled, hot and tight, before lightning sliced down from the sky and carved out a shimmering door.

"What the fuck is this?" Rowan demanded.

"A door to where we need to go." Killian shrugged.

"And where the fuck is that?" Rowan's voice dripped with distrust.

But Barbie gave the tear one look and dove through it swiftly before my sugar could do anything about it.

"Where Sy goes, I go." With a sigh, he stepped through after her.

The elevator dinged.

"Where the hell did they go?" Silas's shout reached us just as Killian slipped through and sealed the tear behind us.

## Page 3

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2

Barbie

Killian and Rowan stumbled through the shimmering door after me, their blood staining the marble rooftop. Killian sealed the portal, cutting off the stream of curses and shouts from our pursuers at X Palace.

It was a close call—the other heirs had nearly caught us.

I shot Rowan a dirty look for hurting Killian. Sure, I hadn't forgiven the chaos prince, but in my book, I was the only one allowed to mess with him.

Sy rolled her eyes inside me. Your man carved mine up too.

The air thickened, and the link between Killian and me pulled taut, crackling with electricity. His raw need slammed into me, matching mine, curling my toes. I caught the pulse between Sy and Rowan too, fainter since she was lurking within me.

Like looking through frosted glass, Sy peered through my eyes, drinking in the sight of her lover with fierce hunger.

I ran my fingers through my tangled curls.

Shit, we'd left pure chaos in our wake. Where the hell were we supposed to go from here?

I cupped a hand over my eyes to shield them from the intense light as I took in the surrounding snowy mountains.

We'd landed at Killian's cliff-top villa. The ice never melted here, but his dragon packed enough fire to keep him warm—I hoped. He called this place his dragon's haven, untraceable and safe.

Last time he'd carried me through that door, I'd been in heat, too lost in clawing at him to notice the view. Lust had ridden me hard, turning my brain to fog.

The canopy bed where we'd last mated was gone. I turned to find his eyes on me, blazing hot, and I knew he was remembering every filthy thing we'd done there. Heat flooded my core at the memory of our wild coupling. I pushed those erotic flashes away before they could sink their claws deeper.

My heart fluttered like trapped wings, and I forced myself to lower my gaze, afraid my eyes would give away everything I felt for him. Like I said, I wouldn't make this easy. He hadn't even started groveling yet. Even if he did, his betrayal wasn't something I could just brush aside.

Sy's hand flickered in the shadows, signaling her frustration at my stubbornness.

"This way," Killian said, gesturing toward the table. His muscled forearm brushed mine, sending electric tingles across my skin and igniting that familiar ache in my core. The air between us whipped with tension.

Even with all this space on the rooftop, he'd found a way to touch me—a move too precise to be accidental. I jerked back even as every instinct screamed for me to jump on him, but I shoved down the urge, as I had another concern. I needed to stay sharp, keep this mating heat locked down tight before it could surge back and tear through me again.

A hint of a smirk played on his lips. The chaos heir always found my antics amusing, oblivious to his own bleeding wounds as he guided us to the round stone table circled by four chairs beneath a canopy of white blossoms.

I blinked. The ancient tree had definitely grown since my last visit, its branches heavy with dense clusters of flowers. Magic pulsed from its roots, reaching out to greet me. Through our connection, I felt Killian's dragon stir, drawn to the magic of his realm.

The table was packed with platters of food. My stomach answered with a growl, my eyes lighting up at the feast. The familiar bite of mountain wind carried the scent of snow that now mingled with the metallic tang of blood.

"Stop," I called.

Both heirs froze in their tracks, eyeing me warily.

"You two need to clean up first," I said firmly, wrinkling my nose. "You're bleeding everywhere, and it's kind of killing the vibe. Do you know Japanese gentlemen always take off their shoes before they eat?"

The blank looks on their faces said it all. Rowan probably didn't even know Japan existed. Fae had always hated humans, and before the Veil split their worlds apart, they'd warred endlessly. Now humans dismissed magic as stories and myths, which, honestly, worked out better for everyone.

As the most destructive species, humans had wiped out beings far more powerful than them and obliterated countless civilizations.

Only the Veil stood between the worlds now, but when magic failed, that barrier would crumble. Nothing would stop humans from pouring into this last pure realm. The immortals could face extinction.

But neither side had any idea that my father would devour both worlds when he came.

A wicked smile tugged up Killian's sensual lips. "I've never claimed to be a gentleman, little scorpion. Rowan's the one who plays nice just to get women into bed."

Rowan flashed his fangs at Killian, as did Sy.

I left them to their drama and made a beeline for the table, dropping into a chair and sinking my teeth into a cream bun. The sweetness exploded on my tongue.

The knot in my chest loosened as I watched Killian and Rowan heal, their wounds closing like a video on fast-forward. Supernaturals could bounce back from almost anything, and these two were walking, talking regeneration machines.

I grabbed a mug of coffee that was liquid sugar with a splash of cream—exactly how I liked it. No black coffee for me, not since I'd learned that was serial killer fuel. After a long sip, my nerves settled.

I drink gin and whiskey like a real woman, Sy declared.

Yeah, you had your fun while I dealt with your hangover, I said.

The two heirs were still cleaning up.

"How the hell?" Rowan demanded.

"You'll have to be more specific, Rowan," Killian said lazily.

"You shouldn't be able to open a portal alone," Rowan accused.

It took all five princes' combined power to teleport, but Killian had become more powerful. He could now slip between places solo—a secret he'd only shared with me.

Killian shrugged. "And yet I opened it alone."

"What else have you held back from us?" Rowan's voice dripped acid.

"If I told you everything, I'd have to kill you," Killian mocked.

"You already tried and failed." Rowan's lips curled into a sneer, transforming his handsome features into something unpleasant.

Liar, Sy protested. My sugar looks great no matter what.

"Weren't we supposed to be brothers?" Rowan's words cut like glass. "Yet here you are, keeping us in the dark this whole time."

Killian sighed. "I can only travel to my dragon's realm." He caught Rowan's look and added, "Not exactly breaking news that I'm bonded with a dragon, and he's an ass. And yeah, I can also show up wherever Barbie is when I'm dream walking."

My heart did a little flip. Did he mean that we had a serious link that mimicked a solid bond? But wasn't he already tied to the demon queen?

He meant that he can find you whenever he wants to fuck you, dummy, Sy said.

If you can't say something nice, zip it, I snapped at her.

Rowan gave Killian an odd look but dropped the subject.

Killian flicked his wrist with a flourish, and poof—bloody clothes gone, replaced by

a black shirt and worn jeans. Every heir could pull that convenient quick-change magic, and Cade could even whip up a feast, like he had done in that prison cell in the House of Mages. Everyone in the academy knew that all the heirs were keeping some of their powers under wraps. They never showed their full hands, not even to each other.

I can magic up dresses too, Sy bragged. You missed my show at the party while you were passed out. By the way, you should keep your mouth shut when you sleep—you snore like a chainsaw.

Rowan snapped his fingers to summon his outfit and got zilch. He let out a growl when it became obvious that no one could conjure up magic in this pocket dragon realm except Killian.

Killian slanted Rowan a pitying look, then waved a hand. A stack of clothes appeared in his grip. He held them out like a peace offering, and Rowan grabbed them with a grunt. He didn't thank Killian, not even with a nod—not when they'd just finished trying to kill each other five minutes ago.

Rowan's blank look turned to a scowl when he saw the farmer getup Killian had offered him. A sheltered fae prince raised with silk sheets knew cheap clothes when he saw them.

"They're all I've got," Killian said. "Wear them or stay away from Barbie. She's not having drinks with anyone who looks like they've just walked off a horror movie set."

"And whose fault is that, asshole?" Rowan snapped. "I stayed in my lane and fucked my own woman, and you came at me like a psycho."

He stripped off his frayed tunic and squeezed into Killian's handouts. The shirt rode

up above his belly button, and the pants looked like he was ready for a flood. Next to Killian's superhot look, Rowan could've been auditioning for Fashion Disasters: Immortal Edition . Which was exactly the point, judging by Killian's smirk.

"Fuck you," Rowan said.

"Maybe later, brother." Killian smiled and headed toward me.

His mood had improved a great deal now that he knew his friend hadn't bedded me.

"Better than nothing, right? Besides, the peasant look is really working for you."

Rowan shook his head in disgust as he approached the table.

I'd been holding in my laugh, but watching the fae prince rock the discount rack look broke me. A peal of laughter burst out until I doubled over, Killian's grip the only thing keeping me from hitting the floor.

Sy seethed beneath my skin, pissed that Killian had turned her prince into a joke.

I tried not to look at Rowan, but one glance at him in that ridiculous outfit sent me into another giggling fit. Killian lost it too, while Rowan scowled.

I fell apart in Killian's arms. He held me as if I was the most precious thing. Electricity buzzed on my skin, and arousal shot through my veins. By sheer will, I shoved him away before the mating heat could kick in—especially with Rowan right there.

The fae prince didn't blink on seeing that I could touch Killian. He'd clearly figured out why the chaos prince had attacked him. Killian gave me a hungry look as he slid into the seat beside me, and Rowan took the chair across from us.



“How’s my Sy doing?” Rowan asked, his face tight.

Sy straightened, glowing at his attention.

“She’s prickly,” I said.

My laughter had faded as reality crashed back down. We’d made a mess, and it was time to let the truth out, but I didn’t even know where to begin. I bit my lip, shadows haunting my eyes.

Start by telling them about me, Sy said. And fix your posture. And you’re doing that lip-biting thing again.

Since when are you an expert in manners? I snorted.

“Are you two talking right now, Barbie? Sy?” Rowan demanded.

“If she’s not criticizing my every move, she’s dropping terrible advice I never asked for.” I raked my fingers through my curls, trying to tame them.

Sy pouted.

“I want you to be nice to Sy and let her take over now,” Rowan urged. “I need to hear her voice.”

Let me take over, Barbie, Sy demanded. My sugar needs to hear my voice.

Later, I snapped. I’m not done with Killian yet.

Make it quick, then, she snapped back. I might not be the primary, but I’ve got rights too!

I massaged my temples. Everyone was entitled. Everyone had demands these days.

“Barbie stays,” Killian insisted. “I’m not done with her.” He turned to me, heat in his storm-blue eyes. “How long have you been sharing space with that wild thing?”

“Her name is Sy,” Rowan growled.

“Since birth,” I said.

I’d thought that I’d created Sy as an imaginary shield against my father when I was a child. But Sy had been there from my first breath—I just hadn’t known it. After the oracle dropped her cryptic hint, the puzzle pieces started falling into place, and I was beginning to understand what Sy really was.

I was what-you-see-is-what-you-get. But Sy had layers upon layers. And now that our secret was out to both princes, there was no stuffing it back in the bottle.

No more hiding her away in fear.

Sy’s eyes went misty at my change of heart.

Partners in crime, she whispered.

Two peas in a pod, I offered.

“How is this even possible?” Rowan asked. “And you two aren’t twins.”

I spread my arms. “We aren’t twins. We’re something else.”

Rowan nodded and sucked in a breath. “There’s never been anyone like you two. What are you? Let Sy out. She can explain this better and with less attitude.”

While Rowan was starting to get on my nerves, Killian just watched me patiently, not demanding shit.

“I’m the primary,” I said. “Main control’s mine, though Sy gets her time too.” Every battle Sy had waged for dominance, she’d lost. “Think of it this way,” I added, and Rowan’s eyes narrowed at my tone. He was so protective of his precious Sy. “Sy is a sex worker, and I’m her pimp. When I need some shiny, I send her out to play. She’s quite the professional, isn’t she? You’d know all about that, Prince Rowan.”

“What did you just say?” Rowan’s voice dropped to a dangerous growl, his eyes on fire.

Killian rose, putting himself between Rowan and me, even though I could hold my own. “Back off. You pushed first, and you know how Barbie handles threats.”

He slid two fingers of whiskey on ice toward Rowan. An odd choice. Fae usually drowned themselves in sweet flower wine, but maybe some mortal fire would cool that temper.

Killian poured his own glass and drained it, looking at Rowan. The fae prince matched him, the sharp edges of his ethereal features softening.

“My little scorpion stings,” Killian said with pride, and Rowan didn’t even bother to raise an eyebrow at the chaos prince’s claim on me. The unspoken truth hung between the two heirs—they’d nearly killed each other over what they’d thought was one woman, only to discover we were two entities sharing the same space. “It’s who she is, Rowan. She challenges authority, and you stepped right into it. If you want answers, ask nicely. I’ve learned that lesson the hard way. Pushing her gets you nowhere.”

“I don’t sting. I’m not a scorpion.” I narrowed my eyes at Killian.

He smirked. “Are you sure?”

“You think you know me, but you don’t,” I said to Killian before I turned to Rowan at Sy’s urging. She was growing anxious. “Don’t worry. Sy wants you to know you’re her only client, and she’ll keep it that way. Well, as long as those pink diamonds keep coming.”

“You don’t need his diamonds,” Killian snapped. “Whatever you need, I’ll provide.”

“You’re still holding my jewels hostage,” I said.

“Then come get them. I told Sy you needed to pick them up yourself. You heard every word.”

“We need to fix this,” Rowan said tensely and zoned in on me. “Can you two be separated?”

“We’ve never been apart,” I said. “If there’s a way, I’ll find it.” I let out a heavy sigh. “Sy wants her own life. She longs to spend some nights with you.”

“Can you blame her?” Rowan growled, concern for Sy flashing in his silver eyes. “I want to spend every night with her.”

Sy’s eyes misted over.

“So, where should we go from here, now that you two know our trade secret?” I asked, holding my breath, bracing for the worst.

“The realm isn’t ready for this.” Killian studied me before locking his eyes on Rowan. “This stays between us.”

I blinked. “You’ll really keep our secret?”

“Of course,” they answered in unison.

“We’ll protect you both,” Killian said.

Rowan nodded. “No one shall harm you. Not without getting through us first.”

“And you don’t think we’re an abomination?” I needed to be certain.

Killian’s growl rumbled deep, more dragon than man.

“Anyone who dares call you and Sy an abomination will answer to me,” Rowan snarled.

I slumped into the chair in relief. “Thanks, guys. Now, mind if I eat while you talk? I’m feeding two here.”

“Eat, little scorpion,” Killian said softly, passing me a plate of mixed smoked meat. “Now I understand why you’re always hungry.”

If only he knew that I was born a devourer of worlds and magic. But food kept me from draining everything around me. When hungry, I was more dangerous.

Rowan kept loading my plate. “I don’t like my little monster hungry.”

Stop that, I told Sy before she turned weepy. Her getting so emotional was ruining my appetite.

“Here’s what we’ll do,” Killian said. “The four of us are bound now. We’ll each share our deepest secret to seal a pact. We’ll guard each other’s truths, making

betrayal impossible.”

I knew his game. The chaos prince had shattered my trust. Now he wanted a path back.

“You realize some secrets can destroy us?” Rowan asked cautiously.

“Yes,” Killian said. “That’s exactly why we’re doing this. If one falls, we all fall. I’m ready for that kind of commitment. Are you?”

“I’ve been committed to Sy ever since we met,” Rowan said.

Joyful tears streamed down Sy’s face, and she dabbed her eyes with her claws.

“A pact of trust then,” Killian said. “You start, Rowan.”

“Why the fuck should I go first?” Rowan challenged. “Why should I even trust you after you tried to kill me?”

“Tried and failed, unfortunately,” Killian said. “Are you going to hold it over my head forever? And let’s be honest—I wasn’t fighting at full strength.”

“Neither was I, asshole,” Rowan said, running a hand over his fine silver hair. “I’ll do this, but you’re starting. Go ahead. Share your dirty secret.”

“Nothing but truth now,” Killian said.

I set down my fork, heart beating in my throat.

Three pairs of eyes stared at the chaos prince—Rowan’s and mine and Sy’s watching through the same face.

“I fucked Barbie,” Killian said. “Many times.”

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:35 am*

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Sy

Barbie's heart tripped, her two-toned eyes going wide. Her greedy hand froze halfway to another cake.

She stared at the chaos prince, stunned. "What?"

"I fucked you and I loved every second of it," he said.

"Why would you say things like that?" she hissed.

Dumbass, I sighed. He's not trying to shock you—he's making a commitment. After watching me fuck all these years, you still don't get it.

Some things just couldn't be taught. While I rolled with changes, Barbie dug her heels in against them. The world wasn't going to wait for her.

The chaos prince's eyes blazed into hers—ours—and damn if I didn't feel that heat. I would've melted right there if my sugar Rowan wasn't anchoring me. His gaze stayed fixed on our face too. He wasn't looking at Barbie—he was seeing straight through to me.

"Still denying what's between us, little scorpion?" Killian purred.

"But—" Barbie stumbled, lost for words before her jaw set. "What's between us?"



Huh? Last I checked, you were tangled up with your betrothed and her ward.”

“Never tangled with them like you imagined,” he said. “And today you’ll get the whole truth. No tricks. No lies. I’m laying it all out with Rowan as our witness. I wish Cade were here, but we can’t risk telling my other brothers. Ready for the hard facts, little scorpion?”

Rowan glanced between Barbie and Killian, unfazed.

“I saw you kiss her in the CrimsonTide dungeon,” he said. “It didn’t surprise me that she could get around your bond with Queen Lilith, as no spells stick to Barbie. It’s none of my business if you want her more than your betrothed. I’ll keep quiet. But you came at me, ready to kill, when you thought I fucked her. I’ve never seen you lose your shit over anyone else. So, ask yourself, will you do everything in your power to keep her? How will you handle your powerful betrothed? She can’t be humiliated, and Barbie won’t settle for being your fucking side piece. She deserves better, and I’ll back her, for Sy’s sake.”

My man is a rock. I grinned. He’s got our backs.

Killian swallowed, a riot of emotions flashing through his storm-blue eyes. “Barbie can override my forced bond with Lilith, but not because she can nullify spells. She’s my fated mate. Never thought it’d happen, but my true mate found me.”

Barbie blinked so hard it hurt our eyes. I wasn’t shocked, but Barbie froze, gaping at Killian.

“Say that again?” she croaked.

I already told you he’s your mate. I groaned.

You also told me to fuck Cade, she shot back.

Yeah, if you couldn't fuck Killian, then Cade would do, I said. I just wanted to cushion your fall.

Rowan stared at the chaos prince, shock finally cracking his cool.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” he asked.

Killian's gaze stayed locked on Barbie, hunger and need searing his eyes, and energy flowed between them. He caught her sugar-dusted fingers between his palms, and she tried to pull away half-heartedly. That was Barbie—always pretentious and immature while I was the opposite. Then she went still in his embrace, her heart thundering too hard for me to feel my own pulse.

Her body burned hot for him, but it wasn't the mating heat. Truth blazed through her mind, fierce enough to sting.

I'm his mate, she repeated. I'm really his true mate.

Of course, dummy, I said.

Barbie needed the hard truth to slap her right in her stubborn chubby face before she'd see it.

We'd found our fated mates. Even though I didn't get my moment with mine, I wouldn't ruin Barbie's. My heart had enough space for her happiness. Besides, once we got out of here, the rest of the night belonged to Rowan and me.

“Haven't you felt it, little scorpion?” Killian's voice dropped lower as he stroked her cheek. Electric tingles raced across her flesh, raising goosebumps on mine. His touch

always affected her this way.

“This thing between us?” she asked, lifting her chin while curling her toes, fighting back a moan of pleasure. “It’s just lust.”

“Is it?” he purred, a dark, amused smile ghosting his lips.

“It’ll pass,” she said, but I knew better.

Her body was always attuned to his—the way true mates were. When he revealed their connection, the amber light in her mind had blazed to life. Everything had clicked into place since then. The chaos prince’s dragon would never have triggered the mating heat unless she was meant to be theirs.

My idiot soul-sister was flame to his frost, and he was ice to her dark fire. Once she accepted what she had with Killian, their true mating bond would shatter the demon queen’s false bond with the chaos heir. Her heart had figured it out, yet her mind stumbled along behind.

“Will it?” Killian asked, his voice rich with knowing.

Rowan watched them. He hated these games, saw them as a waste of time, and waited impatiently for me to return to him.

“Aren’t you still engaged?” Barbie challenged, her eyes sharpening like a lioness sighting her prey. “Getting married right after graduation?”

Her cutting words slammed the gritty facts back in our faces. The chaos prince had known Barbie was his true mate, yet he’d chosen his betrothed anyway, even tried to make the other woman happy. I pulled my lips back and growled threateningly.

He screwed up, all right? I offered, dipping into my well of wisdom. Playing life coach to Barbie made me feel better about myself. He's young and stupid. We're young too. But if you shut yourself off from this opportunity, you'll end up growing old alone.

Her childhood in our father's clutches had scarred her deeply. She buried those years of terror and refused to look back, but nightmares clawed their way up every night.

I don't want you to grow old alone, I added.

Killian's blue eyes darkened at the mention of his betrothed. At his hesitation, Barbie yanked her hand from his grasp, though her body protested the loss of contact, and I wasn't happy about it either. She let ice fill her mismatched eyes, forcing me to wipe away the frost to look out.

"You'll learn my truth, little scorpion, before you sting me again," Killian said.

Rowan laid his elbows on the table and interlaced his fingers, now that the tension from his duel with the chaos prince had melted away.

"We fought over our true mates who happen to share one body," he said. "I can forgive you for trying to kill me, as I tried to end you too when I thought you'd defiled Sy. I just never thought an asshole like you would have a fated mate."

"I held back," Killian said. "Part of me remembered you're my brother."

"Through all that madness," Rowan said, "neither of us fought at full strength, even consumed by jealous rage. The bonds between us heirs run deep. Now our true mates have found us, unfortunately in one body, we'll need to sort it out. You shared your secret, so here's my confession. My little monster already knows, and now you will too."

Killian arched an eyebrow, waiting.

Rowan let out a ragged breath. "I'm a bastard."

Killian shrugged. "Obviously. Always have been."

Rowan glared at him. "I'm not the king's true son. If he discovers it, he'll strip everything from me—my title, my heritage, all of it. Best case? He'll exile me. Worst case? Death. Either way, I become nothing."

The fae king's cruelty was legendary. That was why I kept pushing my love to strike first and claim the throne for himself.

Tell my sugar he'll always have me, prince or pauper, I said. Besides, he owns shares in Killian's human companies. We won't be poor.

Tell him later yourself, Barbie said. I'm not derailing this conversation.

"Don't be so dramatic, Prince Rowan." Killian smirked. "I've known for years you weren't King Emyr's blood."

"How?" Rowan growled. "Did you spy on me?"

"Yes," Killian said.

"How dare you?"

"Well." Killian shrugged. "You have your own spies. Don't pretend like I'm the only one who's paranoid. I make it my business to know every dirty secret. But I've kept yours. Don't worry about my mate. She hoards secrets better than a dragon. Besides, even if King Emyr discovers the truth, you're still one of us. Your birth won't change

that.”

My sugar sucked in a breath. He hadn’t expected this from the chaos prince.

“You can’t stop him if he tries to kill me,” Rowan said. “You aren’t a king.”

“No one touches you or any of us,” Killian said. “Any king who tries will have to get through me first. And they won’t succeed. It’s not only me who outpowers them all. Together, we heirs are unstoppable.”

We wouldn’t make empty promises, but we knew where we stood. We protected each other’s interests. And between us, Barbie and I packed serious power. We’d throw in our lot with the heirs.

“I can take the throne whenever I want,” Killian added, his tone lazy. “The court’s been ready to toss my father aside for years. I held back because of Lilith. I wouldn’t want her to gain more power through our alliance. But now”—his knuckles brushed Barbie’s cheekbone, and she didn’t pull away but gazed up at him through her lush lashes, her lips parted in desire—“things are different. I’ve found my true mate, and I’ll protect her with my last breath.”

Barbie didn’t swoon at the chaos prince’s declaration or get misty-eyed like me, as she loved to play the role of a hardass, but warmth flooded her chest and heat pulsed in her veins. Not that she’d ever admit it.

“Just like I’ll do anything to protect Sy,” Rowan swore. “And that protection extends to Barbie.”

Gratitude bloomed in me. He’d been protecting Barbie even before he knew our secret. “I can’t afford weakness, not when so much is at stake.” His silver gaze cut through Barbie, searching for me. “I may be an imposter, but this stays here.” He

turned to Killian. “Who else knows?”

“One of my men,” Killian said. “Not saying who.”

It had to be Cassius, the Silent Blade. He made me shiver, but Barbie liked him—ever since he’d nearly gutted the chaos royal guards for trying to take her blanket in the dungeon.

“Think I’d have him killed?” Rowan asked.

Killian’s cold smile didn’t reach his eyes. “My men can handle themselves.” He tapped the armchair, danger radiating off him. “We’re good as long as you don’t try to claim my woman.”

“For fuck’s sake,” Rowan said. “I only want my own woman. It’s not my fault she shares space with Barbie. Everyone knows you’re paranoid, but you’re getting fucking worse.” He turned to Barbie. “Let Sy out. I want to make sure she’s all right.”

Let me take over. I tugged at Barbie. My prince wants to make sure I’m all right.

“Back off,” Killian barked. “I’m not done with Barbie.”

“Yeah? Now you big boys decide who comes out to play?” Barbie sneered.

Rowan sighed. “This body-sharing thing is getting very inconvenient. Sy shouldn’t live like this.”

“Really?” Barbie said. “She was fine before you showed up. We’ve managed it for twenty-one years.”

She drained her coffee, slammed the mug down, and reached for the bottle of

whiskey. Killian snatched it first.

“It’s too strong for you, little scorpion,” he said.

“Even poison can’t touch me,” she bragged and glared.

He sighed, poured two fingers, and handed it over to her. “You won’t like it. You love sweets.”

Barbie knocked it back, then coughed and cursed. Killian seized his chance to pat her back and pull her into his arms, but she shrugged him off. He only smiled. The chemistry between them crackled, growing stronger with every denial.

“We need a plan going forward,” Rowan said. “Regular meetings, the four of us, so there’ll be no fucking misunderstandings.”

I perked up, loving the sound of the four of us, like some exclusive club. I didn’t sob in joy though, as Barbie had banned my happy tears.

“Future meetings are on the menu, but now I need some alone time with my mate.” Killian waved Rowan off. “You head back to the academy and explain the duel to the heirs. Those assholes are probably tearing my properties apart looking for us.”

“You started this fucking mess,” Rowan said. “You deal with it. I’m staying here with Sy.”

“This is my place,” Killian said. “And you’ve worn out your welcome.”

“Who wants to stay in this fucking cold place?” Rowan snorted and gave me a nod while talking to Sy. “Let’s go, little monster.”



Let's depart with my sugar, I urged, but Barbie didn't move her butt an inch.

"I'm not leaving these cakes." She eyed the cheesecake. "Wonder why they call it New York cheesecake. Did New Yorkers invent it? Or is it the original recipe?" She took a huge bite and hummed. "Would you look up the history while I finish this?"

"Come feast at my house," Rowan coaxed, and Killian's eyes narrowed.

The chaos prince was ready to pounce if Barbie moved. I could grab control while they fought.

"Here's the thing," Barbie said, flashing Rowan a smirk. "One feast in front of me beats two promised elsewhere. Wild horses couldn't drag me away if I wanted to stay." She shot Killian a cocky look. "No dragon can keep me if I want to leave. Right now, I want to eat cakes."

And I wanted to go with my sugar. Without a warning, I surged forward. So much for my promise not to usurp her—not that it mattered when she was such a bully. But Barbie shoved me back right away. She'd been waiting for it. We grappled for control, a mental tug-of-war that ended with me backing down, because what else could I do when she went full psycho?

I want my turn! I hissed in frustration. You can't keep treating me like your damn sidekick. Those days are over!

You'll have your turn. Just not now. She flicked her pinkie at me like I was an annoying bug. Killian and I have unfinished business. We need to hash things out, especially after he dropped that bomb about me being his...whatever. We'll have to fix our broken trust, right here. Before I could protest, she waved a hand with a flourish. Look, Sy, if we don't sort this mess out first, the four of us are going nowhere fast. You'll be just as stuck as me.

Promise you'll make it quick, I growled, giving her another shove. She retaliated with enough force to nearly knock me on my butt—because apparently, she couldn't do anything without being extra about it.

Both heirs watched us intently as Barbie's face tensed and her eyes flickered—sapphire and green to gold and back again—telltale signs of our power struggle.

“Were you two fighting just now?” Rowan's concern warmed my blood.

“Don't worry about it,” Barbie said with a shrug. “Sy wanted to leave with Prince Rowan, but I'm not going anywhere until I finish all the cakes.”

Killian grinned. “That's my girl.”

“You shouldn't bully Sy, Barbie!” Rowan seethed. “If cakes are the holdup, let me help you finish them.”

Rowan snatched a cake and devoured it in two bites. As he reached for another, Killian threw up a wall of darkness between him and the table.

“Those are for my mate,” the chaos prince said. “You don't take food from her.”

Rowan called for his magic, and this time, it managed to push through in the dragon realm. His vines shot through the barrier, grabbed a cake, and hurled it straight into Killian's face. The cake dropped, leaving his nose smeared with icing.

“Eat it then, asshole,” Rowan said.

Barbie stopped mid-bite to stare at Killian before bursting into laughter.

“Looking for another fight, Rowan?” Killian growled, not amused as he wiped his face with a napkin.

“Anytime,” Rowan said. “And make sure we finish it this time.”

Both heirs rose, squaring off for battle.

Barbie jumped up. “If you two fight again, you’ll trash everything Sy and I risked by sharing our dangerous secret.” She gave my sugar the evil eye. “Let me eat in peace. Sy gets her strength from what I consume too.”

Rowan and Killian sank back into their seats but kept glaring at each other.

“Sy is all yours later,” Barbie said.

“Just so you know, Barbie, I have a French chef,” Rowan said.

Barbie’s fork stopped halfway to her mouth.

“I have the best chef,” Killian countered. “I’ll hire three more just for you.”

Barbie’s face lit up. “I’ll eat at both houses. Maybe Cade will hear about this and join the competition.”

Rowan snorted. “Cade’s too cheap for top staff.”

Barbie sighed. “He keeps complaining about his tight budget. He asked me if I thought his job was easy, and I told him that I wouldn’t know since he’s the prince and the only job I had was an underpaid squire.”

“You should go now, Rowan,” Killian cut in. “Handle the heirs.”

“I’m not leaving without kissing Sy goodbye,” Rowan said.

My heart fluttered with hope and longing.

Let him kiss me before he departs, I urged Barbie. Don’t be a bitch.

“I’m sick and tired of fighting him.” Killian turned to Barbie with a weary sigh. “We probably have to give him what he wants so he’ll leave.”

Her mismatched eyes swirling, Barbie loosened her grip. I burst through the surface with a bang. Her golden curls vanished, and my twin white braids kissed my ankles. The mountain air hit my face, sharp and clean. I turned to my sugar with a fanged grin, dazing him with my wild beauty.

Killian dragged a hand over his face. “I can never get used to this shit.”

Before I could get my bearings—shifting always left me vulnerable for three full seconds—Rowan had pulled me into his embrace.

“Well, hello to you too, sugar.” I grinned.

He slanted his mouth over mine, and I instantly wrapped my arms around his neck, my torso stretching against him, my bountiful breasts pressing against his hard chest.

“I missed you, little monster,” he murmured against my lips.

It hadn’t been that long since Barbie and I shifted back and forth, but my sugar counted every second we were apart. I clung to him, showing that the feeling was mutual. I never thought I could feel this strongly for any male, but here I was. Barbie had warned me not to fall for my sugar, but it was already too late.

Falling felt light and oh so right.

If you do not take the risk, how can you find love? I lectured Barbie.

Fall for the wrong man, and you're choosing between bad and worse, Barbie countered.

I choose to jump off that cliff on faith, and the falling is worth it because he catches me every time, I said. And why are you still so negative? You've found your fated mate. Think of the odds; not even one in a million will find their true mates. And Killian's right here, looking at you like you're his favorite dessert.

He's not looking at me, Barbie said. I'm inside you. He's counting down impatiently, about to tell Rowan the kissing game is over.

Rowan thrust his tongue through my eager lips, and I melted into his kiss. The tip of my tongue mated with his feverishly. His hardness pressed against me, burning through the thin fabric of my magical mini-gown, my latest party creation, and searing my flesh.

I hooked my leg around his hip and moaned into his mouth. We breathed each other in, hungry for each other and desperate for more.

Do me a favor, Barbie. Ask Killian to step away, I said. A quickie with my sugar will do us all good. I want to give him a nice parting gift to remember me by until my next shift.

Barbie's mental eye-roll was practically audible. You can't be this horny all the time, Sy. It's unhealthy. You need professional help; this is becoming an addiction. I read about compulsive sexual behavior. Human social media is big on mental health these days.

“Quit it,” Killian barked. “You’ve been kissing for over five minutes, and I don’t see an end in sight.” He shook his head in disgust. “Who even kisses that long? Normal people take breaks to breathe!”

Who needed air when my sugar was my oxygen? Besides, he’d done the same with Barbie, kissing every inch of her.

“I want my Barbie back, and you need to go handle things, Rowan!” Killian shouted from beside us, and Barbie nudged me mentally to wrap it up.

I pulled back an inch, my eyes bright as I gazed at my lover, and he grabbed my hand, glancing at the spot where we’d stepped through, ready to drag me back through the portal. But there was no door. Killian was being petty and calculating, refusing to open the portal until Barbie took control. Barbie could also borrow the chaos prince’s magic and tear open the fabric between worlds, but I couldn’t. No bond with Killian meant no portal privilege.

“You’re a fucking cockblocker, just like Barbie,” Rowan grated.

“Thank you,” Killian said. “My little scorpion’s got some talent.”

“That wasn’t a compliment,” Rowan snapped. “Now I see why you two are true mates—same terrible attitude, same insufferable personality.”

“Feel better getting that off your chest? Good. Can we move on now?” Killian said. “The longer you stay here, the worse it gets out there. We don’t know what’s boiling over now when those heirs are involved. Don’t want to be too late and go back only to pick up the pieces, do you?”

I brushed one last kiss over my prince’s mouth. “See you later, sugar.”

Barbie licked at her lips as if she was the one getting kissed.

“You’ll spend the night with me,” Rowan said.

“Yes,” I promised, leaning into him for another kiss.

This is really taking too fucking long, Barbie bitched.

She yanked me back from my lover before our lips crashed again and surged forward. Dark light flashed in her wake as I tumbled down, and this falling was nothing like falling for my lover. This kind I could do without.

Rowan blinked at Barbie in surprise as she stood in my place, her hands planted on her hips. Killian moved like a flash to put himself between them.

“Sy, you okay?” my prince called.

Warmth bloomed in my chest at his caring and pulsed outward. He blinked again, feeling the wave of my feelings.

Barbie shrugged, already jogging toward the cake table.

“Have Sy meet me when you’re done with your cakes, Barbie!” Rowan said, then turned to Killian. Their truce held, but barely. “What am I supposed to tell the heirs?”

“Just make up something to get them off our backs,” Killian advised.

“I’m not a liar like you,” Rowan said. “The heirs have known me since we were kids. They’ll smell every lie from my mouth. Then the interrogation will never end.”

“Then rage at them. Blame everything on me and stomp out,” Killian instructed.

“You can at least manage that, can’t you? Send them my way. I’ll handle it after I smooth my mate’s ruffled feathers.”

Barbie kept her face blank, but her heart still jumped and her pulse raced every time he called her his mate.

The air rippled, and a door appeared at the far end of the rooftop. Rowan strode toward it in his rough farmer’s clothes, abs and calves exposed, his icy beauty undimmed. Halfway there, he looked back at Barbie, catching my gaze as I peeked through her now-golden eyes.

“Little monster,” he said, feet dragging. “As soon as?—”

A wave of darkness and starlight slammed into him mid-sentence, catching him off guard and sweeping him straight into the portal.

“Assho—”

The portal sealed, slicing off his curse at Killian.

Just like that, he was on the other side while I was stuck here in Barbie. My heart clenched and ached. I missed him already, even though he’d barely left.



## Page 5

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Barbie

I t was just Killian and me now.

I'm here too, Sy reminded me, like I could forget.

Killian watched me stuff my face with cake, cheeks bulging. He was waiting for me to break the ice first, but I wasn't giving him any hint about my next move.

Silence stretched between us, broken only by gusts of icy wind. If he wanted to remain mute, two could play at that game. I stood up. Unlike the fae prince, I could open my own damn portal and get the fuck out of here.

"Not so fast, my little scorpion," he said, his hand lashing out and snaking around my waist.

I grabbed his wrist to shove him off, even though my body rebelled.

"I'm not yours," I said. "Never was, never will be."

His dragon growled, and I narrowed my eyes at the sound. Others might quake at a dragon's roar, but I wasn't others.

"Still mad at me, aren't you?" Killian said. "I can see you wanting to hurt me badly."

“You’re not even worth me hurting you,” I said.

He chuckled. “Don’t you know you wounded me after using me then kicking me to the curb last time? No other woman would dare treat me that way.”

“Of course,” I said. “They just trap you with a mating bond, and you roll over to satisfy their every whim.”

His face darkened instantly. “My little scorpion always strikes where it hurts. But you’re wrong about that bond. Forces beyond me might’ve forged it, but it’s never been a true mating bond. However, I still kept my vow of celibacy to keep everyone away, Lilith included, and I only broke it for you. You should be able to tell that you’re the only one I’ve been with.”

Sy had informed me she didn’t smell another woman on him.

“The bond with Lilith is just a magical lock keeping me from having sex with other women,” he continued. “You’re the only one who can walk right past it.” He paused, dark emotions storming through his eyes. “I tried breaking it, but nothing worked. It’s sealed with dark intent and blood magic.”

I knew curses, had cleared the block in Bea, and still needed to tackle the Fury in Cade. But that bond between Killian and Lilith remained untouchable, and I could feel it festering in him like an open wound. I had an idea, though—I’d have to form my own bond with him to uproot the old one from his betrothed.

It wouldn’t be an easy task. I swallowed. But that was a problem for another day.

“Grace touches you just fine,” I said, tilting my head to the side. “And don’t lie. I saw it with my own eyes, and she keeps bragging about it. Or maybe you’ve got a thing for her.”

“A thing for your pale copy?” Killian snorted. “No one knows where she crawled out from. She’s not you, nothing like you, and can never replace you. Grace is just Lilith’s puppet, a weapon aimed at you. I know their game, and I’ve been playing along to keep them away from you.”

“Why stop playing then?” I snickered. “You seem to enjoy it.”

“Enjoy it? While I had to watch Louis try to drink from you and Silas try to get into your pants?”

“So you get to have others, but I don’t? Since when do you have rights to me?”

“I don’t want anyone except you! I’ve fought Lilith’s control since day one. She’ll never have me, even if I can’t have you. And Grace—that empty-headed, power-hungry girl with your face? What could she possibly give me?”

“You tell me,” I insisted. “You once looked at her like she was your world.”

He laughed. “Now you’re making shit up just to win the argument. I never looked at her that way. I couldn’t even fake it. My hot looks are only for you. I might’ve faked interest in her chatter, just to keep their attention off you and on me.”

“Yeah, except it hasn’t stopped them from coming after me. They’ll keep coming until I’m dead or driven off.”

“But they haven’t hit you with their full power,” he said, “because I’m still standing between you and them, even if it doesn’t look that way. But none of that matters now. Things have changed.”

“What things?”

“You’ve entered the first circle of the mating heat,” he said. “You’ll need me full-time now. Besides, you’re always in danger. Those abominations we fought seemed fixed on you. From now on, I’m always with you, even in public. We handle things together.” He closed his eyes for a second with regret. “I should’ve done it earlier. Should’ve trusted that you could hold your own.”

“So I’m not your dirty little secret anymore?” I half-sneered. “Not your side piece?”

“You know it’s only you. It’s always been you.”

“You kissed her,” I seethed. His cozying up with Lilith and my copy had cut me deep.

“I wouldn’t call that a kiss, little scorpion,” he said. “I turned away when she tried. Just a brush on my cheek. I couldn’t avoid it then, but that is no excuse for hurting you. I hate myself for doing that to you.” The wind tousled his dark hair. “I suck at relationships. I never bothered with them since I never thought I’d have a real one. But you’re my true mate. I can learn to do better by you.”

He’d hit every note and said everything I craved to hear. My blood even sang at his words, but reality also closed in like walls crushing me from all sides. Everything had exploded in just a few weeks, with the biggest threat looming—my father was coming.

I couldn’t deal with a relationship now. The oracle’s words swirled through my head like the tolling of a dark bell. My gut knew how this would end, and there would be no HEA for me. But I could still give others, especially Sy, their happy endings after I went out with a bang. I owed Sy that much, and I’d do everything I could to make sure she had a future.

“You hurt me, Killian,” I said, shaking my head. “Even with your reasons, the

damage is done. Once trust is broken, it doesn't just mend itself. It doesn't matter now, since I don't think I'm built for relationships anyway. Besides, we can't focus on romance while the realm is in danger. Ruin's army is at our door, and they'll keep coming."

Killian's throat worked as he swallowed. "I'm not demanding you stand by me, but you're my fated mate. It's not in me or my dragon to watch you flirt with other men. He'll go berserk. Claiming and protecting our mate runs in our blood. Let's make a pact. I'll give you space, commit only to you, and you give me a chance to make it right. You're not facing this threat alone. I'll always stand with you. All the kingdoms are aware of this threat from the God of Ruin. The crowns will meet tomorrow to discuss our response."

My breath eased. "All the kingdoms will back this?"

"The heirs and I will ensure our kingdoms form a joint army against Ruin and his forces," he said. "I'll do anything to protect you." His forehead pressed against mine. "No one can break me except you. Without you, I'm a broken man. I know you won't have me after how I hurt you, but I'll fight for you with everything I have."

Something inside me cracked at his confession. My broken heart wouldn't mend just because the truth was out. You couldn't flip emotions like a switch. When I'd thought he'd used me then dumped me for his betrothed, it had cut too deep to heal.

I'd played this scene a hundred ways in my head when I'd imagined him admitting his regret for choosing another.

"I made a bad choice," he'd say.

"Then live with it," I'd answer. "Go back to your betrothed and her ward. They're desperate for you."

And if he walked away, my heart would bleed out all over again, but I'd leave him and his regrets in the dust while thunder would roll, sealing our tragic fates.

Fuck this shit, Sy had said. Stop playing that dumb shit in your head.

Now he had chosen me in my reality. But I couldn't be with him, at least not yet, even after he'd declared I was his, even after he'd sworn to claim me publicly.

"Please stop," I said. "I don't need you to profess your undying love for me and confuse the hell out of me."

He looked at me, pain and understanding blending in his storm-blue eyes.

"I can't turn off my feelings for you," he whispered. "But you do what you have to do, my little scorpion. I'm not giving up on you, on us," he vowed. "Never."

## Page 6

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### The Fallen Star

She knew about the young lovers painting her as their villain.

They'd escaped to the place beyond her reach, thinking themselves clever.

She waited for the pain of betrayal to hit. She'd thought herself beyond such feelings, but the hurt made her want to raze everything. No, she wouldn't touch this world, but she could destroy them both.

She closed her eyes for long seconds to get her emotions under control. She needed to focus on her true purpose. The Wheel of Fate had begun its final turn. The casualties would be devastating, like in any war. This wouldn't be the war that ended all wars, but it would be the most crucial one.

Her thoughts drifted back to the young lovers.

Barbie matched his age and power. She was cunning, fierce, full of attitude and lies, and Killian was smitten and tried to hide it. They both plotted against her, thinking she was blind to them. Her ancient angelic eyes missed nothing. She sighed at their youth.

From above, Lilith's vast ivory wings with ebony tips cut through the clouds. She surveyed Mist of Cinder below—its castles, lakes, forests, all six kingdoms, and Underhill. The magic had grown stronger and more vibrant with Barbie's arrival.

The realm had feared the fading of magic. That's why they'd started the Brides Selection, hoping to produce a ruler strong enough to bond with the realm's power and preserve Mist of Cinder. She'd watched the supernatural races weaken over the centuries while humans rose and dominated with their technology and sheer number. If this last magical realm couldn't hold its magic, it would become just another human territory.

After she'd bound the chaos heir and established the sixth house in Mist of Cinder, others began to fear her ambitions and her ascension to high power, saying that the demon queen's rule would bring Hell to Earth.

Their fear amused her. They knew nothing of the true threat or the horror waiting at their door. Being misunderstood and judged didn't bother her—no one had ever grasped her mind. But soon, everything would come to an end.

The High Queen's crown was never her goal. She came for Ruin's daughter, hidden in plain sight. Facing her own flesh felt strange, yet they remained strangers. She couldn't risk attachment. The first phase of her experiment had come to pass, and she needed her emotional distance to ensure her grand scheme would succeed.

What wouldn't she sacrifice for the greater good, for the safety of her starlit home?

Everyone knew the Queen's Suite awaited the chaos heir's bride. Only Lilith's bloodline could unlock its sealed doors. The oracle spoke of something hidden inside—a piece of prophecy she refused to reveal. A crossroad. A buried truth that would change everything.

Lilith had breached the House of Chaos's wards and reached the red door. When she'd touched it, icy flames had scorched her hand, denying her entry.

"It's not meant for you!" Ancient voices, older than even hers, had screamed through



the cold flames. These beings shouldn't be there. Monsters. Gods. Prisoners. "Only she enters. Only the daughter is welcome."

Barbie was the only key to unlock the door and retrieve what Lilith needed, then she must take her place on the sacrificial altar like a lamb, destined for this great purpose.

Lilith searched herself for emotion, for pain, but found emptiness. Archangels didn't feel the way mortals and immortals did.

The Wheel of Fate spun faster as Barbie drew closer to its center.

Lilith's gaze tracked to Shades Academy, then the House of Mages, seeking her target. A small yet radiant figure—as bright as Lilith had been before her fall.

Lilith nodded. Soon, this would be history. She began her descent, her wings vanishing. Weightlessness gave way to crushing pressure. Gravity dragged her earthward.

She fell again.

6

Sy

We crossed back to this side in my form, with Barbie sulking inside me.

Back in the dragon realm, the scorching sexual tension between her and the chaos prince could've melted those snowy mountains. But Barbie played the hardass, refusing to cave in just to spite him, watching him suffer with his obvious hard-on. Well, her pettiness backfired, as she didn't get laid either. Now she was even more frustrated, giving off bad vibes like a champ.

I had to block her out before her foul mood poisoned mine. One of her self-help books warned about not engaging with narcissists, so I kept my focus up instead of down, letting her brood in her corner and biting my tongue. You couldn't help those who didn't want to be helped.

I inhaled deeply, savoring the fresh air. This was what freedom felt like—moonlight on my face, wind in my hair, a fresh start before dawn.

The world slept on. Indigo and ash gray smeared across the sky. Sentinels prowled the campus perimeter; the security was tighter after the battle with the Shriekers. All five kingdoms had shipped in small troops to bulk up Shades Academy's defenses. But none of those soldiers ventured into this restricted zone.

The portal had spat me out at Underhill's edge, and boom—I felt Rowan. Our connection zinged to life, and I knew he sensed me too.

I strode into the dark forest, my pulse racing at the thought of seeing my prince.

Underhill still blocked Rowan from its depths, but he didn't mind camping out in the cabin.

Two shadow beasts flanked me like bodyguards on escort duty.

"No work today," I told them. "Just visiting my mate."

The beasts looked stumped, Underhill's confusion bleeding through. Then they bailed, trotting off, guard duty over.

I pushed open the cabin door, swaying my hips with a grin.

"Little monster," Rowan called, already moving before I got a good look at him.

He pulled me into his arms, crushing me against his chest. We'd been apart less than an hour since he had been booted from the dragon realm, but he acted like it'd been months. We were just that desperate for each other.

"Hello, stranger," I purred.

"I'm not a stranger," he growled. "If you need a reminder, I can show you."

His mouth claimed mine, hot and demanding. I parted my lips for him right away, and he invaded my mouth with his tongue. His minty breath mingled with mine, and soon we were panting with searing lust.

My claws traced the rippling muscles of his back, making him shiver. What scared most men thrilled him. My fangs and claws were a thing of savage beauty for him, and in his bones, he was the same. He only played the gentleman for others.

He'd ditched Killian's farmer getup. Now he stood bare-chested with his designer leather pants riding low. My mouth watered—my man was pure temptation. I ground against his hard bulge, his heat stoking my fire, warming my slick cunt.

I slipped my hand into his pants and stroked his massive cock. My long fingers could wrap around only half of his girth. He hissed in pleasure as I pumped his length.

His lips molded mine as he kissed me with raw need, bruising me, his hand palming my pussy. I still wore the gown I'd conjured from pure magic, the fabric clinging like gossamer to my bare skin beneath. A delighted giggle departed my lips as he pressed the heel of his palm against my aching clit, sending sparks of pleasure through me.

Then he broke the kiss, leaving me gasping. His fingers traced a searing path along my slit. When he brought those fingers to his mouth, tasting my cream, his eyes glowed silver.

"It tastes like nectar," he said.

I flashed him a knowing smile, magic thrumming beneath my skin. "Of course it does, sugar."

"You're mine, little monster," he said, voice rough with promise. "I like that you're so wet for me. Always ready for me, aren't you?"

I wiggled my ass, and before I could even spread my legs wide enough, he plunged two fingers into my heat. A moan and a gasp escaped from my throat at the incredible pleasure. The prince thrust his fingers in and out, his thumb rubbing my swollen clit.

"You like everything I do to you, my little monster," he said, his heated gaze tracking every flutter of my eyelids, every tremor that coursed through my body.

I was busy moaning instead of answering him, and he watched me with burning lust.

“I need to fuck you now, babe,” he hissed as my hand pumped up and down his cock.

His pants dropped, his cock springing free, still in my hand. He pulled his fingers out of my cunt, removed my hand from his swollen shaft, and placed the thick head of his cock at my entrance. We both watched him rub his cock up and down my slick sex, my heart pounding, my blood heating at the erotic sight. I couldn’t wait to be fucked.

“Didn’t you say you needed to fuck?—”

He hooked my leg over his forearm and drove into me with brutal force before I could finish my sentence. I gasped at the exquisite sensation as he embedded himself deep within me.

My gown vanished, leaving me bare to his touch. He dipped his head to take my taut nipple into his mouth while pounding into me, every thrust smooth, powerful and delicious. I whimpered, wanting more, wanting everything. The prince pushed me against the door, fucking me with abandon, the wood creaking at the force. Then he gripped my thighs and lifted me with my legs wrapped around him.

A lot of times, he preferred me beneath him, so he could watch every flicker of pleasure cross my face. I liked him to thrust into me from behind with me on all fours.

His eyes searched mine, seeking reassurance that I was real, after learning what I was.

“You want my cock badly, don’t you, little monster?” he asked, his voice rough velvet around me as he drove into me deeper.

“You know the answer, sugar,” I purred between shivers.

“I can never get enough of you.” He pounded into me rapidly, sending my boobs bouncing. “Every second, I want to be with you, holding you, fucking you, and claiming you.”

“I want the same, but now you know why we can’t be with each other all the time.”

“I’ll cherish every second I have with you,” he said.

A high counter materialized beneath me—Underhill’s gift. Rowan blinked at its sudden appearance before setting me down. I adjusted my position, planting my feet on the edge and thrusting my hips forward, baring my pussy for him.

“Looks like we have an audience,” he said as he drove into me hard.

“We do,” I said breathlessly. “We always have an audience.”

“Now that everyone saw you at the party, you don’t need to hide anymore. Come to my penthouse, and we’ll have more privacy. I want to pamper my girl.”

My heart stuttered. I wanted that.

My pussy gloved his cock, milking it. Then he tensed and stilled, something on his mind.

“Can Barbie see everything we do and hear everything we say?”

“Of course. She and I are inseparable,” I said as worry crept in. “Will that hurt your performance?”

“Want me to display my prowess, little monster?” He pounded into me brutally, making his point clear, and I lost my train of thought amid waves of pleasure.

Desperate moans escaped me. My lover’s eyes darkened, his hunger and lust mirroring mine.

“Audience or not, no one can get in the way of me fucking you and relishing you. But is she watching now?”

“Don’t focus on her,” I said.

“I just want to make sure she’ll behave.” He lowered his voice as if by whispering, Barbie wouldn’t hear him.

“Don’t poke the hornet’s nest,” I warned.

Rowan nodded. “Everyone knows she’s a nuisance and a cockblocker.”

“She only blocked you and Killian,” I said. “He got it worse. I watched her kick him out of bed before he could even finish.”

“She did that to him?” His eyebrows shot up. “That’s intense. And Killian took it well?”

“He warned her to play nice.”

“Did she?”

“She turned around, flashed her naked bottom at him, and walked out on him,” I said, snapping my fingers. “Just like that.”

Rowan shook his head. “That girl. Even Killian can’t handle her. But then, he probably deserves it.” He pondered for a second while driving hard into my heat. “He deserves her,” he concluded.

“Maybe let’s not criticize her,” I said. “Barbie doesn’t take criticism well, and lately, she’s been extra negative. We need to be careful around her. She can be petty. Just look at what happened with Killian. Who kicks their sugar daddy out in the middle of fucking?”

Rowan embedded himself deep in me. “I don’t feel sorry for that asshole, though.”

“He’s a jerk, all right, but he didn’t deserve to get kicked in the balls while he tried to sate her mating fever,” I said. “Anyway, it’s not my business. Can you tell us what happened after you went back to Shades Academy, so Barbie will stop bugging me?”

“The heirs swarmed me the second I got back, demanding answers,” he said. “I took Killian’s advice. I raged, cursed, and told them to go bother that asshole instead. I admitted that Killian was risking a house war by dragging me into a death duel over some unfounded rumor. Then the heirs wanted to know about the rumor. I threw them off again and told them to ask Killian themselves since he’d returned to his house.” He chuckled. “Now the heirs are storming his house while I’m here enjoying fucking you. Karma is a bitch.”

The cabin door rattled and the counter under my ass shook as he pounded into me vehemently. I thrust my hips forward to meet his plunges. We fucked with abandon, moaning, groaning. Our bodies collided with wet sounds that bounced off the wooden walls, so fierce and erotic that the shadow beasts started howling outside.

Inside my head, Barbie jerked forward, annoyance flitting across her face. Now that I was having the best time of my life, she hated being pushed aside, stuck watching. Finally, she got a taste of what I’d had to live with all this time.



Wrap it up, Sy, she snapped. This was supposed to be a quickie, but you're taking forever. I need to get back to the mage house.

I ignored her bullshit. She couldn't stand seeing anyone else happy. Just like her mate.

Fuck off, I told her. I'm working.

She yanked at me, and I shoved her back. Then she rammed into me harder.

Rowan had no idea of my fight with Barbie as he kept pounding into me, driving me mad with desire, my blood on fire. Ecstasy rushed through me. I was on the edge, but I fought against coming—the second I climaxed, Barbie would drag me away from my sugar. So I held back, stretching it out as long as I could.

Fighting my orgasm was pure torture, especially when Rowan's next series of hard thrusts sent me high into the clouds. But it'd be worth it if it meant spending more time with him.

"Touch yourself, little monster," he ordered me.

I flicked my swollen clit with my claws, and Rowan watched with dark hunger, lust distorting his face.

"Harder, baby," he said. "Beg me to fuck you brutally."

I opened my mouth to beg, just for fun, but the voice that came out wasn't mine at all.

"Yes! Yes, fuck me harder! Please, I beg you!" Barbie shrieked like she was auditioning for a horror flick. "You've got the biggest cock, according to Sy anyway. I don't mind yelling about the size of your cock to boost your ego. But hey,

remember that blonde who shouted about the dwarf's huge dick in Game of Thrones ? He strangled her to death."

Rowan froze, scanning the room before fixing me with an incredulous stare that matched my own shocked look.

"What the hell, Sy?" He squinted at me. "Did Barbie's voice just come out of your mouth?"

"What the fuck, Barbie?" I hissed.

"Yeah, that fake pleading was all me, you two geniuses," she admitted in a scornful tone. "You promised it'd be a quickie, so let's mean it, shall we? Chop, chop!"

"I never said it would be a quickie," I growled.

"This unholy coupling has dragged on long enough." Her voice kept spilling from my mouth. "All the pounding and shameless dirty talk with the polluted scent of sex in the air! I'm pretty laid back, but even I have my limits. You two can't just fuck like animals while the rest of us deal with gritty reality. Life is hard for me already. The House of Mages is my last shot, and I'm late reporting back. Cade is a good man and a better prince, and he trusts me to be a proper mage. I won't let you screw this up for me like everything else. He's probably pacing outside my room right now, wondering what happened to me. I won't let him down. Not again."

Rowan and I traded stunned looks at her outburst. What an obnoxious twat!

I clamped my mouth shut, but her voice pushed through anyway. My pain-in-the-ass soul-sister had proven that when she wanted to be heard, not even our evil father could shut her up.

My voice burst out alongside hers. “Hush, Barbie! You’re ruining everything!”

“The longer you two go at it, the more shit piles up for me,” Barbie kept ranting. “So, please, wrap the fuck up. I can’t take more stress, guys. My heart is racing so fast and?—”

I threw up another sound barrier. Ever since discovering my magic, I’d been tossing my power around, but it was hit or miss. This barrier worked somewhat. Barbie’s words pushed through but came out garbled. I counted that as a win.

Then she switched tactics, threw her head back, and howled. The shadow beasts joined in, backing her up unconditionally.

“What the fuck?” Rowan growled and wrapped his arms around me protectively.

He hasn’t ejaculated his bountiful seed into Sy’s womb yet, Underhill chimed in for everyone to hear. But do you want me to boot him for being slow or disrespectful?

My sugar’s eyes widened.

Let’s be nice, Barbie instructed. But if they’re not done in two minutes, throw him out . We don’t want to be seen as weak.

Roger that, Underhill gloated. Initiating countdown. And Prince Rowan shouldn’t act so cocky. The chaos heir’s got him beat by half an inch. And the way their tips ? —

Rowan blinked and shook his head.

I bet he got the message, Barbie cut Underhill off. Nice attention to detail though.

Underhill preened. When’s Killian coming back? He and Rowan put on the best cock

shows.

Underhill had no grasp of human or supernatural emotions, just parroting thoughts from Barbie and me without context.

I sighed in defeat. “Better get it done fast, sugar. They’re already ganging up on us.”

“Doesn’t Underhill like us as well?” Rowan asked hopefully. “Can’t you get it on our side?”

“Forget it. Barbie and Underhill are thick as thieves,” I said. “There’s no breaking that bond. She got here first, and the wild magic sees me as competition.”

“Why?” Rowan asked. “Aren’t you two basically twins?”

“Fifty seconds left,” Barbie chimed in. “Tick tock.”

“Back off,” I growled. “Or I’ll do the same when you fuck Killian next.”

“I’m not having sex with him ever again,” she scoffed. “I rejected him, remember? I’m the FMC in a rejected mates story. Following the tropes.”

She was nuts, and you couldn’t argue with the crazy and the stupid. Rowan and I shared a look of understanding as he picked up speed, pounding into me so hard that I saw stars. Pleasure rippled through me, dancing on my nerve endings. This was no longer a rage fuck but an emergency fuck, which was hot as hell too.

“I can’t believe we’re in this situation,” he said, thrusting into me powerfully. “Whenever Barbie is involved, everything turns to shit.”

I nodded, ashamed of Barbie.

“We’ll spend the night in my house,” Rowan decided. “And I’ll ravish you all night.”

With a growl, he brought me to the bed, thrusting into me with urgency. My legs clamped around his waist. The bed cracked and broke under his force, dumping us onto the grass below, which didn’t stop us from claiming each other.

We’re not making you another bed, Barbie grated, thankfully not through my mouth. Next time use the bushes. I’m done being nice—look where that got me.

You sound like a bitter ex, I shot back. And no thanks. We’re not coming back here. I’m drawing the line.” I gloated, “You know what? We’ll fuck in my mate’s luxury penthouse from now on.

With one long, powerful thrust, Rowan stiffened atop me, grunting as he came. His cum filled my depths. I exploded on his cock, milking him, and screamed his name instead of calling him Satan, as Barbie had spitefully done to the chaos prince.

Rowan gasped, riding the waves of our mutual pleasure, and I giggled in satisfaction.

His energy flowed toward me, but Barbie dove in first, snatching what she could. I lunged after her, racing to pull in more than that greedy professional cockblocker.

Then I froze when Rowan whispered, “I love you, my little monster.”

“Say it again.” I needed to make sure that I hadn’t heard him wrong.

“I love you.” His rich voice turned fierce. “Always will.”

“And I love you, sugar.”

7

Barbie

A polite knock sounded on my door, but I burrowed my face deeper into the pillow. I'd barely gotten any shut-eye.

It was nearly dawn when I got back to the House of Mages, raw and pink from scrubbing the fae heir's scent off me in the lake in Underhill. The moment I crossed the pentagon courtyard and stepped inside the heavily warded lime-and-gold building, Fred, Matt, and three of Cade's personal guards swarmed me, even after I threw my hands up in surrender.

"His Highness requires your presence, wicked Barbie," Fred said with a smirk.

"Shit." I blinked. "At this ungodly hour?"

"Best not keep Prince Cade waiting," Matt snickered. "You came to us as a criminal. His Highness was generous enough to offer you a second chance to turn over a new leaf."

"But I'm already a new leaf," I protested.

"Are you?" They snorted, distrust dripping from their voices as they marched me to the entertainment room on the second floor.

As soon as I walked in, I froze.

Silas and Louis were sprawled on chaises, playing cards with Cade and some new guy, who screamed royalty with his expensive clothes and fancy hairdo. Shot glasses were lined up in front of each player with a graveyard of empty bottles on the side table. Not that it mattered—alcohol barely touched supernaturals, especially powerful princes.

Why had they camped out here instead of going to bed? My stomach dropped as it dawned on me that they were waiting to ambush me. I sighed. A long interrogation was inevitable.

“Get over here, Barbie,” Cade called when I shrank back; the minions had already blocked the exit.

“There she is,” Silas drawled.

Louis raised his gin on ice in a salute. He loved it when I stirred shit, as long as it didn’t hit his house. “Come sit by me, Barbie. I’m worried about you.”

The new guy studied me with interest. He had Cade’s features.

Cade waved his minions out, and they closed the door behind them. I dragged myself to their table and dropped into the empty chair farthest from the heirs, my posture slouching.

“High sirs,” I said. “I’m very tired. It’s good to see you all here, but I need to get to bed. I already missed out on my beauty sleep. Did you know if you don’t crash before eleven, your yin ruins your yang?”

“That’s bullshit,” Silas snorted. “We shifters live for the night.”

Louis narrowed his eyes at me. Right, vampires were creatures of the night by

definition, duh.

“Well,” I said. “I tried.”

“Tell us what went down on that rooftop,” Cade ordered me. “We waited here to hear it straight from you, and as a gracious host, I won’t let the other heirs be disappointed.”

I blinked, putting on an innocent look. “Didn’t Sir Rowan fill you in?”

“He ranted, but it made no sense,” Louis said. “Then he told us to ask Killian, saying that the ‘chaos asshole’ had all the answers. We searched Killian’s house, but he wasn’t there. He might be with his women in the demon house. Storming the sixth house would look bad for us. We gotta respect this delicate diplomatic thing until we’re kings.”

My heart stuttered, even though I knew for sure that Killian wasn’t with his betrothed and her ward. He’d promised to end things with her. I’d kept quiet when he made the vow, but I’d watch his actions later. Before I left, Sy, the idiot, had urged me to give Killian a blowjob to make sure he’d do what he’d said. Give him a sample to remember you by, she’d said.

I eyed the heirs warily as they all stared at me, waiting for answers. They wouldn’t let me off the hook until I gave them something to chew on.

“By the time I got to the rooftop, they were wrapping up,” I said.

“Hold that thought.” Cade raised a finger, and I knew what was coming. He always fixated on the technical aspects of spells and wards. “How did you get past their blood ward?”



I shrugged. “You all know wards, spells, and magic don’t work on me.”

“But this was a blood ward cast by two of the most powerful heirs,” Cade pressed.

“So I used my blood to negate theirs,” I offered, showing him my hand. “See the scar from the cut? Hurt like hell.”

Louis nodded. “I smelled your blood when you sliced your palm.” He’d barely kept his shit together as I made it to the elevator.

“My potent blood’s worth more than diamonds,” I said.

Silas and Cade gaped at me incredulously, but Louis nodded knowingly.

“Tastes like a goddess’s,” the vamp prince said, making my heart skip. If he only knew he’d drunk from an actual goddess—the daughter of the God of Ruin, the realm’s greatest enemy.

I still owed him that promised sample. He’d almost gotten it, fangs at my neck, before Killian intervened.

“Now that Barbie’s in Cade’s house, you won’t get another drop from her,” Silas growled at Louis.

“Our house could use your talents,” Cade said, regarding me, his eyes distant, wheels turning in his mind.

Shit! The mage prince was too clever. I couldn’t let him suspect my origin. I flashed him a carefree grin.

“I might be many things,” I said. “Con woman, thief, liar, murderer, shifter,

wanderer, or whatever, but I'm always a mage first and a defender of our house and realm."

Cade gave me a long look. "Of course, and I'd expect no less."

"So what happened on the rooftop?" Silas cut in. Subtlety had never been his strong suit.

"Total disaster, sir," I said, and the heirs nodded. They'd seen the aftermath when Killian, Rowan, and I fled. "Repairs will cost millions."

"Who gives a fuck?" Silas said. "It's Killian's money."

"I give a fuck," Cade countered. "I invest in his business. Insurance better cover it."

"It won't," Louis said. "Clear vandalism."

"Killian can be convincing, though. Everyone in the mortal world worships him," Cade said. "If insurance won't pay, it's on him. I won't take the loss." He fidgeted with his designer scarf. "I'll meet with him tomorrow to ensure he handles it properly and keeps his investors, mainly me, happy."

"Let's focus on the real issue here," Louis reminded the rest of the heirs. "The fight between Rowan and Killian."

I nodded. "Sir Killian was even more unhinged than Sir Rowan." The shifter prince grunted his agreement. "Pretty sure Sir Killian started it." At their looks, I threw up a hand. "Don't ask me why, but they were both mad as bulls, probably arguing over whose dick was bigger. Not that anyone else gives a shit." I gave the heirs at the card table a pointed look. "You're all just big boys with big cocks and too much privilege."

The newcomer laughed. “Does she always talk like this? I’ve heard about her in the realm.”

“Let’s not get sidetracked again,” Cade said, massaging his temples and frowning at me. “Move closer so you don’t have to shout.”

“No one will bite you while I’m here, Barbie,” Louis said and glanced at Silas, and the shifter prince glared.

I scooted forward half an inch. “Better now, good sirs. Anyway, Killian apologized for beating the shit out of Rowan and offered to take us to his resort as a peace offering. Turned out to be some snowy mountain place that froze everyone’s asses off.”

“You three vanished when we hit the rooftop,” Silas said, narrowing his amber eyes. “How exactly?”

I took an exaggerated breath. This secret of Killian’s would tumble out eventually. Queen Lilith and the oracle already knew, and it wouldn’t hurt him if the heirs knew. I needed to give them something big to throw them off my back anyway. The night was almost over, with dawn approaching.

“What, Barbie?” Cade barked, not liking the suspense. “Spit it out and fast.”

“Sir Killian holds a very dark secret,” I blurted out. “I discovered it.”

The heirs straightened. Cade exchanged looks with the others, hesitating. He and Killian were close.

“Maybe we should let him keep it,” Cade said.

“No way. C’mon, Barbie,” Silas pressed. “Say it.”

Cade sighed. “Then we need to swear to keep this quiet. It stays in this room.”

“Fine,” Silas growled, and Louis crossed his heart.

I jerked my chin at the new guy. “What about him?”

“My cousin, once removed,” Cade said. “Jeffrey’s loyal and tight-lipped, like me.”

I swept my gaze over the royals, bit my lip for show, and let anxiety flicker in my eyes. Sy rolled hers.

“Swear you won’t reveal your source,” I said. “The last thing I need is Prince Killian coming after me.”

“He won’t,” Louis said. “I promise.”

But I didn’t trust anyone’s promises.

“Just get on with it, Barbie!” Silas barked, losing patience by the second.

“You’re in my house now,” Cade said. “I’ll take care of Killian. He shouldn’t keep secrets from us anyway.”

“Killian opened a portal to his mountain resort,” I said. “He can do it alone because—” I paused as the royals narrowed their eyes, tired of my games. “He’s Hades’s grandson. The true heir of the Underworld.”

Silence filled the room before the heirs erupted.

“That dick has been holding out on us,” Silas seethed.

“I sensed darkness in him, but...” Cade’s turquoise eyes lit up. “That’s why he could kill the abominations while we had to channel our magic through Barbie to slay them. Hades’s heir. Which means he’s?—”

“What else is he hiding?” Louis asked.

A lot! I thought.

Too much, Sy agreed.

“A demigod.” Jeffrey whistled. “First in the realm.”

“That lying son of a bitch,” Silas spat in envy.

“He didn’t lie,” Louis said. “Just omitted the truth.”

“What’s the difference?” Silas huffed.

“Let’s not argue at this hour,” Cade said. “Let’s take a deep breath and process this calmly and rationally.”

“Well, Barbie.” Silas fixed me with a sharp look. “Was it just the three of you on that rooftop?”

My heart skipped. He was fishing for information on Sy.

I shrugged. “That’s all I saw.” I raised a hand. “I can swear on a Bible if you want me to.” I dropped my hand to my side when he didn’t follow up. “I’m exhausted, and I have class tomorrow.”

I wasn't physically tired. I'd gotten a good feeding from Sy and Rowan's coupling. But mentally, I was drained. I just wanted to hit the pillow, and then I'd have more mental energy to process what being the chaos prince's true mate meant. I turned to look at Cade hopefully, but he didn't dismiss me.

"Where's your friend Sy?" Silas asked, and Louis leaned forward.

Sy had left quite an impression.

Inside, Sy perked up.

I yawned, letting an eye droop shut, playing up my fatigue.

"No idea, sir," I mumbled.

"She seemed close to you," Silas pressed, watching my reaction. "Even called you Ugly Barbie."

A muscle twitched under my eye at the insult, and Sy's guilt rolled off her.

"I defended you," Louis said. "Called you a fine lady."

I let my other eye close, refusing the bait. No way was I getting tangled up in their games about Sy. Soon, I added a light snore for effect.

"Interview's over," Cade said. "Barbie's had a rough few days. Let's cut her some slack. Now, gentlemen, it's time to leave." He barked at me. "Barbie, quit snoring and get to your room."

My eyes snapped open, and I jumped up, snatched the plate of cheese cubes, and bolted for the door. House magic swung it open before I reached it, and I vanished,

leaving Jeffrey's chuckles behind.

A third tap on the door came after I ignored the first two.

"You're testing my patience, Matt," I said, my throat still raw. "I haven't forgiven you and Fred for skipping my breakfast in that jail cell." Never mind that the cell was decked out like a five-star hotel room, complete with a magical fire in a marble hearth. "I've played nice, but you keep pushing it."

I couldn't believe how heartless these supernaturals were. I'd stopped a death duel between heirs and saved the day, but here they were, business as usual and expecting me to go to class.

The door creaked open, and Sy hissed.

Shit, I'd forgotten to lock it last night. But whoever entered was about to regret it.

"It's me," Bea called before I sent my dark wind to teach the invader a lesson.

I tossed my pillow aside and shot upright.

"Bea?" I rubbed my eyes, hoping I wasn't dreaming.

Her blue hair billowed in the draft, and her hazel eyes remained warm. It was really her.

"Sorry to wake you, Barbie. It's mid-morning, so?—"

I leapt from my bed, zoomed toward her before she could blink, and hugged her. She squeezed back, and we clung to each other.

Sy joined our virtual embrace. Love group hugs, so warm, she said.

House magic hummed around us.

When we broke apart and I turned to squint at the window, the curtain parted automatically, letting in generous beams of golden light. Cade had let me skip morning class. He wasn't as cold as I'd complained earlier.

"I missed you, Barbie," Bea said.

"Still want to be my friend?" I asked.

She blinked. "Why wouldn't I? Why doubt our friendship? What happened?"

I spread my arms. "My reputation is worse now."

She shrugged. "You've had a bad rep since day one. Never stopped me before."

I bit my lip. "I got tossed in the dungeons twice—once for murder. I wasn't convicted, though, thanks to the heirs defending me."

"And Prince Killian protected you," she said. My heart jumped at his name. Only Rowan knew he was my true mate.

I knew too, Sy piped up.

Guilt churned in my gut. I kept so many secrets from Bea, my most loyal friend.

"I just got back this morning." Bea swallowed. "Heard about your trial. I'm sorry I wasn't there for you." Shame and tears filled her eyes.



“Stop that,” I said. “I didn’t want you in that court. Think Medea’s snake hair was creepy? Her mom’s worse. They’d have tried to hurt you to get to me. I’m glad you missed that shit.”

“I heard about Wyatt,” she growled, trying to mimic the shifter prince but sounding more like a spitting-mad bunny. “That ungrateful rat. If he were still here, I’d kick his disloyal butt.”

I blinked. “They kicked him out?”

“He left after Prince Killian banished him. No house would take him after that,” Bea said. “Don’t pity him. You got him into a house, defended him, and he betrayed you.” She rested her hand on my arm. “Not everyone deserves saving. Bad people don’t deserve kindness.”

“Wyatt isn’t a bad person. Just weak,” I said.

“The weak can do more harm.”

“Let’s not waste time discussing weaklings,” I said, smiling at her. “I’m so glad you’re back. A lone wolf needs her pack.”

“We’re mages, and we can take on anything and anyone.” She smiled back. “Hey, I heard your second imprisonment happened in a five-star cell with steamy tea, mountains of cake, and a magical fire. Duke Jeffrey, Cade’s cousin and new security chief, had to boost measures after your prison vacation video went viral. He’s worried every lowlife will commit crimes just to score the same cell.”

“Shit, are you serious? I started a supernatural prison trend?” I said, running a hand through my curls. “Cade said he was afraid that might happen.”

“Can’t blame him,” Bea said. “You hungry?”

“Always.”

“Let’s grab lunch before class, then,” she decided. “Our enemies are saying you’re still locked up. Let them see how amazing you look.”

“I’m not looking that great,” I said.

“Doesn’t matter,” she said. “Just show up.”

With tits up, Sy added.

Barbie

Bea and I ambled out of the House of Mages, which was mostly empty, all the students crammed into Jubilee Haven for lunch. A handful of mage guards loitered in the pentagon courtyard, side-eyeing me.

I flicked away a spell from the crimson dwarf bushes as we passed the fence. I'd stopped yanking them off—the mages would just slap new ones on, and then Cade would haul me into his office for another chat. The mage house was my last shot at making things work. Annoying Cade enough would probably land my ass on the street.

We can always crash at the House of Fae. My sugar won't turn us away, Sy piped up. Or there's the House of Chaos. You're Killian's true mate, after all. Even before your prince dropped the bomb, that chaos werewolf said your room there was permanently set aside for you.

It's not just about having a place to crash, I said. House politics are a whole other mess.

"How's your grandmother, Bea?" I asked. "I thought of seeking you out at the border before I talked myself out of it."

"Nana wasn't at the border," she said as we walked the cobbled path along the edge of Windsong Woods. The scent of pine and oranges blew with the wind. "She was

stuck in a human town, and the absence of magic there was killing her slowly.” She paused. “I never told you why my family was banished to the mortal realm...but it was because of my mom’s crime. Now, Nana is all I have left.”

“Shit.” I blinked, then grabbed her arm. “I’ll talk to Cade and get him to revoke the exile. I won’t rest until your nana’s safe here!”

“Prince Cade already took care of it,” Bea said, her eyes wet. “He got the king to pardon Nana before I left. She’s recovering in the mage city, thanks to His Highness.”

I smiled in relief. Now Bea could visit her grandmother whenever she wanted.

“Cade’s a good guy when he’s not being a ruthless ass like the other heirs,” I said.

The heirs were all predators in their blood, no matter how much kindness they bothered to show. I opened my mouth, then shut it and bit my tongue. I almost said something about Cade’s curse. His secret wasn’t mine to spill. However, I’d hunt that Fury down and take her out.

“The kindest prince heir,” Bea said with a sigh. She still watched him with stars in her eyes from across the room. “I’m so glad we’re together in the mage house.”

I nodded, my thoughts drifting to Killian. A sudden need for him hit me like a barrage of hail.

Jubilee Haven loomed ahead. My stomach groaned, yet I slowed my pace as dread settled in my chest.

Killian had broken my heart when he played cozy with Queen Lilith and her ward in front of everyone. It’d been a ruse, a distraction to keep them away from me, and it

hadn't worked since his "women" came for me every chance they got. Now he was changing his strategy, and declaring me his true mate in private with Rowan there to witness seemed to be the first step.

I didn't know where we'd go from here, but I dreaded seeing him with them today, even if it was an act. It would wreck me. I stopped in my tracks, suddenly struggling to breathe, panic icing my lungs.

"You okay, Barbie?" Bea asked.

She didn't know about my last night with Killian. The worry on her face told me she thought I was dreading another show of him with his two women.

"Whatever happens," she said, her quiet voice steel-hard, "I'm here for you."

I nodded and squeezed her hand in thanks before squaring my shoulders. Sy pumped strength into me, and Bea and I slid into the dining hall, heads held high, after checking the entrance for traps and nasty spells.

We headed to our corner table, our shoes clicking softly on the marble floor.

A quick glance told me Killian was nowhere in sight.

I reached out with my magical senses, and I didn't feel him around either. The relief lasted two seconds before my gut twisted. Queen Lilith wasn't around either. Were they together somewhere? There was no way to know, and the uncertainty burned in my bones.

If he ran back to her after telling me that I was his fated mate, I wouldn't be able to come back from that. It'd break something fundamental in me.

And if/when the mating fever returned, I'd be helpless against its primal pull. And thinking that I'd have to go to him like a puppet on a string, regardless of his betrayal?—

My stomach churned. I shook my head, shoving away the poisonous thought, refusing to let it take root.

Another survey of the room told me none of the other heirs were around either. That was new, as if they'd finally gotten bored with the endless drama and moved on.

The bride candidates slumped in their chairs in disappointment, and honestly, I felt it too. Everyone had gotten used to the sexy heirs strutting in like they owned the place—well, they did own the place. Who knew what those guys were up to anymore?

Most tables were occupied, everyone in their usual spots. The seating chart might as well be a map of Shades Academy's pecking order. I'd tried shaking up their hierarchy once. It lasted all of five seconds, but I'd at least disrupted their order during my brief stay.

My eyes swept the hall. Same scene, different players. Princess Medea, my old nemesis, was gone for good, roasted by my dark flame. Now her former attack dogs, Bellona and crew, had found a new master in Grace.

The demon princess had rolled in claiming to be Barbie 2.0, but she'd flopped at replacing me. That didn't mean she'd quit yet. Surprisingly, Lady America hadn't joined Grace's crew. The redheaded fae, niece of Headmistress Ethel, stuck with her fae noble friends, still commanding one of the prime tables.

Dixie kept to her group too. The shifter beta used to be my friend before the Shriekers had killed her lover, Luna. Dixie wouldn't look at me, and I didn't blame her. That

wound might never heal. I'd even let her beat me once to let her vent but promised to hit back next time.

Sy kept telling me off for shouldering the blame for every person that my father's abominations killed. She was right. I couldn't bring back the dead, but I could stop him from bleeding this realm dry and protect the rest.

Bea and I walked the aisle to our table amid a thick silence. Not the normal kind—this was deliberate. My heart stumbled, as the quiet was more unnerving than the crowd's usual hateful words and mocking comments. The suspense of what waited ahead made my skin crawl.

“Shush!” My super hearing caught the whisper perfectly. “Don't look at her. Don't give the attention-seeking whore what she wants.”

Me, an attention whore? I almost laughed. They had the wrong chick. That was Sy.

Sy smiled.

I shrugged at the new silent treatment. Let them pretend I didn't exist. It meant I could eat in peace.

Bea caught the shift too—it was the first time no one had even glanced my way, as if I were a ghost. We kept walking, our chins held high. Ever since I'd cleared her magical block, Bea had found her inner warrior. She no longer cracked under pressure. She didn't even blink when shit hit the fan.

But I hated that my friend took heat for sticking with me. We'd fought about it, and she only got pissed when I tried to talk her out of it.

“We're in this together, Barbie,” she swore. “I'm with you to the bitter end.”

I'd let her join the fight, but that bitter end was mine alone. Not even Sy could follow where I was headed. Not even Killian. My chest burned with longing every time I thought of him. In my blood, I'd always known he was mine, and now my mind had started to catch up.

Bea's gaze landed on Jinx and our old geek crew. Jinx had tried to recruit her to Grace's side, promising her the moon. Bea had shut her down cold, dumping an old friendship that predated my arrival at Shades Academy.

The trio—Jinx, Bea, and Drusilla—had been the real muscle behind the underdogs campaign after I'd kicked things off. Now Bea rode with me, and Jinx had hopped the fence to chase greener pastures. Two-thirds of the underdogs had trailed after her and switched lanes to follow the Underworld princess.

They were surprised, even disappointed that I didn't crash and burn like Grace had promised. Instead, I sailed through a murder trial without a scratch. Sure, the House of Chaos booted me straight into the mage prince's backyard. When they accused me of beating up another student, I got a luxury cell with a roaring fire and fancy tea service. Shit, I even scored a selfie with the mage prince and went viral. Instant influencer status.

The top dogs got madder, and the traitor underdogs just stood there scratching their heads.

"Fucking turncoats," Bea spat. "They joined the machine, the collective bad. They're nothing but a bunch of socialists, fascists, and religious cultists."

My once-meek friend's cussing still threw me. A decade of exile, powerlessness, and unfair crap had turned her into a tiny rage monster.

"Did you pick up those terms from human politics?"



“I picked up my ailing nana from a broke human town,” she said, tears burning behind her eyelids. “I saw how much they all suffered.”

“I have to ask you this.” I steeled myself to ask what I’d been dodging. “Did your nana put that magical block in you?”

“I never asked. Doesn’t matter now,” she said, shooting a glare at the former underdogs. “What matters is fighting back. They slander us, and we slander them!”

“If we fight lies with lies, we lose all credibility,” I said. I had nothing to lose—not even my reputation—but Bea didn’t need to join me in the gutter.

“Screw credibility. It’s overrated,” she snapped. “One week in the human world taught me that all truth is skewed. Everyone is a liar.”

“Shit.” I gaped at her. “You’re more cynical than me now.”

Since birth, Bea had been at rock bottom. Everyone stomped her down, but now that her magic ran free and she’d proven her power, she would no longer take their crap. Years of bitterness had made her a mage bulldog.

I got it, but my role hit different. My goal didn’t align with their annoying, petty games. I had to take down my father and save the realm. For that, I’d have to sacrifice my wants, needs, and any shot at a future.

We reached our table.

“The underdogs’ campaign is in the past,” I said. “Leave it in the dust and move on, my friend.”

While Bea sat down and guarded our schoolbags, I made a beeline to grab food. The

whispers started up, all hush-hush conspiracy style.

Sy's super-hearing caught the gossip train.

"She spread her legs for every heir," Fake Blonde said with disdain but failed to hide the envy underneath. That witch, who'd banged half the less powerful players and now kissed Grace's feet, couldn't get within five feet of an heir herself. "She might sleep her way to the middle, but she'll never sleep her way to the top!"

"She dodged punishment for every crime," Bellona said bitterly. "But mark my words, justice is coming. The second trial will be her reckoning. She can beat one of us, but she can't beat all of us!"

My heart skipped a beat and ice crawled up my spine. They planned on ganging up on me to take me out in the next trial. Headmistress Ethel had mentioned something about arena-style combat for trial two—only the survivors would make it to round three. I didn't want to kill anyone, but if they forced kill-or-be-killed, I'd bloody my hands.

My steps dragged as I thought of Bea. How could I push her clear of the blast zone? I chewed my lip. I needed to figure out how to keep my friend alive.

I loaded up a tray at the buffet. I'd be back for a second serving. With a heavy tray on my arm, I breezed past Jinx and her new crew without a glance, dropping the tray on our table with a grin for Bea.

Grace's table kept firing toxic energy my way, their whispers carrying across the hall.

"Is it true Ugly Barbie never washes her bottom?"

"Eww, that's disgusting."

Bea bit into her sandwich, a brow quirked at my murderous expression.

“What did they say, Barbie?” She knew I could hear everything.

“What the fuck?” I spat. “They’re calling me Ugly Barbie now. Apparently, they also found out that I don’t wash my butt.”

Sy slunk into a corner, guilt rolling off her, before she made a show of yawning. Then she pretended to be asleep, dead to the world, yet her ears pricked, listening to every bit of the conversation.

Cami strode in our direction, two of her friends flanking her. She’d defended me during the first trial and gotten me out of the corrupted ivory tower, but I’d been her housemate back then, and Killian had been my shield.

Was she going to turn against me now that I’d switched houses? Whatever. One more enemy wouldn’t kill me. I’d dealt with worse.

I put on my game face as Killian’s cousin approached. Her blank expression told me Killian hadn’t spilled about the true mate bomb he’d dropped on me. I was still reeling from the shock of the truth.

“So, refusing to wash your bottom these days?” Cami asked, narrowing her eyes at me. “Or just forgetting?”

“Look who’s talking,” I said defensively.

Cami snickered at my pissed-off expression. Her friends dragged chairs over, surrounding our table. Bea stayed quiet, but her fingers curled around her wand, ready for shit to hit the fan.

Then Drusilla rolled up with enough garlic fries and ice cream for a small army and joined us too.

“That’s a new low, even for you, Ugly Barbie,” the dhampir said, her blue eyes glinting. “Remember when you played Little Bob in the House of Vampires? I practically had to shove you into the shower.”

Drusilla had it bad for Louis. She’d quit being his assistant to join the Brides Selection, just like I’d ditched being his squire. Weird that she didn’t hate me, considering how the vamp prince drooled over me. Then again, she’d watched him screw around plenty—right in front of her.

Everyone except Bea and I cracked up as Drusilla nodded at Cami before she took a seat next to Bea.

“Yeah, as Little Bob, I got mocked and abused over rumors about my tiny dick, which no one had seen since I never showered in public.”

The table erupted in laughter, but I wasn’t amused. I caught Dixie’s eye across the room. The hatred had faded from her gaze, replaced by something sadder, more nostalgic. For a second, we connected, both remembering when I’d snuck into her lover’s apartment for a private shower and gotten busted.

That was when the small-dick rumors started—not that anyone had seen the goods. Luna had collapsed in Dixie’s arms, both of them dying of laughter at my expense. That was the last time I saw Luna alive. A Shrieker got her when I failed at my job of keeping everyone safe.

“But you don’t have a cock, even a tiny one,” Cami said in amusement. “Or do you?”

“She fooled everyone with her boy act, even our princes.” Drusilla flashed me a grin.

“Pretty shrewd of you. Had me convinced too.”

I didn't smile back. “It's not my fault that everyone ran with Little Bob . I bathe daily and wash every inch, kind of, just not in public. And this stupid rumor about my unwashed bottom is worse than the dick joke. Who started it? I don't usually duel, but I'll make a fucking exception!”

My chest heaved with rage. I was done with this humiliating shit.

“Calm down.” Drusilla shoved the fries and ice cream to the center of the table. I snatched a fistful of fries and three cups of ice cream. I was shy, but not with food.

“Your bestie spilled about your bad hygiene habits,” Cami said. “It's all over Spinchat.”

I stared at Bea incredulously. “Why, Bea?”

Bea's hands flew up, fury and confusion on her face. “I'd never share something that personal.” Cami's crew snickered, and Bea whirled on them. “With respect, Princess—your attempt to drive a wedge between Barbie and me won't work. Barbie might look naïve, but she's too sharp to fall for this. She's one of the most seasoned, sophisticated warriors I know. Plus, she's quirky and funny.”

I blinked. I was sophisticated, quirky, and funny?

Sy's ears twitched. Quirky means weird, Barbie.

“It wasn't Bea,” Drusilla said. “I can vouch for her.”

“Can't even let me finish before jumping into fight mode?” Cami sighed. “Well, Sy's the snitch.” Sy stiffened at her name as Cami's gaze fixed on me. “She broke into

your room to steal your jewels—the ones in the shoebox. Prince Killian caught her. When we checked the box, he found his missing pinkie ring. I found my mother's pearl necklace. Took it back. Still wondering how they landed in your shoebox.”

The chaos house and my ghost familiar had tag-teamed to swipe the goods. The thievery had been done out of love and compassion, born from their need to spoil me rotten, making up for my shitty childhood. Plus, the house wanted me to stay. Mental note: visit the chaos house soon and tell its magic to quit stealing stuff. I'd known it would blow up in my face, but back then, Sy and I were suckers for sparkly things. Cade had warned me to resist the magpie urge. For now, I was behaving. I had to.

“I have no idea either,” I said, my cheeks burning. No way was I ratting out the house and Pucker. “The shoebox came with the shinies already in it. We can call it finders, keepers, or inheritance.”

“Inherited from whom?” One of Cami's friends—the brunette, Lady Eva—narrowed her eyes at me.

“Whom or who?” I asked her.

“My stuff's gone missing too,” Lady Lola cut in, looking ready to launch into a full investigation. Unlike Eva, she had pale skin and a high forehead. “Including my favorite gown and dress shoes. Word is, even Lord Cassius lost some expensive wine and rare candles from his room. Who'd be stupid enough to steal from him?”

Shit, Sy had drunk the wine, and I'd burned the candles while bathing. If I had known the candles were rare, I might've saved one of them. They were all gone now, and there was no evidence for the Silent Blade to find.

I kept my mouth shut, blaming the whole mess on Killian. I'd only grabbed that wine and those candles to romance him the morning I left his bed. He never showed up,

and I wasn't about to rehash that shit. Though seriously—wasn't Lord Silent Blade supposed to be busy assassinating people? Since when did he care about missing trinkets?

Even assassins need to fuck, Sy said. Someone's gotta set the mood with wine and candles.

That's not— I stopped short. Cami's friends were drilling holes into me with their stares. I met their gazes despite my guilty face. Deny wrongdoings till you die, right? Sy flashed me a thumbs-up.

"I didn't raid your rooms," I said, throwing up my hands. "You're not that fascinating."

"Only Prince Killian can authorize a room search," Cami said. "Nobody's brave enough to file that complaint. But we're not here to add to the rumor mill. Barbie's reputation has taken enough hits."

"My reputation?" I sneered. "Please. It's already in the gutter. Give me your worst. I've got nothing more to lose."

"You've got so much more to lose than you realize," Cami said.

I swept a hard look around the table. "Are you here to ruin my lunch?"

The other bride candidates kept sneaking glances at us, hungry for drama, before darting their eyes back to their plates and companions. They had to maintain that silent treatment. Anyone who sided with me, except the heirs, got automatic enemy status in Grace's army. No heirs had shown up today, so Bea and I figured we could eat in peaceful exile. Should've known better. There was no peace for the nice and meek.

“You might find it hard to believe,” Cami said, “but we’re here to show support.”

I blinked. “I don’t get it. Chicks usually come over to pick a fight.”

“Well,” Cami’s smile turned playful, like she was enjoying this little game, “we’re not your usual chicks.”

“Sadly, we’re not,” Drusilla added. “I do miss the good old days. Remember our vampire house? Pure chaos followed you everywhere.”

“I don’t miss Prince Louis making me watch his threesomes with random blondes,” I said, and Drusilla flushed. “I didn’t get paid for that heavy shit.”

The girls leaned in, faces flushed with embarrassment and eyes bright with curiosity.

“His prowess in bed is legendary,” Eva said, making Lola giggle.

“Once he ordered some bimbo to go down on me so he could get off by watching. I decked her when she grabbed for my groin. Couldn’t risk anyone discovering nothing there.”

Cami snickered. Bea widened her eyes. Eva and Lola sat there, practically salivating over the gossip. And Drusilla’s eyes dimmed.

Then it dawned on me that I was the only one who’d had a front row seat watching the vampire prince’s private performances, feeding habits and all.

“Where were we,” Cami asked, “before we got lost in the dick jokes?”

“We were discussing the mystery woman who claimed to be Barbie’s bestie,” Lola offered. “Someone called Sy.”



Sy preened at the mention of her name. I'm the mystery woman.

"Who's Sy?" Bea demanded. "If she's Barbie's friend, I'd have met her a long time ago." Guilt slammed into my face at her words. She zeroed in on me. "Or did you make a new friend while I went to get Nana? Another bride candidate?"

"Not a candidate," Cami said flatly. "She showed up at X Palace as Rowan's plus-one."

"Strutting around like she thought she was a ten," Eva chimed in.

Sy bristled. I'm a ten.

"At least she put Princess Grace in her place," Drusilla said. "Called her out for being a Barbie copycat, then berated her for not copying Sy herself." She raised an eyebrow. "Where were you, Barbie? You never skip a feast."

"Healing," I said. "I had a run-in with some Shriekers."

"We heard," Cami said.

"Are you alright?" Bea's voice softened with worry.

"Good as new."

Bea's jaw tightened. "So this Sy, your supposed best friend, tried to tank your reputation by telling everyone you don't wash your butt?" Old anger bubbled up in me as she spoke. "It's the worst kind of hit job, Barbie. Our foes are running wild with it on social media. They're trying to get the heirs to dump you. Who wants a bride with questionable hygiene? And it might actually work this time."

Everyone stared at Bea as realization sank in.

“Shit,” Drusilla said. “Got a plan to save Barbie’s reputation of questionable hygiene?”

I growled at Sy. What else did you say and do at the party?

I’d been slumbering, not wanting to see Killian with his two women draped over him. Since he owned X Palace, I’d assumed that he’d parade them around like trophies.

I was trying to help, Sy protested.

You weren’t helping, I said . You just made another mess for me to clean up. Like always.

Why do you keep blaming me for your every failure? she fired back.

Thanks to you, I’m literally the butt of the joke.

You lied about daily baths, she said. Remember when that shifter prince caught your scent and shouted at you, “You stink, Little Bob!”?

I was running from the vampire hordes and had a skirmish with my attackers that day before I could sneak into anyone’s place to shower, I yelled at her. And who scrubs their ass 24/7?

If it helps, we’re goddess-grade clean by default, she said with a bored yawn.

“No one knows anything about Sy,” Cami said, “except Rowan, and he’s not talking. She vanished right after turning every male’s head at that party, like a ghost in the night. Academy security has been sniffing around since we’ve had a few breaches

lately. The sixth house launched their own investigation after multiple witnesses reported Sy threatening Princess Grace at X Palace.”

My heart skipped a beat. Queen Lilith was behind it. Had she caught on to the connection between Sy and me? I couldn’t afford to let her discover and endanger Sy.

“At least we’re done with the butt jokes,” I said.

“What butt jokes?” a deep male voice asked, and I nearly leaped out of my skin.

Rowan straddled a chair backwards, fixing me with a look. I’d been so caught up in my viral butt drama that I hadn’t noticed the fae prince’s arrival. Sy’s eyes locked onto her lover with lust. She hadn’t alerted me to his presence—her petty revenge for our fight. These days, we clashed more than we aligned.

Every gaze turned to us like sharks scenting blood the moment the fae heir appeared. So much for Grace’s followers giving me the cold shoulder. She’d overestimated their loyalty when real power came to play.

“Are you well, Barbie?” Rowan started.

“Of course.” I kept my face blank. “Why?”

“Won’t you say hi to Sy?” he asked.

I put on a confused look. Rowan scanned the table, catching my predicament. Sy and I were meant to be under wraps.

“You need better nutrition,” he said, and waved a hand.

Two fae guards materialized, loading my table with a dozen fresh dishes. Every girl’s

jaw dropped. I beamed at the food, then at the prince.

“From my personal chefs,” Rowan said. “You and...need to stay strong.”

“Too kind,” I said. “Thank you, Prince Rowan.”

Now that he knew Sy and I kind of shared one body, he’d taken it upon himself to feed her through me. Sy went misty-eyed at his gesture.

Best. Mate. Ever! she croaked. He’s taking good care of us.

Whatever, I said, and ditched the cafeteria food for Rowan’s spread. I waved my friends over to dig into the five-star fae cuisine as well.

Sy’s scent bloomed through me—her love note to him. Rowan’s silver eyes lit up as he breathed her in. I pushed Sy back instantly.

“I’ll walk you to class,” Rowan said, his gaze locked on mine, or rather, on Sy, who was peeking through my eyes.

Everyone else probably thought he was trying to get into my pants. Sy snarled at that thought.

“That’s unnecessary, good sir.” I waved at my packed table. “Got my entourage already.”

“If you see Sy, tell her I want her to come to my place tonight,” he said.

Sy preened. Tell my sugar I’ll be there.

“Just DM me,” I said, trying to brush him off.

“I believe a message delivered in person is better received and less likely to be ignored,” said the fae prince almost threateningly.

9

Barbie

Cami stuck to me like glue. Not only had she and her friends crashed my lunch while everyone else waged their war of silence against me, but now she trailed me to afternoon class. This was someone who'd never have been caught dead in my social orbit before.

"You don't need to babysit me, Princess," I said. "Believe me, you won't like it by the end of the day. Ask Prince Cade's minions how fun it was during my time in the mage jail."

She arched an eyebrow. "Who says I'm babysitting?"

I gestured at our group, Drusilla included. "Then what do you call this?"

Maybe she was taking over Rock's guard duty, as I couldn't feel his usual pulse at the edge of my radar today. But Cami was Killian's cousin, royal blood and all. And since when did princesses guard commoners, especially ones almost convicted of murder? Then again, Prince Rowan had just tried to play bodyguard too.

"I can walk to class by myself," I'd insisted, even when Sy begged me to let her man escort us so she could moon over him through my eyes like a lovesick fool. At one point, I swore that Rowan had spotted my eyes flickering golden—Sy's signature color. His eyes had flashed silver in response. "I don't need rumors about us, Sir Rowan. You get my drift?"

“Can’t say I do,” he’d said, but he’d conceded when I’d whispered to him that I would send Sy to him later for his booty call.

He’d still left his fae guards on my tail though.

“School’s boring,” Cami said. “Figured you’d have some action going on.”

I couldn’t shut her down like I’d done to Rowan, so I shrugged.

Our group traipsed through the north courtyard, past the five house sculptures standing sentinel around the ancient white tree. The demon house hadn’t been able to muscle its way into this spot yet, and I called that a small mercy.

“What’s going on with you and Prince Rowan?” Drusilla couldn’t resist asking. She’d known me longer than anyone, since back when she managed me at the House of Vampires as Louis’s PA. “He usually steers clear of you.”

Tell them to fuck off, Sy barked. He’s mine!

“Nothing’s going on,” I said, squinting at the shimmering “Pathfinder” letters swirling across the facade of the ebony dome.

Why was I still playing student while danger circled? I needed to talk to Killian. Just thinking of him made my body hum and my heart ache. A few hours apart and I missed him terribly already. Pretty pathetic how I envied Sy’s little reunion with her man just now.

Not just any man, she corrected. Mate!

Yet she’d also claimed to have a connection with both Silas and Louis. I shook my head. My own relationship was fucked up enough without diving into someone else’s

shit.

The wind brushed my face before I registered the spark of the familiar bond. Pucker materialized in front of me a heartbeat later, huffing and brimming with energy. Had he fed from Killian? I'd warned him about divided loyalties.

Everyone except Cami and I jumped back with a yelp.

"Take cover! Incoming attack!" Bea shouted.

"It's fine," I said. "It's just Pucker."

Pucker twirled with a flourish and bowed to the group. "Ladies."

"Is that the poltergeist from the House of Chaos?" Drusilla's voice quivered.

Pucker dropped his smile, menace rolling off him. He hated to be called that.

"Pucker," I warned before he could show my friends what a real poltergeist would do.

He resorted to shooting Drusilla a glare before turning to me with a solemn expression. "Barbie, we've got a situation."

I gestured for him to get on with it and quit his usual dramatics.

"I spotted a Shrieker, Barbie," he said. "I came to you right away, knowing that you'd be pissed otherwise. And no one in their right mind would piss off a godde—" He cut himself off at my warning glare. "Now I need to report to Prince Killian about the abomination. Direct orders. You aren't my only boss, and serving two masters is not for the fainthearted." He called over his shoulder as he shifted into his phantom form, "Don't do anything reckless. Just wait for His Highness."



Before I could stop him and ask more questions, he vanished. No point yanking the familiar bond and dragging him back now.

“You go ahead,” I told our group. “I’ll catch up.”

“Where are you going?” Cami demanded.

“I’ll return soon,” I said, waving them off, not wanting my friends in harm’s way.

“Wait,” Cami called.

I couldn’t wait. The bad news sliced through my veins like sharp ice. Urgency thrummed through me. This situation needed to be taken care of right away. I couldn’t afford to let a Shrieker breach our defenses.

I zoomed toward the Veil, mapping the route in my head—through the woods, past vampire territory, across the plains, and over the hills at the academy’s southern border.

Students swarmed toward the Pathfinder building by the hundreds, like a persuasion spell had rained down on them. The mass blocked my path.

I shoved through, but more filled the gaps.

Then Cami appeared beside me, with Bea and our group close behind.

“Let us help,” Cami said. “You aren’t alone.”

Her air magic burst forth, joined by Bea’s mage wind. Drusilla and the other chaos bride candidates added their currents too, shoving the crowd aside like parting waves.

I charged through the clearing with my friends on my heels, their magic speeding us toward the Veil.

As we crested the hill, the Veil's shimmer flickered. Massive claws and a monstrous body fused with machine parts pushed through the passage.

Six Shriekers had breached the Veil.

My heart slammed against my ribs. One minute later and they'd have started their killing spree.

"Princess!" they shrieked at the sight of me.

Rage boiled in my veins as I eyed my prey. Two bore traces of my father's blood; his stored supply of my blood must be running low. If Ruin used that blood to mass produce a Shrieker army, the realm would fall. Chills sank into my bones at the realization that my father's work was nearly complete. The deadliest invasion in history loomed.

Sy! I summoned.

Roger! Her rage matched mine, her hate burning just as brightly.

Her power surged through my legs, and I ran.

"Barbie, slow down!" Bea called. "We do this together!"

"Stay where you are!" I shouted back. "Your weapons and magic don't work on Shriekers."

I launched toward the abominations, leaving my friends behind.

“I have a message from the master!” A female Shrieker opened its mouth.

“Keep your fucking message to yourself, or shove it up Ruin’s hole,” I snarled in the ancient godly tongue. The Shrieker’s grotesque face twisted in shock, as if it had actual feelings.

Spare me!

I opened my fist and summoned Deathsong. It materialized from the mist into my hand.

The evil blade giggled as my fingers curved around its hilt. Mistress, let’s ? —

I hurled it at the speaking Shrieker. The blade flipped end over end until its ebony tip found its mark between the monstrous yellow eyes.

The other Shriekers screamed. I hadn’t broken stride. With an extended fist, I yanked Deathsong free of the falling corpse and had the jeweled hilt in my palm without missing a beat.

Deathsong and I, becoming one, whirled through the Shriekers, unfazed by their siege. The evil blade gorged on my goddess energy. Like a violent twister, we sliced through the tentacles striking at us from every angle. Blood and gore drenched me.

I leapt and slashed through a trunk-sized tentacle like hard butter, twisted to dodge the rain of severed chunks—a feat impossible for most supernaturals—and landed on a male Shrieker’s machine shoulder.

Crouching on my ride, I sliced through more detestable tentacles and then sent Deathsong spinning again.

I'm dizzy , it complained before severing a Shrieker's head.

Without waiting for its return, I channeled Sy's transformation and buried our claws in the vulnerable spot between my mount's eyes.

I'd taught the heirs and their warriors that the third eye space was the abominations' weak point. Deathsong was the only weapon lethal to them. What the heirs didn't know was that I could also kill Shriekers with my bare hands.

Claws, Sy corrected. My claws. She never let anyone steal her credit.

I had no time for a petty debate. And I didn't worry about my friends seeing the claws, as their eyes couldn't track my lightning-fast motions. Speed was my brand.

I yanked my claws free, and Deathsong returned to my palm. I launched again, changing lanes to land atop another Shrieker and strike.

When Cami led the group to the battlefield, only one Shrieker remained. She hurled air and fire magic at the abomination without hesitation. Despite her impressive power, her magic slid off the Shrieker like a sneeze. She blinked and tried again, anger fueling her. The others joined in, Bea's potent spells included, but the Shrieker swatted their collective assaults aside, like throwing away children's toys, before stomping toward them.

"Eat this!" Drusilla shouted, her dagger flying true, hitting the sweet spot between the Shrieker's eyes. It bounced off harmlessly.

My friends stumbled back, fear sparking in their eyes.

"Send me your elemental magic," I called. "Trust me. Now!"

They unleashed fire, wind, and spells. I scooped up their power, branded it with mine, and hurled our newly combined power at the last Shrieker. Flames engulfed it as it screeched.

My friends clapped their hands over their ears until the sound died away. They stared at me, stunned, seeing me in a new light. A strange glint lit Cami's blue eyes as she considered me. Bea, however, puffed up her small chest in pride while at the same time something in her gaze hinted at unease.

We stood over the Shrieker corpses, their stench fouling the air.

"Ho-how did you fight like that?" Lola asked. She'd never seen me in action.

The others had witnessed my brawls, but none, not even Bea, had seen me wield a blade, let alone summon one from thin air. And Deathsong wasn't just any blade. As the vilest weapon in existence, forged by my father, it would corrupt any mind except mine. I was its mistress, immune to its persuasion.

My friends shuddered as Deathsong brushed at their minds. It backed off at my scolding, and my friends' unease faded.

"If you'd fought the way you fought those monsters," Drusilla drawled, "no one would've stood a chance in the ring."

Drusilla had been one of those who had entered the ring to beat me up, blaming me for injuring her prince. I'd let them vent and inflict violence on me due to my own guilt and grief. They didn't know that I was the real danger. I could drain the realm, kill countless beings with a flick of my wrist. I always held back. Otherwise, I'd be just like my father.

I shrugged. "When I have to fight, I fight, but my beef isn't with anyone here. I know

it's hard to believe, but I'm not competing for a bride spot. They're stupid to come after me. I won't kill vicious bride candidates who wish me harm if I don't have to." I toed a Shrieker's head. "These abominations are a different story."

They stared at me, finally seeing the pro killer in their midst. My face had gone cold while slaughtering the Shriekers.

I dropped the mask, cracked my knuckles, and grinned to lighten the mood.

"Feels good blowing off steam," I said.

"Now I get why the heirs want you," Drusilla said. "They like lethal things, and you're as ruthless as them."

"I'm nothing like them," I said, then I froze, sensing the apex predator approaching.

"Let's all go back to class," Cami ordered. "I'll report?—"

Thunder cut her off, rolling across the horizon. A heartbeat later, lightning rose behind the hill. Only one being commanded lightning like that.

Killian was coming.

My heart pounded erratically, blood racing in my veins. How would he react to seeing me? I hated to admit I'd never stopped wanting him, even with a broken heart.

Like a dark god, Killian appeared on the hilltop, his storm-blue eyes pinning me right away. Even with the distance between us, electricity crackled in the air. My body lit up and hummed, my need for him rising to a crescendo.

His gaze raked over me, checking for injuries before scanning the carnage of the

battlefield—dead Shriekers everywhere. He bolted down the hill, moving so fast I could barely track him. The wake of his speed sent my golden curls dancing.

In moments, he stood two feet from me, visibly restraining himself from yanking me into his arms.

The others dropped into unified bows. “Your Highness.”

I stayed upright, as I bowed to no one, not even the God of Ruin himself. And I never begged, no matter how he inflicted pain on me and leached my life force.

Killian ignored them all and fixed his eyes solely on me. My pulse went haywire at his intensity and proximity, and I didn’t appreciate being affected like this in front of everyone.

“Barbie.” My name rolled off his tongue.

“My, look who decided to show up,” I drawled, going on the offensive and earning shocked gasps from everyone except Cami. “Late to the party, high sir, as usual.”

“Sorry I was late,” he said, his eyes sweeping over me again. Black blood stained my uniform; no avoiding that mess. “That blood isn’t yours. Are you hurt?”

“Everywhere,” I said sarcastically as I bounced between my feet, jittery energy coursing through me.

“Want me to make you feel better?” he purred, his lips quirking slightly.

Eva, Lola, and even Bea looked ready to pass out at the rare sight—a Killian smile, even a tiny one, was apparently enough to send them swooning.

Electricity rippled between us, the air thick with tension while everyone watched. Killian's focus locked on me, and heat crept up my neck to my cheeks. Sy preened inside me, basking in the attention. My gaze held his—looking away would mean defeat, even if I was already regretting this staring match.

I'd always known he was stupidly gorgeous, but right now his presence hit a different level. His dark glory burned brighter than a supernova. The raw longing in those storm-blue eyes made my knees wobble. Every cell in my body screamed for me to throw myself at him, grab hold of him, and never let go.

But we couldn't always get what we wanted, and I sure as hell wasn't going to show vulnerability in front of everyone. I plastered on my best "fight me" expression, even with the significance of his being my true mate burning in my mind.

"Looks like you want to take a bite out of me," he said.

"Don't worry," I said. "It won't be a love bite."

As soon as the words left my mouth, I instantly wanted to die, my face flaming. Killian's smirk only made me scowl harder.

"You sure about that, little scorpion?" he purred.

My eyes widened as he dropped the endearment in front of everyone. What game was he playing? He was still engaged, at least as far as everyone else knew. If he thought he could openly treat me like his dirty little secret, he had another think coming.

I hissed, "You really know how to make a girl feel special."

Sy dragged her claws across her face. You're hopeless at flirting, Barbie. Let me coach you.



His smirk didn't drop. "Did I make you feel special?"

I stared at him, stunned at his sheer nerve. Did he forget that we had an audience? Did he not care that gossip about us would sprint straight to his betrothed's ears?

His betrothed. The thought tasted bitter. What was his plan there? And where did we go from here?

His face turned stoic as his men charged down the hill, Rock and Cassius in the lead. They surveyed the scene, the Silent Blade as cool as ever, while disappointment flickered across the werewolf's face—he had shown up ready for a fight, but all he'd get was cleanup duty.

The warriors bowed to their prince. Cassius darted a glance at me, but Rock regarded the black blood on my uniform before zeroing in on Deathsong in my hand.

Deathsong perked up instantly at the attention.

Hello, werewolf, miss me? the evil blade chirped. Like an itch?

Rock's eyes went wide at the voice in his head, but his fingers twitched with obvious want. The blade was pure evil, but it was one of a kind and dangerously seductive. I was one of the few immune to its twisted charm.

I shook my head at Rock, warning him not to engage with the evil blade. Deathsong snapped its attention to its next target.

Well, look who else is here, Deathsong purred. Another favorite, Mistress. It slithered right into Cassius's head: Hello there, Silent Blade. I'm the evil blade.

Cassius gave my gore-covered blade a flat look before turning to study the stuttering

Veil, just to show Deathsong that he had better things to do.

I dismissed my blade before it could run its mouth more. It vanished in a puff of mist, zipping back to its pocket realm.

“Something’s off,” Cassius said. “The sentinels were supposed to be patrolling this area, but it was left wide open.”

“It feels like someone wanted to draw Barbie out,” Rock added.

All eyes turned to me.

Killian’s expression went blank. “There’s a residual mental power here. Someone deliberately cracked the Veil to let these things through.” He gave Rock a look. “Get all the princes here, especially Cade. We need to reset the ward and find out who’s sabotaging us.”

My heart hammered. I’d felt that same mental power earlier, some spells designed to keep the sentinels from patrolling the Veil. My suspicion wheeled to Queen Lilith, not because I strongly disliked her or was even jealous of her, but because few supernaturals packed her kind of power.

“Barbie,” Killian called.

I held up a finger. “Can’t do Q&A right now. My stockings are soaked. I don’t want to catch a cold.”

His gaze instantly dipped to my legs as if he was mentally peeling off my leggings. Heat rushed through me, pooling low in my belly. Shit, these supernaturals could all smell arousal a mile away, but before anyone could catch a whiff, I bolted for the hill.

“Gotta run—shower time!” I yelled over my shoulder as I made my escape.

I wasn’t planning to show up for afternoon class as I sprinted in the direction of Underhill.

10

Killian

The images of my vicious mate blazed through my dark mind like a flaming wind.

Her quick feet had carried her away from me before I could reach for her, demanding she stay until I could escort her to my house. She had a permanent room there and full access to my penthouse, no matter whether she wanted it or not.

Sitting behind my ebony desk carved with ancient runes, I opened a drawer and retrieved a romance novel I'd fetched from Barbie's old room. I usually read military strategy, history, and magical texts, but I needed to understand what kind of man captivated my mate's imagination.

My dragon growled. There's only one kind of male our mate fancies, and that's us. If you hadn't screwed up, there'd be no reason for her to look elsewhere, not even in books.

Shut up and let me figure this out, I growled back.

The endless bickering with my beast exhausted me. There was never a moment of peace with him. I dragged a hand over my face, still reeling from the fact that she had a beast too.

What other secrets are you hiding, little scorpion?

We'll find out one by one, my dragon offered.

I ignored his unnecessary encouragement and flipped through the sex scenes. My dragon watched intently, pretending expertise. I tossed the book aside.

I wasn't expecting knife play, which seemed to be in trend in the mortal world. I would never stick a gun, a knife handle, a string of beads, or any other objects into my mate. The only thing inside her lovely cunt would be my cock, tongue, or fingers.

You insult our mate, my dragon snapped. She'd never allow a gun inside her lovely, divine body.

We don't know that, I said, annoyed. She reads those books.

If my scorpion was into that kind of kinky stuff, I'd show her how much better my cock felt than cold metal. My blood heated at the thought, my cock instantly and painfully hard.

Let's get our mate here to fuck, my beast pushed. Or take her to my realm. Show her something better than lame book dicks.

I stood, my erection straining against my pants. My dragon had a point. I needed to find my scorpion.

As if summoned by my desire, golden curls flashed past my study door. My heart leapt. She'd come to me before I could hunt her down. She knew where to find me. That first summons, I'd pinned her to my desk, laughing. My men had burst in to witness the truth—Barbie was the only woman I could touch since the Underworld queen's bond.

Barbie retraced her steps and paused at the door. I waited. A few heartbeats later, she

slid in and shut the door behind her.

Those pink lips. That golden face. Her dual-colored eyes sparkled with lust, one sapphire, one spring green.

“Barbie—” I started, trying not to fumble like an awkward adolescent boy who didn’t know where to place his hands since he was so smitten with the girl. I’d never been that guy until her.

It’s about time, my dragon growled.

Before I knew it, I’d crossed the room. The next second, I was standing in front of my mate and pulling her against me.

“Little scorpion, you came to me,” I murmured as I lifted her chin up for a kiss, my cock rigid with need.

But I reminded myself to take it slow, to drink her in and savor our little reunion, even as my need for her burned raw and hard, even without my dragon urging me to fuck and claim her.

Barbie had done a complete one-eighty with her looks. Gone were her school uniform and the yoga pants she wore when she wasn’t in her uniform. She’d showed up in a killer mini-gown that made her look like a delicious snack. The way the dress hugged her petite, lovely frame screamed “fuck me.” It was flattering to see her put in such effort for me, considering she never gave a fuck about impressing anyone before.

Something nagged at me. I breathed deep but caught no trace of her scent; neither could my dragon. Wrongness prickled across my skin, as if someone else was wearing Barbie’s face.

“I came as soon as I could,” she whispered, fingers threading through my hair, pulling me down for a kiss.

Her gown dropped to the floor, her naked flesh inviting me in.

Her body called to me, familiar as an old addiction.

But Barbie would never offer comfort so polite and gentle. I tore my gaze away from her perfect form. Dark power slid across my skin, more tempting than her beauty.

My mate never needed seduction tricks.

I knew this magic, dark, powerful, devastating. Only one being wielded such force: my betrothed, Queen of the Underworld.

Her power caressed me like a drug, promising ecstasy beyond mortal pleasure. I could have lost myself in it, surrendered completely, if not for Hades’s raw power blazing in my blood. I was the Death God’s true heir, after all.

I shoved her back, trapping her in rings of darkness and starlight, the same rings that had once contained my true mate at the ice rink.

“Who are you?” I demanded, my lightning crackling at my fingertips.

“I’m everything you want, my prince,” she said.

Barbie would never call me “my prince.”

My starlight slammed into her, shattering her glamour. She gasped and doubled over. When she lifted her head, her honeydew green eyes gazed up at me, replacing Barbie’s dual-colored ones, and the Underworld’s scent emerged, permeating the air.

Lilith's power burned through her ward, seeping into me despite the barrier of my magic.

That explained the wrongness I'd sensed—an alarm had blared in my mind before our almost-kiss, exposing the impostor. I cursed my distraction, my need for my true mate clouding my judgment, allowing the deception to catch me off guard.

Cold anger surged. The lust drained from me the instant I realized it was Grace standing naked in front of me, pretending to be my true mate.

I'd tolerated her to keep her master—my betrothed—from obsessing over my mate, but the strategy had backfired. They'd only intensified their attacks on Barbie. Now I shifted tactics. No more playing defensive. I'd bring the fight to them, leaving them no energy to pursue my mate.

“How did you get past the house ward and my men?” I asked icily.

“Oh, that was easy, my prince,” she said, still smiling at me.

The house magic whimpered, recognizing its error. I raised a hand to calm it, showing it that I'd handle this from here. I understood why the house magic had faltered. Grace and Barbie shared cellular similarities, and Lilith's celestial power flowed through Grace. The Queen of the Underworld could bypass the ward through our bond.

And Grace's glamourised two-toned eyes had fooled my men. Her siren power could sway even my inner circle, except Cassius. Even Queen Lilith, the strongest mind-wielder in the realm, couldn't penetrate the Silent Blade's mental defenses.

“Get the fuck out,” I said flatly.



“You don’t mean that, my prince.” Grace pouted. “You don’t want to hurt my feelings.”

“I don’t give a fuck about your feelings,” I said harshly. “Now?—”

Her power, channeled from her master, crashed over me, and heat flooded my blood, dazing me with lust.

11

Barbie

Something bothered me as the invisible bond between Killian and me pulled taut, flaring. It felt like an invasion was going on, a violation waiting to happen.

This feels fucking wrong, I told Sy, worrying my bottom lip. And I don't know what it is.

Like ice in our chest, Sy agreed, biting her claws in worry. Go check on your man so he won't fuck another. Guard what's yours.

I'm not going to him, I said. He'll think I'm desperate. Men don't want what comes too easily.

You're a dumbass, she snapped. You know Killian isn't just any man. He's almost as good as my sugar, and they're cut from the same cloth.

Killian and Rowan don't have much in common except their titles, I said. Killian never apologizes for being an asshole. Rowan just pretends he's not one.

Sy huffed in disagreement. I paced the room, unease coiling in my gut.

Fuck it, I'm going to the House of Chaos. I caved in.

Sy's face lit up.

Not to check on Killian, I said, and her smile vanished fast enough to crack her fangs. I'm making sure my treasure's safe. Anyone who touches that shoebox will have to answer to me.

Check the treasure, then fuck Killian, she said, fingering the pink diamond necklace she got from Rowan. She'd nearly bitten my head off for offering to store it for her.

I just want you to understand that this visit won't be about having sex with Killian, I said. I just want to say hello to the house magic.

Keep lying to yourself, she said. But better hurry then.

I was already running, urgency coursing in my veins. But when the violet steel-and-glass House of Chaos loomed into view, I slowed.

Killian had called me his mate, but what if he changed his mind again? I didn't have Sy's thick skin.

Get going, Sy urged, giddy at the thought of meeting him.

I paused instead and drew a ragged breath, still torn between need and doubt. Was wanting Killian this much a weakness? And what if he wasn't there—or worse, what if he was with her? As far as the rumors went, their engagement still stood.

Sy groaned.

I won't make a fool of myself again, I protested.

Even if Killian was my addiction, or poison, I was getting tired of fighting.

We can take any poison, Sy hissed.

Have you forgotten how the Seed of Heaven nearly did us in? I retorted.

Before I knew it, I'd started moving again. My feet carried me past the House of Chaos's perimeter as another wave of urgency swept through my veins. None of the patrolling warriors stopped me, but a few stared as if they'd seen a ghost.

Whatever. If they tried to stop me, they'd have a taste of extreme rudeness.

The main door flew open before I reached the top step, house magic spilling out in a riot of wild colors, ready to drag me inside if I dared to retreat.

"Hello, hello," I said. "Missed you too. Let's go check on our treasure, shall we?"

I'd considered sneaking in—clambering up to the roof, then swinging down through a window to the penthouse hallway. The house magic would open any window for me, letting me spy on Killian without anyone knowing.

But no. I'd stroll through the front door like I belonged. I was no thief.

The house magic shot ahead in a phantom arrow of chaotic color as I followed. Everyone in the hall turned, wearing the same confused looks as the guards outside—like they were seeing a ghost again.

I pinched my cheek to prove I was real. As long as they didn't block me, we were good. I wasn't in the mood for interference while on a mission.

A sweet mission to fuck Killian. Sy beamed.

"Barbie?" Archer called tentatively as he strolled toward me from the depths of the hall. "Where did you come from?"

“Somewhere,” I answered evasively, as I didn’t like anyone to poke into my business.

“Weren’t you in the house just now?” he asked.

“Yeah? Double check with Rock. He’s shadowing me, but he should know that no one hides from me.” I swept two fingers southeast. “Your buddy’s heading that way, knowing I came here. This isn’t a social call, Archer. Just grabbing my favorite pillow from my old room for my new place in the House of Mages. I’m a respectable high mage now.”

“Are you?” He narrowed his eyes, his doubt as plain as daylight. “You sure you didn’t go up just now?”

“Maybe you should get your eyes checked, Archer,” I said. “Does Prince Killian cover vision? You better check. Prince Louis promised full insurance when I was his squire—turned out to be a sham.” I shook my head. “I got scammed.”

I charged past him and up the stairs like I still belonged.

“Scorpion, wait!” Archer called, but I was already three floors up, his footsteps echoing behind.

With Sy’s strength pumping through my legs, I barely touched the ground. Contrary to what I’d told Sy, I bypassed the sixth floor and my old room and raced to Killian’s penthouse.

Only at his corridor did I slow. My heart stuttered. How would he react? Would he welcome me or scold me? I needed an excuse ready. If he wasn’t all that happy to see me, I’d hit him with my worst attitude before storming out.

I squared my shoulders. Where was Pucker when I needed backup?

I'm your backup! Sy said.

Right, I sighed. I'd gotten used to his phantom form trailing me. But he was diligently guarding the Veil now, paranoid that I'd be dragged away by my enemy and he'd lose his drinking source. Still, he'd grown on me. After warning me about the Shriekers' invasion in time, he deserved more than a few sips of my goddess energy.

The Queen's Suite loomed ahead, its red door glaring. I steeled myself, hoping whatever waited inside wouldn't sense me.

I crept forward, remembering Pucker's words. They aren't ghosts. They're more like a kinetic energy force.

Whatever kinetic energy was—even Pucker couldn't explain it. But something beyond that door terrified my familiar.

I quieted my steps as I padded along the long corridor, my pulse racing as I drew near the red door.

Come to us! You must come, little goddess! Ancient voices rasped from beyond—two distinct ones now, male and female, old as the earth itself.

I froze, instinct screaming for me to flee. But I stood my ground, as my need to see Killian burned stronger than fear.

Fuck off, I said.

As I moved to dash past, purple light spilled from under the red door, pooling at my feet.

We're running out of time, girl. The female voice pierced my strengthened mental

shield—these things were more powerful than I'd thought. Your father's coming.

My heart sank into ice. At least they'd skipped the prophecy shit this time, naming my father directly instead of their usual Ruin is coming.

I stopped in my tracks. They had my attention.

The Queen's Suite was meant for Killian's true mate—everyone thought that meant the Queen of the Underworld. But the house magic had known I was his true mate all along, shocking everyone by offering me the suite, though I'd never taken it.

No one else can enter but you, the female voice said, icy wind brushing my mental shield. It could pierce my mind and read my thoughts. Not Hades's heir. Not even the fallen star who once tried.

My heart rammed into my ribcage, and anxiety drenched me in icy dread. What force could overpower the demon queen and Killian?

Come and see, the male voice coaxed. We've waited an eon for you.

I'm not even twenty-two, I shot back.

We waited for you to be born and then come of age, the female said. We saw your coming before we fell.

I frowned, my mind whirling.

Don't you want to defeat your father? asked the thundering male voice.

More than anything!

The dark flame in you has emerged, he continued. And you need allies. Only we can teach you to vanquish him.

Who are you? I demanded.

Come, the female invited.

They wouldn't reveal more through the door, knowing too well that I was hooked—I'd do anything to kill my father. Even if it was a trap beyond the door, I'd jump in now.

Fortune favors the bold. Wish me luck.

I reached for the handle. The door creaked open before I pushed it. Taking a deep breath, I ducked inside. It clicked shut behind me, sealing me in.

I fought the urge to yank the door open and bolt. Not that it would budge until whoever lurked here was done with me. Better to get this over with. I kept my fear locked down tight—supernaturals could smell weakness like sharks scented blood, and the beings here were far worse than mere monsters.

Their presence saturated the air, their power crackling even through their restraints.

Chills slithered up my spine, reminding me of standing before my father. What had I gotten myself into? Then again, nothing could be worse than dear old dad.

The darkness here went beyond the absence of light—it was a living thing, deeper than the blackest night. My eyes adjusted, seeing through the writhing mist that twined with shadows, danger lurking within. Sy rose closer to the surface, ready to strike if the presence made a wrong move. For now, she waited, deceptively quiet but vibrating with contained violence.



“You have me here,” I drawled with a swagger I didn’t feel. Everyone preached fake-it-till-you-make-it, so why not join the circus? “And you’ve got five minutes to make it count.”

Cassius and Rock had tried drilling into me the power of keeping my mouth shut. I got their point—silence could be a weapon. But I already packed enough power, and throwing the first punch, even blind, was way more fun.

If you had thoughts, you wanted them heard.

“The mainstream ain’t owning the microphone no more,” I said, knowing it made no sense to the beings here, but I didn’t care. When I was nervous, I just needed to vent. “Yeah, they’re desperate to snatch it back.”

My mouth snapped shut as the eerie fog slithered toward me. Whatever was in the fog wasn’t some kinetic energy Pucker had babbled about. No, this was something else. Something close to my father’s essence. And it nearly freaked me out as I watched the fog stretch into infinity, deeper than an abyss and bottomless like the Void, a cosmic drain that could devour gods.

A shudder ripped through me.

“Quit the games and show yourself,” I said more aggressively. “Everyone who’s played with me ended up being the mouse. So, save yourself the humiliation, please.”

Probably not my smartest move, goading them. They might not even give a shit about embarrassment, especially without an audience.

I’m your audience, Sy chimed in supportively.

Silence stretched in the room, which I now noticed had no walls and no dimension;

even time seemed frozen in this space.

“You were chatty enough in my head outside that red door. Don’t get shy on me now,” I broadcast into the void.

Nothing. Just the weight of their scrutiny pressed against my mind, probing. I slammed my mental shield up, and it held this time.

“Who are you anyway? Are you even people?” I clicked my tongue. “If you’re trapped souls, heads up—I’m not scared of ghosts. Got one as a familiar, and he’s a poltergeist. And if you want help crossing over to the light?—”

Purple lightning pierced through the dark fog, nearly blinding me. In a blink, I was yanked—backward? Forward? I had no clue. I just knew I was thrashing, cursing, and hurling power at whatever was manhandling me.

One second, I was poking the bear. The next? I was dumped into a battlefield—and not just any war zone. The sky bled red.

My bare feet hit scorching sand.

Superheated air whipped my golden curls against my face, my academy uniform twisting and reforming around me. I clutched the hem to keep it from being blown off. Reddish sandstorms spiraled past, meeting a green ocean at the horizon. Through the crimson sky, galaxies wheeled overhead.

For a hot second, I couldn’t place where the hell I was. Then it hit me—this wasn’t some memory playback or hologram show.

Shit, shit! I’d been dragged across time, and now I was standing on the ancient Earth as three cosmic heavyweights duked it out.

One female and one giant male dashed around a shadow-wreathed figure, their blades splitting air, power lifting their hair like live wires.

My genetic knowledge kicked in like a shot straight to my heart, and instantly, I knew who was in front of me. These weren't just any beings—they were the original trio of gods. The dark one channeling shadows was Ruin, my father, originally known as Ra. The pale god facing him was Nephthys, the God of Sky. And the radiant dark-skinned goddess was Isis, Goddess of Earth.

All three beings radiated raw power. Nephthys's eyes glowed golden, Isis's blazed blue, and Ruin's emitted pure darkness.

This was my father's true form—glorious and pitch-black, not the half-shadow wreck stitched to scarred flesh with dark veins snaking across pale skin. A far cry from the starving shade who'd tried to reclaim his power by feeding on his own daughter.

The sky god and earth goddess circled Ruin, caging him in. Crimson sand whirled around them as they clashed faster than light, yet somehow my eyes could track their every movement.

Shadow-forged twin blades danced in Ruin's long fingers, trails of smoke hissing from their edges. Unlike his opponents' Earth-forged weapons, the twin blades reeked of something alien—materials from beyond our world.

A dark thought clicked into place—my father wasn't Earth's original god. He was alien.

Isis and Nephthys shouted in an ancient tongue, swords slashing at Ruin. He twisted away like a flowing shadow, their strikes hitting empty air. They lunged again. Ruin caught the sky god's flaming sword with his left blade and the earth goddess's ice spike with his right. Divine weapons clashed, spitting sparks.

Isis snarled, summoning a dozen ice spikes that screamed through the air. My heart soared—until shadow poured from Ruin, melting them to mist. He ducked the final spike instead of blocking it. The ice buried itself deep in Nephthys's shoulder, the god too slow to dodge.

Cursing, Nephthys ripped out the spike. Lightning crackled from the wound—power bleeding into the ancient air.

“Watch it, Isis,” Nephthys snapped.

The earth goddess shot Ruin a death glare while muttering an apology to her ally. Ruin laughed.

The sky god didn't waste time, his flaming blade already carving a path toward Ruin's neck. I silently prayed it would bite deep. Best to behead that motherfucker. Ruin caught the strike with his shadow-steel, then kicked Isis's legs as she hurled her newly made ice spike at his ribs.

They blurred into a cyclone of motion, blades flashing white, black, and gold. When they broke apart, all three were bleeding.

Lightning crackled again from Nephthys's fresh cut. Shadow wove through Ruin's back wound, sealing it instantly. While his opponents weakened with each drop of fallen blood, his shadows knitted him whole.

Shit, this wasn't going well for Isis and Nephthys.

Isis stumbled back, clutching the shadow blade buried in her gut. She ripped it out with a snarl, stabbing it into the sand to let the earth swallow it.

“I'm not healing, Nephthys,” she gasped, pain glazing her electric blue eyes. “His

blade's poisoned! Ra fights dirty!"

No shit, lady. Evil was his brand. But at the mention of that blade—I peeked closer.

Holy hell, that was Deathsong, the same one I'd lifted from him. Only mine had shrunk from a longsword to a dagger over the years, getting mouthy in the process. And it only occasionally smoked in my hands.

Blood streamed from Isis's wound, sizzling on the sand.

"We end this!" Nephthys charged, his blade glowing red-hot, slicing wild arcs.

Still bleeding, Isis attacked from Ruin's other side. Her wrists snapped, and power rushed to her. The earth rumbled as sand twisted into cyclones. The desert split, jaws gaping, ready to swallow the shadow god.

Ruin levitated, but thorned vines shot up from the ground, spearing his ankles and dragging him down to earth.

Kill that motherfucker! I screamed inside, even knowing history said otherwise.

Kill the motherfucker! Sy echoed, then blinked as if she was hit by a truth. Technically, he fucked our mother, and we were the result.

Nephthys took advantage of Ruin's momentary surprise and plunged his flaming sword into Ruin's chest. My father hissed, banging his head into the sky god's face as the blade drove home, fire sizzling against his flesh.

Quick as dark lightning, Ruin grabbed the hilt and yanked out the burning steel. His eyes screamed escape.

Shit. He was about to bolt. I wouldn't fucking allow it.

Since landing in this time-slice, I'd been itching to blast him past Hell. Maybe this was why I'd been dragged here—to end him.

I dropped into a fighting stance, waiting for my shot. My shoulders tensed like whips, an adrenaline rush riding through my veins.

My hand stretched out to call Deathsong.

Wait! Sy shouted. Stop!

I jerked back my hand as if burned. Our thoughts clicked. We didn't know if Deathsong would even come across time, and my father already wielded the longsword in this timeline. It was his creation, after all. What if it turned on me?

One moment of hesitation, and I'd missed the chance.

Shadows wove around Ruin, sealing his wounds. A dark truth hit me—Earth-forged blades couldn't kill him. My father's warnings about celestial beings rang true as I remembered how the Seed of Heaven had nearly ended me. I'd need weapons forged in both Heaven and Hell to take him down. But could my darkest flame burn him to ash?

Strategies and scenarios ran wild in my mind as Ruin untangled himself from the thorny vines, Earth's poison sliding off him.

Thunder cracked the desert horizon.

The sky god's eyes blazed orange-gold as galaxy fire danced in his palms. He hurled the inferno at Ruin's head, lightning striking for my father's chest.

Isis's light followed and pierced Ruin's back, trying to tear him apart from within.

Ruin shifted, turning incorporeal, dark tendrils latching onto his opponents' elemental magic. I watched his shadow grow fangs, devouring flame, lightning, and light. Chills raced through me. He'd been an eater since the beginning.

"I warned you he's a thief," Isis cried out in dismay. "All he does is cheat and steal!"

"Leech!" Nephthys snarled.

I snarled too.

Ruin's head snapped to me. Confusion flickered across his face before surprise and recognition sparked in his raven-black eyes.

Shit. Even across time, he knew his own blood.

"Hello, daughter." His dark, musical voice slithered down my spine like a cold flame, chilling me to the bone marrow.

My palms turned slick with icy sweat. Same old song and dance—his presence always triggered this primal cocktail of terror, then fury, until it saturated my every cell. This monster had put me and Sy through hell, and here he was, still hunting us like we were his all-you-can-eat buffet.

I matched Ruin's stare, pure hate ablaze in my eyes, refusing to cower.

Let's kill him right here! Sy pulled her lips back and snarled.

Love to, Sy. I wavered. But ? —

I could unleash my darkest flame, right here, right now. Maybe that was why these two beings had brought me back—to end my father. But offing him back in time meant erasing myself. Killian would never know me, and he'd wind up with that demon queen instead. My heart twisted in pain at the alternate future for him.

And I wouldn't be the only one getting wiped out. Sy would vanish too.

I couldn't do that to her.

No buts, she cut in.

Then you'll lose Rowan.

It's okay, she said. I've had the best fucking time with him. No regrets. Let's do this. Let's end this motherfucker once and for all.

Tears tracked down my face as a desperate decision clicked into place.

If I could spare you, I would, I told Sy. You're not my sidekick. You're a force of nature and a lot more important than me. Remember what the oracle said about our separation? I think you're the last pure drop of old magic, hiding in me since birth. Right under our worst enemy's nose.

She inhaled sharply, her beautiful golden eyes misty. All this time, I thought I was protecting you. But you've been shielding me, and that shadow god never caught on.

If he had, he'd have absorbed Sy, and with her power, he'd have been back to his full power in no time, wreaking havoc.

Sy, one last favor, I said.



Anything.

I want you to leave me here in the past before I face him. This is our shot. Break away and get back to the present. You're magic in its purest form. I want you to live, Sy. They don't need another eater like me, but they need you. The world needs that spark to come alive again. Do it now—I know you can!

Fuck the world, and fuck the greater good, she spat. I'm not playing the fucking savior for anyone. I'll gladly doom the whole world for you. So don't ever ask me again to abandon you. And newsflash—I'm a bigger eater. Or did you forget how much you hate my taste for sentient snacks?

Warmth bloomed in my chest as profound love for Sy flooded through me.

But— I tried one last time.

You're stuck with me, she said. We're two peas in a pod.

I shook my head as the oracle's words rang through me. "Where you go, no one can follow. Not even your soul sister."

I won't leave you, B. No man, no gods, and no mates come between us. That's how it's been and how it'll always be. We're soul-bound. You live, I live. You die, I die. Even death won't tear us apart.

My eyes grew misty.

What are you waiting for? Sy asked impatiently.

After this, we won't exist.

Then let's go down with a bang! Sy said.

A war song thundered in our hearts, beating as one. Pride and love for my warrior soul sister filled me to bursting.

I stretched out my hand, calling forth my darkest flame.

12

Killian

Not holding back but giving her all, as if her life depended on it, Grace unleashed the most potent, seductive power she channeled from Lilith. Seduction sank into me, setting my blood on fire and clouding my mind with unbridled lust. I staggered.

Any other man, even the heirs, would succumb to this overwhelming compulsion that promised to sate all their carnal needs and deliver wild pleasure beyond imagination. But I wasn't just any man. I was of the death god's bloodline, and I had bonded an extremely powerful dragon from the only royal line. My beast snarled at the invasion, thrashing, fury burning hotter than his flame.

The Queen of the Underworld had bet that her ward, combining Barbie's form and her star power, could bend my knees and entice me to her bed. They underestimated the bond between Barbie and me and my unwavering loyalty to my true mate.

A grave insult.

Grace's eyes widened at her failure. Despite my rejection, she moved to throw herself at me, a last attempt.

I flicked a hand, caging her with my starlight and darkness. I didn't even need to cover her nudity, as it meant nothing to me.

"Why?" she whimpered.

“You aren’t my type,” I said.

“I can be your type. Please, Prince Killian,” she begged. “I’m at your mercy. I can’t fail!”

A dark realization struck, and it confirmed that my betrothed had sent her ward to do her dirty work. Grace had glamourised her eyes to match Barbie’s, attempting to pass as my mate.

“My queen will share,” Grace babbled. “I’m meant to be your gift. You can have me, anywhere and anytime.”

My nostrils flared at her changed scent. Lilith was wearing her ward’s skin now. Impossible—yet the fallen star defied all rules. My betrothed had possessed her ward’s body to seduce me.

Everything clicked. She’d brought Grace in after noticing the connection between Barbie and me, assuming a lookalike could get me into her bed. If I succumbed to Lilith and Grace’s spells, sleeping with either of them and betraying my mate, the bond between Barbie and me would shatter beyond repair. My eternal misery would begin.

I swallowed as I grasped the trap’s insidious implications. This was Lilith’s final attempt to claim me.

The queen was clever and powerful, but she didn’t know me. Even as a child, I had never let anyone in, not even the other heirs. I showed my true self to no one—except my mate. My cock hardened only for my vicious little scorpion. My cold heart beat only for her, my black soul craved only hers.

This creature before me, now possessed by her master, was a pale imitation of Barbie.

Lilith could never replicate my mate's scent and essence, no matter how much effort she exerted.

I drew in a cold breath, containing my rage, holding myself back from slaughtering the copy

in front of me.

What a bad actress, my dragon sneered. If you won't kill her, send her away right now. We need to go find our mate.

"I look just like her, but better," Grace persisted. "I won't disappoint you, Prince Killian."

"You'll never be her," I said with cold disdain. "You're a pathetic copy. Crawl back to whatever hole you came out of. Return without permission and you die."

I tossed her out.

13

Barbie

Heat blazed across my palms as twin dark flames materialized, ready at my command.

“Hello, Father, long time no see.” I locked my predatory gaze on Ruin.

The sky god and earth goddess whipped their heads toward me. The sky god’s eyes narrowed, scanning me like a fresh specimen under glass.

“Ra spawned offspring?” Nephthys’s words dripped venom. “An abomination.”

“No,” Isis whispered, something registering in her blue eyes. “Our last hope. I believe our future selves summoned her here.”

My father’s full attention was on me, and he smiled, which chilled me.

“You’re the apple of my eye, little one,” he said.

Sy snarled.

“Here’s to your eye.” I thrust my palms forward, unleashing dark flames at his face. Time to scorch his eyes and blind the motherfucker.

A force slammed into me. The galaxy spun wildly, launching me skyward before my

flames left my hands.

What the fuck? I snarled, shoving back the cosmic wind. Sy growled as she pumped strength into me, but each blast of wind knocked me further back until I landed on all fours, fingers splayed against the freezing floor.

A blink, and I was back in the Queen's Suite, shrouded in dark fog. My breath came harsh and ragged.

Thrown through time again.

Rage rode me hard, and agony bloomed fresh in my chest. I fought not to double over. Something wet dripped from my nose. The metallic tang hit me before I saw the red smeared across my fingers.

There was a cost to traveling back and forth in time, and I was the one paying. Sy tried to take the pain into her, but I blocked her. Not this time. The memory of her curled in agony haunted me. It always made me hate myself and my weakness whenever she had to suffer for me.

Dark flames still danced on my palms. I hurled them at the fog, shredding it to mist. Beyond lay a void where two pulses thrummed, each screaming with rage and helplessness so raw I stumbled back.

My breath caught as recognition hit. The sky god and earth goddess, trapped between life and death. I was no stranger to that terrible existence—neither living nor dead and completely powerless, as I had been under my father's chains.

I hadn't gotten to toss my darkest flame at Ruin and burn him. Hadn't seen how the battle ended. Here lay my answer—the sky god and earth goddess had been torn apart, part of their essence devoured by my father, and they remained conscious

through it all.

Their every ragged breath leaked pain and misery. Isis and Nephthys, ancient deities, reduced to embers buried in ashes, echoes in the eternal emptiness. My father had done that to them.

“What was the point of calling me here?” I demanded. “You yanked me through time to face Ruin, then robbed me of my chance to destroy him.”

They’d used their last energy reserves to pull me back, and now the agony rolled off them in waves.

“You couldn’t defeat him then,” Nephthys said. His voice rasped from the void beyond the mist.

“Then why drag me into that battle?” I asked.

“One of the many battles,” Isis said. “You’re not ready. Dark flame alone won’t destroy your father. If you’d attacked, he’d have studied your power, and you’d have exposed yourself.”

“He saw me, all right. Recognized me,” I said. “You already exposed me.”

“Not your true power,” Isis countered. “It’s still growing.”

“We risked bringing you to the first god-war to study Ra’s weakness,” Nephthys scolded. “You should’ve watched under cover. But stupidity and the impulsiveness of youth won. If we hadn’t yanked you back, the damage would’ve been unthinkable.”

“Maybe slip me a memo next time? Skip the riddles and random time-jumps before I get my bearings.”



“We tried to teach you,” Isis said, “though we may be rusty at handing down knowledge.”

“Not rusty,” Nephthys cut in. “We never had a pupil. And this can’t be taught—only learned.”

“At least you’re both still coherent,” I offered, my sympathy surfacing for them. I’d suffered for years under my cruel father, but these beings had endured eons.

“Let’s hope you’re strong enough to face your father in the final battle,” Nephthys said. “Most likely, you’ll end up worse than us, girl.”

Divine beings had no grasp of empathy. I might share their bloodline, but I treasured my humanity. Years hiding among humans had shown me their worst, yet also their best.

“Darkness within light. Flame in darkness. All was lost. All will be regained,” the earth goddess muttered, slipping back into nonsense, lost in herself.

The two godly beings before me were now mere echoes of their former selves, so broken they crumbled at the edges. How could I rely on them to help me defeat my father?

My bond with Killian flared, his urgent call jolting my memory. Shit, I’d come for him, and these ancient entities nearly made me forget my purpose.

“Gotta go,” I said. “I’ll come back sometime later to check on you two, all right? Will you be here then?”

“Where can we go?” Nephthys retorted. “We’re caged in the void.”

I swallowed back a comment about them still having each other. It'd be insensitive.

We aren't jerks, Sy chimed in.

"Well," I said awkwardly. "Take care."

I yanked the door open and burst out. Several beings jumped and yelped in the corridor, making me leap into the air.

"What the fuck?" I called.

"What the fuck?" Archer hissed back.

He led a team toward me, none of them expecting anyone to burst from the Queen's Suite—a chamber reserved for the chaos heir's true mate. Some of them believed that was Queen Lilith.

But I was his true mate. The minions just didn't know it. They gaped at me, eyes wide. The Queen's Suite wasn't just forbidden—it was impenetrable. No one, not even Killian, could breach its barriers.

I faced them, releasing a shaky breath while my mind raced for excuses. Then I saw whom they escorted. My face—Grace's face—stared back at me.

Why the hell was she here?

The shock hit like vertigo, my world tilting as I thought of her with Killian. Sy surged up, golden eyes blazing, nostrils flaring before she settled.

She doesn't carry your man's scent, she assured me.

And Grace looked destroyed. Tear tracks marked her cheeks, her golden curls limp. Her power of seduction felt muted. Someone had knocked her down. I eyed her revealing mini-gown, piecing together her intentions. She'd come to poach my man. Molten fury coursed through my veins.

The urgency made sense now. My bond with Killian had tipped me off—I'd felt his mood go pitch black.

The ugly copy failed, Sy said.

I bristled. Sy had come up with all those stupid names. "Ugly Barbie," "Unwashed Bottom."

But I didn't have time to chide Sy right now.

"My, my, look who's here." I cocked my head to regard Grace. "Came begging for candies? Didn't get any, I bet."

Fear flickered across her face before hatred hardened her glare.

"What are you doing here?" she snapped.

"Take a guess," I purred, deciding to play cat and mouse, the game that she was so fond of.

She jabbed a finger at the red door. "Why were you in the Queen's Suite?"

I wagged my brows. "Why not?"

"How dare you trespass on my queen's territory?" Her chest heaved with rage. "That suite is for my queen, and I'm part of the legacy."

“Try getting in then.” I goaded her. “Knock and see what happens. I dare you, cupcake.”

Grace pushed forward. Archer shrugged and let her pass, curious to know what she could do. He couldn’t help it, as he was as nosy as a cat.

She raised her hand to knock, chest puffed with entitlement. A pulse blasted from the door, slamming her into the opposite wall. She slumped down, blood trickling from her mouth.

“You should go get your queen to try,” I suggested with a smirk on my lips.

Just then, Killian emerged from his penthouse, his gaze tracking me, heat and surprise sparking in his storm-blue eyes before he took in the scene. His face turned inscrutable.

“Archer, didn’t I ask you to escort Queen Lilith’s ward out?” His tone was flat, not even using her name.

“Sorry, Your Highness. Scorpion, uh, Barbie got in the way. As usual.”

I glared at Archer, then Killian.

“I didn’t do anything wrong,” I said.

I shouldn’t have snuck into the Queen’s Suite—forbidden territory and all that—but I wasn’t about to mention it.

“You sure?” Rock asked, his bushy eyebrows climbing up his forehead.

He’d just materialized, probably bored after losing track of me outside the House of

Chaos. Cami trailed behind him.

Someone needed to tell Rock to trim those caterpillars above his eyes. Maybe I'd delegate that task to Pucker. The werewolf had stayed clear of the ghost guardian ever since I exposed Pucker's drinking habit.

The chaos house now buzzed with gossip about Pucker's midnight energy-drinking sprees. Members flocked to buy protective charms from the mages, filling Cade's already deep pockets. Those too broke for charms resorted to lining their walls, windowsills, and doorways with salt and herbs—as if that could stop a determined poltergeist.

Pucker sulked about the whole thing. He was gravely offended.

“Why is your face so pale?” Rock's wary gaze darted between me and the red door. Yet he didn't seem shocked that I could enter the Queen's Suite while others couldn't. Grace had proved that point again.

“You don't want to know, I assure you,” I said.

“Get going,” Killian ordered his men impatiently.

“Let's go, Princess Grace,” Archer said.

They'd forgotten about her while fixating on me.

Grace struggled to her feet. “Barbie should not be here.”

“It's none of your business,” Cami cut in. “Now, get out.”

Grace shot me another hateful look. “You'll regret this.”

I smiled at her. “Bye, cupcake.”

Killian’s team whisked Grace away. Soon, she was out of my sight.

Killian moved closer, eyeing my bare feet. “Where’re your shoes?”

“Lost somewhere,” I sighed. “Lost in time, literally. Luckily, I got out in one piece. Prince Cade will probably lecture me about the house budget if I ask for new boots. He wouldn’t even fix the prison cell that I demolished—claimed the court is broke.” I turned to Cami with a hopeful smile. “Perhaps I can borrow your boots?”

She frowned at me. “We’re different sizes.”

“No worries,” I said. “I’ll wear extra socks.”

“You have boots in your spare room here,” Killian said. He must’ve snooped through my old room. “I’ll talk to Cade about any supplies you need, and he can put them on my tab.”

“That’s unnecessary.” I bristled. “Everyone knows that I don’t take charity!”

I preferred stealing, and now I regretted not swiping Grace’s boots while she was down. We were the same size, and since she’d tried to steal Killian, she owed me at least that much. I had let her off easy. Well, there was always next time.

I’ll keep the score, Sy said helpfully.

“Come, Barbie,” Killian ordered me. “I need a word.”

I bit my lip, my heart pounding, as I smothered the craving in my eyes and fixed him with an annoyed look. “What for?”

But he'd already turned back to his penthouse, his men blocking my exit.

14

Barbie

I strutted into Killian's penthouse with an attitude, my hands in my pockets, my golden curls bouncing.

The sitting room was plush with Persian rugs, white leather sofas, and million-dollar paintings. Floor-to-ceiling windows showcased Underhill in the northwest and the valley of mist in the east.

I paused in the center of the room as memories rushed back. Last time I'd been here, in his bedroom, he had buried his face between my thighs. Then he'd returned to his betrothed and shattered my heart—all fake acts, I'd learned later. I never thought I'd come back here seeking him out.

"Keep going," Killian called.

I followed his voice and the faint bond between us into a drool-worthy kitchen. My interest sparked—kitchen meant food—but I focused on the owner with his back to me.

His black shirt and jeans radiated power, money, and elegance. Behind the island, he was mixing something, his back muscles flexing. My gaze automatically dropped to his butt.

You should squeeze it. See if it's as firm as my sugar's, Sy advised. Let's bet on it.



We've never made a bet, but the heirs do it all the time.

Right, they'd once bet on who could get in my pants first and make me give them a blowjob.

Killian got in your pants first, but you haven't done a good blowjob yet, Sy said.

I rolled my eyes. I'm not a blowjob kind of chick.

I am, Sy said proudly. I'm a professional.

Killian spun around while I ogled his ass. I snapped my gaze up, my face burning in embarrassment.

"I wasn't looking, in case you're wondering," I mumbled. "I was thinking—there's a lot on my mind lately."

He smirked.

You shouldn't distract me, Sy, I said, blaming it all on her. Go slumber.

No way. I wouldn't miss this for the world.

Then zip it. I don't want to look stupid again.

You shouldn't feel embarrassed at appreciating your man's body, she said. I stare at my sugar's dick all the time. He loves it.

Killian slid a peach smoothie toward me. The gesture touched me—he remembered my love for peaches.

“No garlic in the mix,” he added.

I blinked. He’d been watching me even after his cold-shoulder act.

“I’m not crazy about garlic either,” I said, sliding onto the seat at the island. “Added it to my diet for a reason.”

These days, I dumped raw garlic into everything. It kept the vampires away—monsters craved my blood. Plus, with all the fights and verbal abuse I dealt with, breathing garlic fumes in my opponents’ faces felt like fair payback.

“Care to elaborate?” he asked.

“Not important.” I waved a hand.

“I want to know everything about you, little scorpion,” he purred.

My face flamed again. My blood raced. I never thought I’d be the awkward one. I fumbled with the smoothie straw, sucking down the drink. Shit, this was good. Who knew Killian could mix drinks?

Reading my expression, he said, “I’m quite good at cooking. Come here again tomorrow, and I’ll cook for you.”

Was he suggesting a date, or would he keep me as his secret lover? A shadow crossed my eyes. I wanted what other girls had, even knowing I couldn’t have it.

I swallowed. The sexual tension between us burned like fuel—one match was all it needed to torch everything.

“So, uh.” I cleared my throat, aiming for casual. “You wanted to talk? Make it quick.

I have somewhere to go.”

Dumbass! Sy yelled. Flirt. Show your sexy side instead of being dense and socially awkward.

I growled. I can’t help it. I have social anxiety disorder.

Since when? Sy barked.

Since now.

Killian pinned me with his intense, heated gaze. I held it with false bravado—a mistake. My body tensed like a bow, liquid fire licking the aching flesh between my thighs.

“Are you growling at me, little scorpion?” he asked.

Fuck it.

I decided to ditch Cassius’s lessons about keeping my opinions to myself. I was going to speak my mind however I wanted and whenever I wanted.

“Yes,” I said. “I don’t like you fooling around with other hot chicks.”

One second, he was still eye-fucking me. The next, he reached me. I thought I was fast. Killian was faster. He grabbed me before I could fend him off, and then I was in his arms.

His head dipped, his lips slanting over mine.

“I only fool around with you, little scorpion,” he purred against my lips. “Don’t like

it?”

“Is that a challenge?” I asked as I threaded my fingers through his thick dark hair, dragging him down for a hard, brutal kiss—teaching him respect.

His large hand cupped the back of my head, anchoring and securing me. He didn’t need to. I was going nowhere. At least not when I had him where I wanted, ready to taste the forbidden fruit.

Our teeth and lips clashed before we found our rhythm, our mouths melding as pent-up passion spilled over. Heat blazed through me, his skin hotter than a burning star, spreading from every point of contact and blooming inside me. His hardness pressed against my front.

Shit, this felt good. I needed his cock in me.

I clung to him, stretching the length of my body against him. The fresh mint and powerful male scent of his breath mingled with mine. My chest ached with searing need for him.

Wild energy coursed through me and coiled between us, so I bit his bottom lip to calm myself. His dragon and demigod blood tasted rich with galaxy power. He growled as I bled him, but his dragon purred in approval. The beast loved it rough, and Sy rolled giddily within me.

Killian slammed me against the marble island, his tongue seeking entrance. I invited him in, and pleasure buzzed from my head down to my toes as his tongue initiated a mating dance. As soon as I joined him, a hungry groan escaped from the depths of his throat. His fangs came out, grazing my bottom lip.

My moans caught between us as he kissed me with abandon. Shit, such passion, such

heat, such white-hot lust. I might be in over my head with this situation.

“I need to fuck you now, little scorpion,” he murmured against my swollen lips. His hand slid under my school uniform to cup my breast. “Or I’ll lose it.”

I’d go up in flames if I didn’t have his cock in me the next second. Through the haze of heat, I knew something needed to be said and done first, but lust pulsed through my every fiber, clouding my thoughts.

So I let him lead the dance. He could fuck me right here, right now. Against the island. Or I could hop up, plant my feet on the edge, spread my legs, and bare my pussy for him.

I pictured the thick head of his cock nudging against my slick slit, my plump folds embracing it and shivering as his massive shaft slid in.

“These past weeks without you, unable to touch you, were hell,” he said. “I hate the distance between us. I thought I could let you go if it kept you safe. But you weren’t safe, and you’ll never be safe until we eliminate all the threats.”

My heart rammed against my ribcage at his admission. His voice—deep, gentle, devastated—held pain I’d never heard before. I didn’t care for praise about my beauty or power, but his promise to eliminate threats sounded like music to my ears and tasted sweeter than honey, especially when his every word rang true.

“Holding back only hurt us both,” he continued. “Watching you flirt with the other heirs nearly broke me. I was one breath away from killing them all, except Cade. The mage heir is a good guy—no agenda toward you, never flirts.”

That was his definition of a good man?

If he knew about my kiss with Cade—it was not romantic though, just to challenge the Fury—would he still call Cade a good guy?

“I was insanely jealous,” he continued. “Still am. I can’t let anyone else have you. It’s not in me. If any heir crosses the line, I’ll tear their fucking teeth out one by one. When they try to seduce you, all they’ll have to show for it is a mouth full of holes. It won’t be pretty for those cocky bastards who think they can take whatever and whoever they want.”

“But—” I pouted. Sy pouted too. No teeth wouldn’t be a good look, and no one would date a toothless guy, even an heir.

“It’s madness,” I sighed.

“Madness or not,” he said, “I don’t care. I don’t give a fuck if the world fucking burns. Living without you—I’d let it all turn to ash. Call me a damaged, deranged psycho or whatever. But I must have you. Without you, my world is cold, bleak, and unlivable.”

“That sounds fucked up, man,” I said.

Yet his ruthless promises only turned me on. Was I as twisted as him?

We’re morally gray, Sy said proudly. Own it!

But I wasn’t going to own shit.

“You have no idea, little scorpion,” he said, his need for me burning, echoing mine for him.

“I have an idea,” I said. “You need to fuck me. Now.”

“Impatient, aren’t you?” He smirked.

He lifted me as if I weighed nothing, my legs clamping around him. A lustful whimper escaped my lips. His eyes darkened with such intensity as he tore open a portal right in front of us.

He stepped through with our lips still locked, his heat seeping through my uniform, his hardened cock jutting against my soft belly.

“I need—” I broke our kiss and gasped for breath.

“I know, little scorpion,” he said. “I need to fuck you, more than you know, and you don’t have to wait any longer.”

“I need a moment,” I said. “That’s what I meant to say.”

I was overwhelmed.

We didn’t touch down on solid ground but plunged into water, the spring pool surrounding us. When we surfaced, I peeked at the snowy mountains ringing the horizon. The scent of snow and winter blossom filled my lungs.

He’d sated my mating fever here before. In his dragon realm, we were untraceable.

Killian peeled off our clothes. His massive cock jutted out between his powerful thighs. He adjusted my position, baring my pussy. His cock jerked forward aggressively. He held his hard length in his hand, placed the thick crown between my slick folds, and thrust.

I cried out, pleasure mixing with pain from his granite hardness and large size. He groaned in pleasure, his storm-blue eyes brightening, and his dragon rumbled happily.

He pushed in further until he was embedded in my heated depths. We were tightly locked, my pussy gloving his cock perfectly. There was no stopping us now. No force in the universe could break our union.

He thrust into my wetness and growled possessively. A delicious feeling washed over me, curling my toes. This simply felt sinfully divine—to be fucked by my true mate while knowing his soul burned brightly for me.

“I’ve never known ecstasy like this, little scorpion,” he said, thrusting into me as if he had all the time in the world, as if he wanted to savor it for eternity.

It felt right. Like coming home at last—a home I never thought possible for me.

Yet something was missing.

“This feels right down to my bones, baby,” he said, his eyes flashing with fiery lust and possessiveness. “I love how your perfect tight cunt clings to my cock like a lifeline.” He drove into me vehemently, and a shock of pleasure rippled through me. “Those little noises you make, little mate. Make more for me. Moan and scream for me. Call my name with those pink lips while your pussy drips for me.” He withdrew a couple of inches before thrusting into me harder.

His unspoken thought suddenly echoed in my mind: I’ve never felt this with anyone before. One hard thrust, and I already need to come in her cunt. His dragon’s thought followed: Because she’s our true mate, and her lovely cunt belongs to us and no one else.

I blinked, and the connection broke.

“You’re mine, my vicious little scorpion,” Killian said as I moaned, wanting more, and begged him never to stop. “There’s never been anyone before you and there’ll be



no one after you. Today, I'll claim you as mine." He thrust deeper and harder, and I felt his imprint starting to etch into me. "After this, you'll wear my mark. I'm ruining this cunt for anyone else. No other male can ever touch you."

An alarm cut through the haze of heat in my mind, even as incredible pleasure rippled through me.

I wanted this. I wanted him to imprint me more than anything, yet I shouted, "Wait!"

He thrust into me brutally. "Too late, little mate. You can't escape me. I'll never let you go."

"But you need to be sure! I'm the lost princess of the Northern Kingdom, the notorious daughter of the God of Ruin," I blurted, dread in my eyes, a shiver in my voice. I gazed up at him, waiting for his disgust and fury then rejection at my deception—or worse, for him to turn from besotted lover to enraged killer.

"I've gathered," he said. "I pieced everything together a while ago."

"How?" My breath caught as confusion swirled behind my eyelids. "And aren't you mad that I lied to you, to everyone?"

He shrugged, thrusting into me rapidly. "Everyone fucking lies. Many make careers of it, like politicians. A small lie like yours is harmless."

I stared at him, not sure if I felt relieved or offended.

"A small lie? Harmless?" I squirmed. "I'm Ruin's daughter!"

"And my true mate."

“And that absolves all of my sins?”

“Of course,” he said. “My mate comes before anyone and everything. But if it makes you feel better, you can tell me more of your sins.”

“This isn’t a joking matter!”

“Of course not, little scorpion.”

His powerful thrusts hit my G-spot, and I arched my back and moaned before I leveled a stare at him again.

“So, you truly want me, Killian?”

He gave me an exasperated yet heated look. “I’ve wanted you since I first saw you, even before my dragon knew you as our mate.”

Tell her more about me, his dragon demanded.

“I’ve wanted you more every day ever since,” he continued. “It was hell not being with you. I won’t go through that again.”

But he might face worse trying to keep me.

“You need to know what you’re dealing with.” I sucked in a breath. “Ruin is a god, pure evil. He’ll come for me himself. He’s hunted me relentlessly for eight years, and now he knows where I am.”

“I have plans,” he said, “including taking the throne if my father won’t give me control of the army to fight the God of Ruin.”

My chest tightened at his promise, and warmth swam in my veins.

“You’d do that for me?” I asked. Tears pricked behind my eyelids.

“In a heartbeat.” His voice dropped low. “You’re my mate, my everything. I won’t lose you. I’ll destroy anyone who hurts you and eliminate every threat to you—starting with your father. I’ve had contingency plans ready since I learned he was hunting you.”

Shit, that was the hottest thing anyone had ever said to me. No one had ever promised murder so perfectly. Slaying my father used to be my only goal, but now it was Killian’s too!

Things were going well for the first time.

My sugar will protect us with all the power he has too, Sy chimed in.

“What contingency plans?” I asked.

“I’ll tell you, if you show me what a good girl you are first.” His lips curved. “Think you can handle it?”

Say yes! Sy’s voice bounced through my skull. Don’t waste this chance.

I shot Killian a look. “A good girl?”

We can be good girls. Just show him, dummy. Sy offered her unsolicited advice again.

“Don’t you know how to be a good girl?” he purred as he heaved me up and down his massive length harder and faster.

As the pleasure made me moan, I decided to play the game. “Maybe,” I purred.

“Take your time while making up your mind, babe,” he said. “But I’m going to show you this cunt is mine—mine to fuck, to play with, and to claim. Mine alone. I’ll ruin you for all other men.”

Fine, I’d show him.

My power slammed into him, hauling us—still locked—into the air. I no longer needed to siphon magic to do so. We spun before dropping onto the bed where we’d last mated—and this time, I landed on top. I planted my hands on his chest, pinning him down with my strength. My hips rocked, riding his length roughly.

Seduce him. Don’t attack him! Sy called.

“Ruin me?” I taunted while he growled in pleasure. “Let’s see who ruins who. After this, you won’t look at another female. Your eyes won’t wander. Neither will your heart. You sure you want me to be a good girl?” I moved on top of him, riding him harder and faster, my pussy milking him mercilessly as he fought not to come and struggled for control. “Good enough for you?”

Sy’s jaw dropped. Didn’t know you had it in you, B.

Restrain from commenting, I said. Can’t you see I’m busy here?

Roger. Do you want me to count how many of his thrusts make you come? You can return the favor when I ride my sugar tonight.

Fuck off, I said, shaking my head. Three really is a crowd.

I gave it my all, fucked him like there was no tomorrow. Killian matched my brutality

with his demigod and dragon strength. He thrust up into my molten core, meeting me beat for beat, not holding back either.

Our combined powers launched us skyward once more before landing us on the bank, our bodies locked tightly. I was on all fours, my hands planted on the marble, my ass in the air. He pounded into me from behind. Every thrust scorched me, yet I wanted more. Wanted all of him, deep in me and filling every empty, aching space. Pain, pleasure, need, and appreciation became one.

His hands roamed all over me, kneading my taut nipples, brushing my swollen clit, while he pounded into me. I slammed back toward him, matching his plunges. I fought back my climax, as I wanted to prolong this as long as I could.

Sweet torture, Sy commented again.

“You’re utterly delicious, my little scorpion,” Killian said in my ear, and his dragon growled in approval. “This is the hottest pussy I’ve ever fucked.”

“And you’ll fuck none other than mine,” I growled, and Sy growled too to back me up.

“Your cunt is all I want,” he promised. “You’re all I want.”

His powerful thrusts set me ablaze, and my moans grew wilder, matching his intensity. Ecstasy twisted my face, giving me a savage look, even though I couldn’t exactly see my own expression. We moved together fiercely, each able to handle the other’s full strength and brutality—his dragon power against my goddess might.

His hand quickened to brush over my bundle of nerves as he pounded into me mercilessly, wanting me to be his. Pleasure rushed over me.

“You’re so responsive, little mate,” he growled in pleasure as the walls of my cunt clenched down on his hard cock. “And so aggressive.”

He drilled into me with rapid, short thrusts before shifting to powerful, long thrusts.

My eyes rolled back as wild pleasure raced through my nerve endings. I screamed his name, begging for mercy as the pressure built to an unbearable edge. I was high, too high probably.

Sy was boneless, drunk in the ocean of heat. Both of us were about to lose our shit. The coupling was even more intense than when I went into heat. Killian was imprinting me. My hands turned to claws, my fangs dropping. I shoved Sy back with a snarl until I was myself again.

Sorry. Sy pretended to yawn while basking in our lust energy. That was intense.

Killian tensed, sensing Sy. He pulled me against his chest, turning my face to kiss me hard, bruising my lips while his power sank into me, pushing Sy further back. He’d accepted that she shared my body, but this union, this intimacy was between him and me, and no one else.

After Sy was out of “sight,” Killian slowed down to make love to me. I savored every thrust until I grew impatient. I had been on the edge long enough. Time for me to end this sweet agony and come undone on my terms.

I slammed my butt back toward his groin, but he pinned me down, leading the dance. His cock grew even larger until every thrust became a struggle. He pushed through, fucking me hard. My sex molded around him to accommodate his massive size. Pleasure threatened to unravel me.

Then I felt it—he and his dragon working in tandem to imprint me, their shadow,

starlight, and fire pouring in. It would incinerate any other woman, but I was their mate and a goddess.

My dark flame rose to meet his starlight and dragon fire. Our powers encircled each other, flirted, then merged as one. Pure energy spiraled around us, heating the space and binding us together.

As Killian filled my every inch, an understanding struck home—like Sy no longer ate sentient beings after mating with Rowan, I could stop being an eater of worlds after my true mating with Killian, who would always feed me. The God of Ruin's curse—that gnawing emptiness and insatiable need to feed—burned away from my blood.

My power surged, lifting us into the air before landing us on the rooftop bed again. We stayed locked as we lay on our sides, my leg hooked over his arm as he thrust into my molten heat.

I writhed in pleasure. He quickened his thrusts. Pressure built in me until it reached a crescendo, and his next powerful thrusts had me erupting around his granite-hard cock.

My pussy clamped on him, milking his shaft possessively. He was my craving, my rush, my eternity. His body growing tight like a whip, the prince roared his release, his bountiful seed spilling in me.

My power sank into him as his surged into me, the might of Hades's bloodline and royal dragon mating with mine. A ring of brilliant light snapped to life between us, blue intertwining with dark flames. It rose into the air, swirling and dancing in a circle before diving back down, one end anchoring in Killian and the other in me, binding us for eternity.

“The true mating bond,” Killian whispered, pulling me tight against him as we both breathed in wonder. “We formed half of it before. Now it’s complete.”

“Why?” I asked, still dazed. I’d never felt so connected to anyone except Sy.

“We’re true mates,” he said. “Our bond was half-formed when I first mated you. You felt it too, that undeniable link between us, even when it flickered. We couldn’t complete it, even during your heat, since intent mattered. This time, we fully accepted each other and declared our intent through the mating ritual. The bond has been forged and is unbreakable. You’re mine forever, little scorpion.”

I turned to peek at him over my shoulder, suspicion creeping in as I revisited an old scene. “And are you mine too?”

“Yours forever,” he vowed, spinning me to face him.

My reflection in his eyes showed mine glowing sapphire and green. No more hiding who I was from him. He knew about my origin and swore to protect me anyway.

“But—” I bit my bottom lip as reality crashed back.

He was still engaged to another woman. As if reading the dark thoughts warring in my head and doubts settling like lead in my stomach, he traced his thumb over my cheekbone.

“You need to know this, little mate,” he said. “I still have this bond with Lilith, not by choice?—”

I knew how he’d gotten that unwanted bond—it was the work of his power-hungry father and the demon queen. Family sucked when you got stuck with a bad one. I’d seen his father’s true colors in the Chaos Kingdom court, watching him pimp out his



own son to gain more power.

Mist of Cinder would link to the future High King and Queen, who'd rule all five kingdoms. The positions had been vacant for centuries. King Vasiliy could dream about claiming the high throne, but he didn't have a shot. The supernaturals believed only the prophesized One, born from one of the heirs, could become high ruler and prevent magic from fading.

"The fake mating bond was forged with the strongest dark blood magic," he said. "Even so, I fought against her. Her bond blocked me from touching other women. You're the only one who can break through it."

"I saw Grace lay her hand on you," I said. "She touched you."

"She and Lilith are the same," he said.

Of course, I'd already figured out Grace was Lilith's vessel and extension.

"Neither of them could force me to want them. No bond, beauty, blood magic, or power of persuasion could make me comply," he said. "She underestimated my willpower. I wouldn't allow her to solidify the bond. I knew that if I mated with her, the bond would activate fully and she'd be able to tap into my inherited power from Hades's House. I bow to no one but my true mate. She's failed to find a crack in my armor. Despite the pressure, I refused to consummate until after graduation. Even without you coming into my life, I'd have stalled as long as possible."

"There'll be no consummation and no fucking wedding," I hissed. "Not now, not after graduation, not ever!"

He chuckled, clearly pleased by my possessiveness. "Of course, my vicious mate. Don't worry. I'll take care of it."

“Don’t brush me off,” I said. “We’re in this together. I get a say too. Let me in on your plan. Run it by me first so I can approve it or scrap it.”

“Dominant, aren’t we?”

“You haven’t seen how territorial I can be,” I purred viciously.

Understanding hit me like lightning. I knew exactly why Grace had shown up earlier. It was the queen and her ward’s final attempt to get into my mate’s pants. I snarled. No one would get their hands on what was mine. I was done playing nice.

But you’ve never been nice, Sy said.

That’s not a nice thing to say, I snapped.

Rage pooled in my middle, power rising from the well at my command. I cupped Killian’s face, magically connecting with him. Through his eyes, I saw mine blazing with the darkest fire. It poured into him. Instead of resisting, he yanked me close, pulled my hand from his face, and crashed his lips onto mine.

His tongue stroked mine, lazy and possessive and demanding at the same time. I arched into him, burning for him, desperate for another round. He groaned against me.

The mating bond lit up between us as our power merged once again, lapping back and forth before sinking deeper, until it settled on a dark pulse that was latched inside Killian like a parasite. I zoned in on it—the pulse came from a hidden dark heart that fed on Killian’s darkness, part of his power. I hissed in rage. A new power from our mating bond flared, burning the dark heart until nothing was left of it.

Killian broke the kiss with a gasp, gazing at me in awe. “You broke her bond, little

scorpion. Her hold is completely gone.”

I touched his face and smirked. “I don’t always sting, but when I do, I make sure it counts.”

“She knows now,” he said.

“Let her come,” I said, my eyes blazing. “I can’t wait to bitch-slap her.”

I’ll maul her face, Sy chimed in, studying her claws.

“We need a good plan, my vicious little scorpion,” Killian said, brushing a kiss over my swollen lips, and I jolted as a new power rushed through me.

Dark flames and lightning burst from my left wrist. An icon materialized on my skin—two half-circles embracing, glowing dark gold.

Killian’s right forearm blazed with the same glow, an identical icon marking his wrist.

“The symbol of the mating bond,” he whispered, voice filled with wonder. “Stronger than any force in the universe.”

His chest shuddered violently, smoke and fire puffing from his mouth.

“Killian!” I shot upright, alarm racing through me.

“Shit,” he growled, his face distorting. “I can’t rein him in. You’re not just my mate; you’re my dragon’s mate too. Our bond burned out the fake one. There’s no stopping him now. The asshole demands to meet you in his form.”

In a flash, a dragon erupted from Killian with a thunderous roar.

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Barbie

The bed crumbled under me, my butt hitting the floor with a thud. Where Killian had been now loomed a massive black dragon, his talons spanning half the destroyed bed. His chest expanded with each breath, and those golden eyes peeked down at me with a mix of worry and devotion.

I gaped up at him, my heart hammering against my ribcage as winter sunlight danced across his black and sapphire scales. He was perfect—the most stunning creature I’d ever laid eyes on—and for a moment, I forgot how to breathe.

“Breathe, mate,” he rumbled, his voice deep and rich, like thunder rolling through my bones.

My gaze caught on the symbol at his left temple—two golden half-circles embracing each other, glowing with power—the mark of our mating bond.

He’s my mate too.

I sensed Killian watching through those golden eyes as a storm of emotions poured through our bond—his frustration and annoyance with his dragon, plus his profound need for me.

“Back off and let me lead,” his dragon growled. “You’ve screwed up enough already. We nearly lost our mate because of your idiocy.”

My brain scrambled to catch up with this sudden transformation. One second, I'd been in Killian's arms, thinking about round two. The next—dragon. I knew he had one inside him, but watching the actual transformation? Still, I needed to get my shit together before these two turned their alpha-male showdown into something worse. They both radiated enough aggression to spark a war, and I wasn't about to let that happen.

"Hello, hello, dragon," I said.

Hello, dragon, Sy also purred.

"Do you require assistance getting up, mate?" he asked as softly as his dragon voice could manage, extending a massive talon toward me.

"I got this," I said, hopping to my feet.

"I'm Tyson," he said proudly before lowering his head until we were at eye-level.

I reached out to touch his snout. The heat radiated through my palm, and he shivered, those golden eyes glowing with pure devotion.

"Nice to meet you, Tyson." I smiled at him.

His pleasure rolled through our bond. I wasn't scared of him at all, despite Killian's warning. He was my mate too, and I knew deep in my bones that he'd never harm me.

"What would you like to do, mate?" he asked politely.

"Good question." I studied him. "Not sure if this is too forward, but..."

“Nothing from you could be too much,” he rumbled. “I like you being forward. You can be aggressive with me.”

“Can we go for a ride then?” I asked. “But you’ll do most of the flying?”

“I’ll do all the flying.” He puffed out a stream of fire from his scaled golden lips. “I was afraid you’d never ask.”

“I asked politely,” I said.

He chuckled and lowered himself, though I didn’t need the help—I could jump onto him just fine. Still, that was sweet of him.

I’d already swung one leg over when a thought hit.

“Wait, dragon!”

I scrambled back to the bed, grabbed a blanket, and tossed it over his back.

He blinked.

“Gotta protect my butt from those scales,” I explained.

“I don’t mind if your butt is unwashed,” he rumbled.

My face flushed. The ridiculous lie had spread across campus, yet Tyson wasn’t joking. And yeah, I hadn’t had time to wash it after my mind-bending sex with Killian—I liked having his scent on me.

Carry my scent, Killian said in my mind, making me pause. Thanks to our mating bond, we could now mind-talk, but I enjoyed this bottom joke even less than the dick

joke.

I leapt onto the dragon's back. "Let's fly, dragon, like in a storybook."

"Never read one," he said. "And call me Tyson, mate."

He launched toward the sky, dark red fire streaming into the air. I hugged his neck, ducking his flame and holding on for dear life. He puffed out another jet of flame in satisfaction. The snowy mountains stretched far beneath his massive wings, wild wind whipping through my bouncing curls while sunlight gleamed on his scales.

"I'll tell you a secret, Tyson," I said.

"A good secret?" He craned his neck, rapt attention in his eyes.

"Yesterday, I was still a girl. Today, I'm a woman."

"What happened?" Tyson asked in his dragon voice. "What turned you from a girl to a woman?"

"I'm mated to both of you."

He purred with pride and happiness.

"So, I'm going to make some adjustments," I announced.

"What adjustments?"

"Well, for one, I'll tell fewer jokes."

"That's a joke, right?" He laughed. "It's funny."



I pressed my head against his neck. “Now Tyson, I’m going to confess my sins even though you aren’t a priest.”

“I’m not a priest. I’m your mate.”

“I’ll still tell you everything about me, right from the beginning,” I said. “Then you can share your dark history while we’re up in the sky.”

“I’m honored you chose me over Killian for your secrets, mate,” Tyson said, his dragon heat radiating into me, warming my bottom.

“It all started with an ancient evil god,” I said, sensing Killian’s intense focus through our bond. “After the war of the original gods, two vanished, but Ruin clawed his way back even after being shattered. He couldn’t hold a solid form. Then twenty-one years ago, he created a daughter who could eat magic and feed it back to him. For years, the God of Ruin sent me to drain magic from lands, cities, realms, and bring it all back. He absorbed every drop of power his daughter collected and grew stronger. And still, he kept feeding on me.”

I trembled at the memory of my father sipping my essence and sucking the magic-rich marrow from my bones.

Every nerve burned as he pinned me down. I’d killed myself countless times to escape the living nightmare of being consumed alive, but he revived me every time. I wasn’t just anyone. I was a goddess, and I couldn’t die easily like a mortal or an immortal.

“I tried resisting his orders to destroy the lands and cities and bring blight to the mortal realm,” I continued. “But he put his command in my head and implanted dark spells in my cells. Even then I fought back, but he sucked me dry, leaving me a skeletal shell, then had the Shriekers drop me in rich, green lands. The hunger was

terrible, and I couldn't control it, so I siphoned the magic again, and the Shriekers brought me back to him in chains. When I displeased him, he'd make me sleep in the snake pits, covered in blood and gore."

An enraged roar tore from the dragon, disrupting my story. Killian's wrath burned with his dragon's until I couldn't see the end of their cold rage. I swallowed. This was hard for me, but I had to finish the story—I wouldn't tell it again and relive the terror.

"I got smarter. I adapted," I said. "At five, I started pretending to be an obedient daughter, eager to please my father, living for a crumb of his approval—like a kicked dog still crawling back to lick her master. He thought he'd broken me, that his will was finally mine, but I was biding my time. That motherfucker failed. He never broke me because of Sy. She was with me from the beginning. When my father ate me alive, she held me and took the pain into herself. We never cracked. Never broke."

Sy sobbed.

The dragon had stopped roaring. His and Killian's silence felt even more lethal.

"Gradually, Ruin stopped guarding me so tightly. Then one day, he didn't send a big army with me. I drained the land but left a drop, used the collected magic to fuel my strength, and then slaughtered every Shrieker. I've been running ever since, until I came to your realm. But now he's found me, and he'll come for me soon."

He'll never have you! Killian vowed. Over my dead body will he get to you!

"Over my dead body too," Tyson bellowed. "Let's kill the god—or any gods for that matter."

"The realm became a target because of me," I said ruefully. "I'm sorry."

“You have nothing to be sorry for, mate,” Tyson said.

Sooner or later, Ruin will find Mist of Cinder, the last magical realm, Killian said. I sent out my elite scouts after your arrival at the academy. My spy network has been working double time to trace Ruin’s movements. I’ve known of his rising for a while, though we had no solid news before.

“He’s regenerated and grown stronger every day.” I swallowed. “Last time, he hitched a ride in one of his Shrieker captains. Soon, he’ll knock on our door himself.”

“Let him come,” he said. “We’ll be ready.”

“We won’t be ready.” I sucked in a shaky breath. “But I’ll do whatever it takes to stop him, including giving my life for the realm, for the people here.”

“You’ll not sacrifice yourself! I forbid it,” Tyson growled. “I’ll toast the world should you not be in it.”

I widened my eyes. “You don’t mean it.”

We mean it, Killian said. Fuck the world if you aren’t in it. Call us villains, and I don’t give two shits. He took in a purposeful breath. To protect you, we need to kill Ruin first. We need all the help we can get. We’ll need the heirs too, and it’s time to tell them some secrets. We need to act fast. I wish I could spend eternity here with you, but we’ll need to return soon.

“Time is of the essence, and we’ll kill the god,” Tyson vowed as he dove through the clouds, leaving the snowy mountains behind.

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Barbie

Rowan's eyes gleamed silver with calculation as Killian laid out his plan to tell the other heirs about Sy and me. The fae prince had bolted to Killian's House of Chaos the moment he got the message.

We huddled in Killian's penthouse office—me sinking into a plush chair while Killian stood guard behind me, his hand steady on my shoulder. Rowan stalked by the window, both heirs too wired to sit, letting the tension crackle.

"Fine," Rowan snapped. "I don't want them sniffing around Sy any more than you want them courting Barbie. It's bad enough that Sy has to share space with her. Makes me sick watching Sy get played while she sits in the dark with no life, and Barbie just bounces around living it up."

What the fuck?

Sy bobbed her head, biting back hot tears, as if her lover could see her. I rolled my eyes at her dramatics.

Bouncing around living it up? He had no fucking clue about my burdens. My enemies lurked in the shadows, waiting to strike. The druid and his brotherhood cult were still out there, hunting me. Grace and her minions, including my former Underdog supporters, aimed to make my life hell, though they were failing at every turn. The Queen of the Underworld posed an even bigger threat as the mastermind behind

many nasty plots against me. I'd been looking over my shoulder constantly ever since that demon queen set up the sixth house in the academy's backyard.

I'm watching your six, Sy said.

Before returning to campus, Killian cloaked our mating bond. He worried about Queen Lilith discovering it before his plan was set in place. He refused to risk me before he believed I could go toe-to-toe against his ex-betrothed.

For once, I didn't care that he hadn't mentioned how or when he would break up with her. I didn't need a public announcement. He was mine , through and through.

His dragon grunted. Once we eliminate the threats, Killian, you need to announce our true mate properly!

Tyson kept Hades's heir in check, my interests close to his dragon heart.

"This isn't about screen time between Barbie and her sister," Killian snapped. "The God of Ruin will soon come in person with his army, and we need all the heirs to win this war and protect our mates. Our forefathers divided, but we can't afford the same mistake when we have a common enemy. I need you to back me up and work your charm with the other heirs. Don't screw this up."

"Who's the one screwing up everything, asshole?" Rowan shot back. "You've got nerve lecturing me. Your arrogance truly has no bounds. No wonder you need me to get the rest of the heirs to listen, since no one likes you. Not even Cade now."

He'd dropped his amiable act toward Killian since their duel. He understood why Killian had forced him into a death match, but understanding didn't mean forgiveness. He tolerated Killian now only because Sy and I shared a body.

“Just go get them,” Killian said. “The stakes are high. We might have to fight enemies on two fronts. You want to protect our mates or stand here berating me?”

Rowan shook his head in disgust but left to summon the other heirs—after demanding to see Sy first. She surfaced eagerly when I gave her control. The two locked lips, going at it for two and a half minutes until Killian and I put a stop to it. If we hadn’t, they might’ve fucked right there in front of us.

These days, people had no shame.

While I briefed Underhill about the classified meeting, Killian posted up at the entrance, waiting for the other heirs to arrive. Both he and Rowan had agreed to my proposal of meeting in Underhill, the safest place for dark secrets. I’d promised them Underhill would welcome all the heirs and play the courteous host.

“What’s the emergency?” Silas swaggered up.

“Rowan wouldn’t spill,” Cade said. “I bailed on my budget meeting for this.”

“This better be worth it,” Louis grunted. “I was feeding when you dragged me here to stand outside Underhill like an idiot.”

Feeding? I wondered if he was banging some bimbo while drinking from her veins.

“Will you stop whining?” Rowan snapped. “We’re meeting here because no one can hear us inside Underhill.”

“Like Underhill would let us in,” Louis scoffed.

Last time, Underhill hadn’t just tossed him out—it had maimed him when he chased after me.

I strolled out, my hands in my pockets, my curls bouncing.

“Underhill agreed to host and let you in,” I said, eyeing Killian. “But?—”

“You’ll all swear a blood oath first.” Killian picked up the line.

The heirs narrowed their eyes at him.

“What blood oath?” Silas demanded.

“To share and keep each other’s darkest secrets,” Killian said.

Silence stretched. Every heir had skeletons in their closet.

“You’ve got nothing to trade. We know your secret,” Silas said.

Killian frowned at him.

“You’re Hades’s heir, we get it,” Cade said.

Killian shot me a look. I blinked slowly, all innocence.

He sighed. “I have more dangerous secrets than that.”

“Told you the asshole can’t be trusted,” Silas said, throwing meaningful looks at the others.

“This is bigger than my secrets,” Killian said. “If we don’t do this—if we don’t bare our secrets—our alliance breaks. No trust means the truce between our kingdoms shatters too.”

“We’re brothers, aren’t we?” Rowan said. “Time to act like it and trust each other. The realm is in more danger than you know.”

“You in or not?” I asked, power infusing my voice.

All eyes locked on me.

“Is this about Barbie?” Silas asked, looking around.

“Yes,” Killian answered impatiently. “You’ll learn who Barbie really is. We’ll make a new pact between the five of us—a blood pact.”

“Trust me, it’ll be worth it,” Rowan added. “Barbie’s more than meets the eye.”

“Never doubted that.” Silas flashed me a smile, and Killian growled.

The shifter prince treated me like dirt when he thought I was a boy with a dormant wolf. He only started seeing me in a new light after Killian brought me to the House of Chaos. Still, he’d helped save my life with the others, so I’d moved past my grudge against him and Louis.

“Fuck it. Let’s do this.” Louis yanked out a blade and slashed it across his palm.

“Underhill will witness your blood oath,” I said, backing into the dark forest. “When you’re done, it’ll let you in.”

“For the sake of being received by Underhill, I’ll do it,” Cade said.

“Fine, count me in,” Silas said. “I don’t like being left alone. If there’s any conspiracy, I want to know about it.”



As I waited by the pool, the heirs sauntered in one by one. Shadow beasts escorted them, growling at the scent of their blood. The wounds would seal soon—perks of being the most powerful supernaturals. The beasts wouldn't attack, snacking on the heirs, under Underhill's tight leash, but the heirs didn't seem concerned anyway.

They craned their necks and gazed around in awe.

Except for Killian in his dream walk, none had ventured into the dark forest before. Rowan had access only to the cabin at Underhill's edge when Sy joined him. Silas and Louis had tried forcing their way in last time and nearly broke their necks when Underhill hurled them out in warning. And this was Cade's first step into the forbidden forest.

Ancient trees scraped the sky. Flowers glowed like stars. Tiny winged fairies zipped between branches. Blue magic fire roared to life in twin hearths materializing beside the spring lake. Three tables shimmered into existence and dotted the center of the clearing, gold goblets brimming with fairy wine. There were even plush towels stacked on carved benches.

The lake with the purest water in the world glowed from the bottom, misty light rising into the air like a forgotten dream.

"This is incredible!" Louis grinned ear-to-ear.

Underhill had created a magical resort.

A column burst from the center of the lake, morphing into a fountain of wine. Liquid rainbows swirled at its peak, and a dozen crystal cups floated around the fountain.

Cade's eyes went wide. "Wild magic!"

“You should’ve said this was a party,” Silas shouted at Killian, throwing back his head and howling before stripping.

“Keep your pants on,” Killian barked.

“Since when do you care about nudity?” Silas shot back.

Rowan backed Killian. “Lady present!”

“Barbie’s no lady,” Louis said.

Killian glared at him. “What did you say?”

“She’s more than a lady.” Louis winked at me.

“Back off, vamp,” Killian hissed. “You’d flirt with the dead.”

“Never did that.” Louis rolled his pale blue eyes. “And you take nasty to a new level, asshole.”

“Just keep your briefs on,” Killian snapped. “I asked nicely.”

Seconds later, Louis and Silas stood in just their boxers.

Louis was all hard muscles and perfectly tanned, breaking the vampire stereotype. His manbun sat tight at his nape, his pale blue eyes gleaming with glee. He was as hot as Silas, but his features had that aristocratic edge the shifter prince lacked.

Silas stood an inch shorter but broader, biceps on constant display. Among the princes, the shifter heir loved brute force the most. A tattoo of giant paws crawled down his left temple—the same marks that showed on his wolf form. That was

something he never shut up about.

“Keep your boxers on at all times, gentlemen!” Rowan shouted a reminder. “Please.”

He didn’t want Sy ogling the naked heirs through my eyes, but she was doing exactly that, hovering just beneath my skin. She graded them based on cut chests, six-packs, and powerful thighs. It wasn’t every day you caught all the heirs shirtless in one place.

Not all of them took off their shirts, unfortunately, she said, eyeing Killian, Cade, and Rowan pointedly.

Killian stood guard over me while Rowan watched Sy by watching me. Even clothed, the fae heir and chaos heir had bodies built to kill and fuck. Killian’s presence fired my blood with lust—my mate radiated power and raw sexuality even at rest. Among the heirs, he had the most carnal energy.

Our eyes locked. His scent of powerful male and winter pine hit me, mixed with his dragon’s flame and brimstone.

Delicious men, Sy purred. And my mate is the most desirable.

She gave him a ten plus. Sure, he was stunning, with elegant fae features and flowing silver hair, but I didn’t think he was in Killian’s league. Sensing Sy’s yearning, Rowan peered into my eyes that flashed golden when I glanced at him.

I pushed back Sy’s claws, shoving her a few inches deeper while blocking her pheromones from seeping through my skin.

The vamp and shifter princes dove into the lake, laughing as they splashed toward the wine fountain. Louis got there first, snagging a floating cup.

“Divine,” he said after a sip. “We should come here more often.”

“Only when Barbie’s around will we be allowed in,” Killian reminded him.

“Or Sy,” Rowan added.

“Where is Lady Sy?” Silas asked.

“You’ll see her,” Rowan said.

Cade flicked his wand, stripping to his boxers, his deep wine-red hair falling into his turquoise eyes. He folded his clothes neatly on a bench before he joined the others. He lacked their bulk but was just as strong and cut, and his bronze skin was lickable, according to Sy.

Water splashed around the mage prince as light beamed from below, making him look otherworldly. He laughed, flinging water at the others with wind magic.

I yanked off my boots and dipped my feet in the water, Killian on my left, Rowan on my right. We stayed dressed while a shadow beast pressed against my leg, watching the heirs vigilantly and making sure they weren’t up to no good.

Why was the water always freezing for me? I asked Underhill.

You needed cooling down. You’d have fallen asleep if the water was too warm.

“Don’t get too comfortable. This isn’t a vacation,” Killian told the heirs. “Time to work, guys. Silas, share your secrets.”

“Why me first?” Silas snorted. “You start.”

“You know Hades is my grandfather and I’m the true Underworld heir,” Killian said.  
“Not even my father knows my mother’s real identity.”

I’d revealed that secret of his since it would come out eventually. Supernaturals respected power above all—knowing the chaos heir was the Underworld’s true heir wouldn’t cost him anything but would boost his status.

“Why did your mother—Hades’s daughter—hide her identity?” Louis asked.

Killian shrugged.

“Why hide being a demigod?” Cade pressed.

“Asshole just loves hoarding secrets,” Rowan said.

The others nodded grudgingly. Rowan used to back Killian, but the death duel had scarred their friendship. They only worked together for the sake of Sy and me now.

“My mother abandoned me when I was three,” Killian said, jaw tight. “Excuse me if I don’t advertise that part of my heritage.”

“You kept that secret for decades. You never treated us as your peers.” Silas glared.

“Like you’re not hiding yours,” Killian shot back. “Remember your blood oath.”

Rowan shook his head. “Everything coming out of your mouth is offensive, Killian.”  
He turned to the other heirs. “Ignore him. I’ll start.”

All eyes turned to the fae prince, and Louis nodded his encouragement.

“I’m a bastard,” Rowan said.

“You’re not, Rowan boy,” Cade said. “You’re a gentleman.”

“Unlike Killian,” Silas said. “He’s the real bastard.”

“I’m not King Emyr’s true son.” Rowan raised his voice. “He’ll exile or kill me if he knows.” He shook his head as jaws dropped. “And no, I don’t know who the fuck sired me, and I don’t care to find out.”

Silas and Louis shared a shocked look before remembering their mutual dislike and glaring at each other.

“You’ve been carrying this burden all these years?” Cade asked. “That’s brutal, man. But listen, you’re one of us. That won’t ever change.”

“Thanks,” Rowan said, his face tight. “But eventually, I want the secret out. I hate living like an imposter.”

“You’re not an imposter,” Louis said. “You’re our brother.”

“And always will be,” Silas said.

Cade swung his wand, and a strong gust barreled toward us. Killian threw up a shield just in time but only covered himself and me. The wind slammed into Rowan before he could fend it off. The fae prince shot Killian a murderous look as he plunged into the lake. A whirlpool materialized, dragging him toward the other heirs while he flailed in his soggy tunic and leather pants.

Silas, Louis, and Cade gripped Rowan’s shoulders.

“Brother,” they said in unison and hugged him.

“You’ve got us,” Cade said. “You’re the only fae heir that matters.”

“Couldn’t you have waited until I stripped before dunking me?” Rowan grumbled.

Silas broke off first, calculation glinting in his amber eyes. “We’ll keep it quiet. But you should give up Lady Sy—for her own good.”

Rowan bared his fangs and snarled. Silas sank into the water. “Just saying.”

“Everything shared here stays here,” Killian warned. “We’ve all sworn to keep each other’s secrets. Now, let’s move to the next heir.”

“Barbie hasn’t taken the blood oath,” Silas said. “Don’t get me wrong—I’ve always liked Barbie. But everyone knows our Barbie is unpredictable. A ticking bomb.”

“She isn’t your Barbie, and she doesn’t need an oath,” Killian said curtly.

“Since when do you speak for her?” Louis snapped. “She belongs to the House of Mages now.”

“I can speak for my true mate whenever I want, just as she speaks for me,” Killian said.

Cade blinked. “What? What are you talking about?”

“What the fuck are you talking about?” Louis said angrily.

“Aren’t you betrothed to the Queen of the Underworld?” Silas’s lips curled into a sneer. “Word is, you’ve already sealed a mating bond.”

I bared my teeth at the heirs.

"A fake bond I never consented to," Killian bit out.

"Barbie isn't yours!" Louis lunged forward, fury twisting his features.

"Agreed." Silas's voice dripped venom. "Just another of his lies."

"Unfortunately, Barbie is his true mate," Rowan said, dragging a hand down his face.

"Can't believe this asshole got blessed with a true mate. Then again, you should not envy him—he got Barbie."

I glared daggers at him.

Killian unleashed his starlight, revealing our uncloaked mating bond. He lifted his wrist, displaying the glowing icon—two half-circles embracing in eternal unity—while the same mark blazed dark gold on my skin.

A perfect, undeniable match.

The heirs inhaled sharply.

"The mating bond symbol," Cade breathed. "Stronger than any force."

"Well, that's an unfortunate turn of events," the vampire prince drawled. "Very disappointing."

"My mate is off-limits." Killian's warning glare swept the heirs. "Don't even think about poaching her. Barbie isn't just my true fated mate. She's also mated to my dragon—the one I never told you about."

A growl rumbled from his chest as his dragon announced his existence by puffing out a jet of fire from Killian's lips.



“Your turn, Silas,” Cade said, in a hurry to dispel the tension and get the ball rolling.

The shifter prince drained his silver goblet and exhaled in defeat. “No judgment, fuckers. All right?”

“Just spill it,” Killian snapped. “We don’t have all day.”

“At thirteen, I broke into my mom’s vault and read her diary,” he said. I leaned in—diaries always held the juiciest secrets. “She wrote about her affairs. Two men, before she discovered she was with child—me. One was the current alpha king. The other”—he jabbed his finger at Killian—“was your fucking father. He seduced her during her court visit.”

Everyone’s eyes ping-ponged between Killian and Silas. Looking closer, I caught the subtle resemblance.

“My father had many affairs,” Killian said flatly. “But you can’t be my half-brother. No fucking way. Fates aren’t that stupid and cruel.”

“Fates can be,” Rowan said. “Nature is crueler.”

“Have you done a DNA test just to make sure, Prince Silas?” I asked. “Denial isn’t a good attitude to begin with.”

Silas’s glare shifted from Killian to me then to Killian again, whose face remained cold. “I’ll never do a fucking D-whatever test. I don’t give a shit about finding out.”

I held my tongue—his resentment toward Killian and their constant pissing contests proved he cared plenty. Still, I got it. The final truth of being the chaos king’s bastard and Killian’s half-brother would wreck him.

He'd also lose his popularity, hand his sister leverage to challenge his heir status, and lose his court's backing. Even if he won the duel, being outed as illegitimate would strip him of everything.

Royals and their dirty laundry.

"That was unfortunate," Cade said, threading his hand through his wine-colored hair.

"Enough," Silas snarled, jabbing a finger at Louis. "Your turn—bet you've got darker secrets."

Louis sighed. "Not like you lot."

"Share, bloodsucker! You swore the oath too!" Silas shouted, taking his frustration out on his long-time nemesis.

"Don't get your boxers twisted, dog. I'm talking," Louis said. "Sorry to disappoint, but I'm no bastard. And my mother's blood rage isn't a secret. She hasn't been allowed to leave the court for decades. Most nights, she's confined to the tower. Dad never had other heirs, so no one contests my position. But his expectations crush me. He wants me to find my fated mate and produce the prophesied One." That explained his orgies during my stay in the vampire house. "No dirty secrets, just my darkest fear: failing to find my fated mate and disappointing the entire kingdom." His eyes locked on me longingly. "As you know, for vampires, the only way to confirm their true mate is to claim and drink from her at the same time."

Killian bared his teeth, Tyson's fire streaming from his mouth. "Take Barbie off that fuck list."

"It's not a fuck list," Louis snapped. "It helps me find a mate."

Cade pressed his palm to his forehead. “Not this shit again.”

“Your turn, but I doubt you have any secrets or fears.” Rowan gestured at Cade. “Everyone knows your parents are perfect, and you always look happy and carefree. You don’t have our scars.”

The fae prince couldn’t be more wrong, but only I knew about Cade’s pain.

Cade, the kindest heir who got along with everyone, stared into the distance, his face darkening with each passing second.

“I’m cursed,” he said heavily. “Or being punished.”

“Are you serious?” Silas asked.

“I can never have a mate,” Cade said. “Can’t have love. My kiss freezes anyone to death, so forget about intimacy.” His eyes flicked to me. “There’s only one exception, but she’s different.”

“Who’s she?” Louis asked.

“I won’t expose her,” Cade said.

Rowan frowned. “You took the blood oath.”

I waved a hand and shrugged. “It was me. I kissed him.”

Killian’s fiery gaze landed on me. I stared back. I didn’t back down from a challenge, not even from my fated mate. No one got to control or dominate me, no matter the situation.

The heirs' eyes bounced between us three.

Killian turned his lethal stare on Cade—his closest ally.

“How dare you?” Killian’s soft voice carried death. “I thought you were my brother.”

“Cade didn’t kiss me,” I said. “I stole his kiss.”

“Why, little scorpion?” Killian demanded. “Why would you kiss another man?”

“For a good reason,” I said, my fingers curling into fists at my sides. “And look at yourself, Killian. I saw how you were with my replica—all whispered conversations.”

“So that was your revenge?” Killian growled, his storm-blue eyes flashing. “I wasn’t cozy with anyone. I kept them distracted so they’d leave you alone.”

“Sure, that worked brilliantly,” I sneered, ignoring the way my heart raced at his proximity and my body hummed at his heat.

“Drop it, Killian,” Cade said. “No one knew she was your true mate until now.”

“I never got a kiss from Barbie,” Louis complained. “I courted her properly, brought fancy gifts. She even advised what gifts she’d accept in advance.”

“I sent expensive stuff too and got nothing back,” Silas said, looking wounded.

“I got all of them,” I said. “And I gave you the receipts.”

“The handwriting was illegible,” Louis grumbled. “And what do I need a receipt for?”

Killian laughed. “Barbie hoards like my dragon.”

Tyson growled proudly.

I always accepted gifts gracefully, with a big grin on my face. I also split my treasures between the House of Mages and the House of Chaos—I never put all my eggs in one basket.

Pucker warned me that gathering wealth from the heirs would bite me in the ass. I shrugged, as I didn’t see any harm in collecting riches. I’d developed a taste for nice shiny things. It was more than a hobby now. It was an addiction.

Human mothers used to say, “Don’t take gifts from strangers.”

But the heirs weren’t strangers. Entitled predators, sure, but Sy and I could handle them. We just had to stand firm when accepting gifts.

“I’m not a fairy grandmother handing out kisses,” I said.

“Fairy godmother,” Rowan corrected me. “And that’s not what they do.”

I raised a hand to stop anyone from interrupting me again. “If you’re so pissed, Killian, Cade can steal back the kiss to make it right.”

“How?” Silas asked.

“By kissing me to cancel out the first one,” I said. “Then we’re even.”

Cade laughed, the other heirs joining in. They enjoyed seeing me make the chaos heir squirm.

“That’s not happening,” Killian snarled, lightning coiling between his fingertips, the air sharp with ozone. His jealous rages were legendary, and if this one turned lethal, it could end badly for everyone.

But then, it wasn’t my business, so I just shrugged.

“Asshole, we’re all in the water!” Rowan warned.

At Sy’s urge, I sighed and touched Killian’s arm, absorbing his lightning. The buzz felt pleasant on my skin. He couldn’t harm his mate—I was starting to accept that reality.

“It wasn’t romantic,” I said. “I was just testing if I could break Cade’s curse.”

“Cade’s curse?” Killian blinked at me, his jealousy fading to concern. “But you shouldn’t risk yourself. Not for anyone.”

Cade glared at him before turning to me, his turquoise eyes dark with dismay. “No wonder you gave me that look when you kissed me and claimed to be impulsive,” he said, ignoring Killian narrowing his eyes. “You’ve known about my curse for a while.”

“I couldn’t see it until I joined your house,” I said. “The house magic wanted me to help you. You know that you’re cursed, but you don’t know that you’re being haunted as well. Unfortunately, your curse isn’t a common one—I couldn’t rip it out like I did with those goddamn offensive spells your high mages slapped on the bush fences. When I touched your lips, they were ice-cold.” Cade’s fingers drifted to his mouth. “And I saw her phase out of you, but she failed to kill me. Anyone else who kissed you would’ve dropped dead on the spot.”

The other heirs gaped at me, knowing that I’d even survived the Seed of Heaven.

“Who’s haunting me?” Cade asked before recognition flashed in his eyes and he drew a sharp, pained breath. “Elle.”

“Who’s Elle?” Silas asked.

“My first love,” Cade said. “I was fifteen when I fell for a servant girl, and she fell for me too. Our first kiss was in a closet to avoid getting caught. As soon as my lips touched hers, she froze to death.” He swallowed, pain welling in his eyes, before he forced himself to continue. “My parents’ people covered it up, said she ran away, and threw money at her family.” His hands trembled. “If she’s been haunting me all this time, I deserve it.”

“What did Elle look like?” I asked. “Her hair and eyes?”

“She was lovely. A redhead, like me,” Cade said.

“Then it’s not Elle who cursed you,” I said, tilting my head. “A Fury did this to you.”

Cade blinked, horror and disbelief washing over his face. “A Fury?”

Just as I’d suspected, Cade had no clue about the Fury haunting him—but then, hardly anyone knew jack about Furies, myself included. I’d been watching him closely, but the Fury never showed when I was around. Even now, she wouldn’t manifest.

“A dead witch turned Fury,” I said.

The other heirs—except Killian and Cade—shot me looks that screamed “scammer.” Whatever. I wasn’t hustling Cade for expensive gifts. He was a friend who’d never played games with me.

“Do you trust me, Cade?” I asked.

“When you call me Cade,” he said.

I nodded. “Ever pissed off a dark-haired girl with blue lips? About fourteen, maybe?”

Cade’s brows creased.

Just then, pale smoke wisped from the mage prince’s forehead. The Fury materialized—two inches tall, hovering over his face, frost streaming from her blue lips.

She hissed at me, and Sy hissed back.

I darted wild looks around, but none of the other heirs seemed to be able to see her.

“What is it, Barbie?” Cade asked, muscles tight as he waded toward me. “Something’s wrong, isn’t it?”

“Feel anything different?” I asked, fighting for calm.

“Chills everywhere,” he said, his face paling.

“The Fury just showed up. She’s out now, tiny and floating right in front of your eyes.”

Killian dropped into the water, putting himself between Cade and me, Rowan right beside him. The fae prince was determined to protect me in order to protect Sy.

Cade snarled and swiped at the air, but the Fury stayed put, sneering.



I shook my head. “You can’t get rid of her that way. You two have history.”

“I don’t have history with any girl except Elle,” he said.

“Bayrose. Ring a bell?” I asked.

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Barbie

Bayrose whipped her tiny head toward me when I said her name. She had nowhere to hide now that I'd exposed her.

"How do you know that name?" Cade demanded.

"When I kissed you to challenge the Fury," I said, "she tried to freeze me to kingdom come like she did Elle."

You shouldn't risk yourself like that, mate, Tyson scolded me, our mating bond letting him lecture me directly now.

I got this, dragon, I said. Trust that I can handle it. Don't be overbearing like Killian.

I'm nothing like him, the dragon said. But the mage is not getting another kiss! We'll deal with this bad Fury.

"If it was anyone else, she would've won," I said, scanning the heirs. "But curses bounce off me. When she came at me, I hit back harder." Sy had clawed at the Fury, snagging her name in the process. "Bayrose ran. She stayed hidden whenever I was near you, until now. She knows the game's up."

"Shit!" Killian shouted. "Cade's lips!"

Silas and Louis rushed over. We all stared at Cade's lips turning dark blue.

"Manifest," Rowan growled. "We need to stop her before this gets worse."

"Take her out!" Louis yelled.

Silas raised his fist. He'd only hit Cade if he swung.

In a flash, Silas and Louis grabbed Cade's shoulders as he swayed in the lake.

"We got you!" Silas said.

"Who's Bayrose?" Killian snapped into interrogation mode. "What did you do that made her curse you, Cade? Must've been powerful black magic."

"Some girl from my childhood." Cade frowned. "I called her little witch, but it's fuzzy now." The Fury hissed at that. "She used to follow me around until I stopped her. Got sick of it." He shook his head in frustration. "I can't remember much. As my father's sole heir, I've always been surrounded by people, and I don't remember everyone."

"Think harder. What triggered her?" I asked. "What was the last interaction between you and her?"

"I don't—" Cade started, then summoned his wand and flicked the tip, conjuring a memory. He stared into space, then gasped.

"What did you see, Cade?" Rowan asked. "You need to share. Let us help you."

Cade swallowed. "The day she died, she told me I was her fated mate and I'd only ever marry her. I shut her down hard. When they said she died from poison, I felt bad,

and that was it.”

"She thought her death would break you, and she became Fury to finish what she started," I said softly.

None of the heirs were saints. They were predators who didn't coddle the weak or bow to the strong. Cade wasn't perfect, but he didn't deserve this curse—all because he'd rejected the advances of an underage girl.

“A messed-up teen,” Killian said.

“A scorned teen turned Fury,” Louis added. “Classic.”

“Not classic,” Silas countered. “Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned warns about an adult woman's vengeance after rejection. Queen Zara coined it during her love triangle in *The Mourning Bride*.”

Of course, the shifter prince would show off the classic literature he'd devoured while courting me.

Louis narrowed his pale blue eyes, but all he said was, "Whatever."

“That's why Cade never dates.” The shifter prince's anger burned for his friend. “That little bitch cursed him so he can't touch anyone, making sure his life stays empty. No mate, no freedom—not while she haunts him.” He turned to me. “You're good with curses, Barbie. Name your price. I'll pay anything.”

Killian growled. "Show some respect. My mate's not for hire." His fingers brushed my cheek. "Can you help, little scorpion? Cade doesn't deserve this hell. He's my brother, the most decent of?"

I pressed a finger to his lips. He gasped. I was pleased that tiny touch of mine affected him so much, but I contained my smirk. We had Cade's curse to deal with.

"Of course I'll help Cade. Not because he's the prince of the House of Mages, the house I belong to now. And not because you asked me nicely." Both Killian and Cade looked at me hopefully. "Removing Cade's curse is second on my to-do list."

Cade narrowed his eyes. "What's first?"

"It's not exactly classified, and we'll get there," I said. "I'd have done it for you if I knew how to exorcize her. Your case is complex. The curse came from black magic—blood magic. Someone powerful helped her. She couldn't manage it alone."

"Who helped?" the heirs snarled.

Cade glared. "Name them!"

"How the fuck would I know?" I threw up my hands. "I'm not Sherlock Holmes."

Rowan frowned. "Who's Sherlock Holmes?"

"A genius detective from popular crime novels," Cade said, then gave me a stern look, failing to copy Killian's ruthlessness. "Not good enough, Barbie. I expected a lot better from you."

"Cade," Killian warned.

"This is what went down," I said. "Bayrose offered herself as a sacrifice to some powerful creep for blood magic. She turned herself into a Fury just to weave that curse into you, making sure you couldn't have any relationships. And since she was a virgin? Double the power."

“Obsession leads down dangerous, dark paths,” Louis said.

“Who’s the sick fucker that helped her pull this off?” Silas snarled.

“I’ve got a suspect,” I said, riding high on certainty.

“Who?” they all demanded.

“Who else? The rogue druid!” I shouted. “And this isn’t me throwing shade because I hate his guts. He made human sacrifices in the ivory tower basement. He’s got blood magic experiments down to an art. The creep tried to get his dark hands on me too, wanted me as a sacrifice since I’m so powerful.” I shuddered, and Killian pulled me against his chest. “Bet you anything he started his experiments ages ago. That’s when Bayrose found him.”

“That druid spent years lobbying in my court,” Cade said through clenched teeth.

“We still can’t track him,” Killian said, “even with all our forces.”

“Someone powerful is hiding him,” Louis said. “We’ve searched every kingdom. He isn’t in CrimsonTide either.”

“Every kingdom except the Underworld,” Killian said.

“Only you can go there, Killian,” Cade said.

Killian’s face darkened. The Underworld should have been his—he was the rightful heir.

“I can enter the Underworld too,” I said, flexing my fingers, “though I’ve never been there physically.”

“Lilith hijacked Barbie’s mind and dragged part of her into the Underworld,” Killian revealed.

The heirs sucked in sharp breaths before rage blazed through them.

“What?” they called. “We know Lilith is powerful as hell, but since when can she do that?”

“Lilith’s mind power is unmatched,” Killian said. “She can invade anyone’s thoughts, but Barbie beat her at her own game.”

Tyson puffed out a stream of fire, his rage at the demon queen tangled with pride in me. Killian’s dragon was possessive and overbearing, but his loyalty ran deep.

“Don’t eat or drink anything in the Underworld,” I warned. “I’ve got rich experience down there. If the druid’s hiding out there, I can lead a strike team to break in and haul his evil ass back here for justice. I’m done lying low. Time for me to lead, or I can be second-in-command, especially with enemies closing in and the biggest threat at our door.” I flashed a savage grin and Sy smiled, appreciating this new me. “No hell gate can stop me. No door or ward can block me.”

“You aren’t going to the Underworld,” Killian said, his face grim, fear sparking in his storm-blue eyes. “I forbid it.”

“I know you’re worried,” I said. “I appreciate it.” Killian eyed me with suspicion, since I usually didn’t play nice. “But I’ve got to go, probably soon.” I decided to dump more of my secrets. “The oracle said I must venture into the Underworld to win this war. I can’t ignore her prophecy anymore. I was scared shitless of what she predicted and what would crash down on me, but running won’t fix anything.”

“You met Lady Moirai, the Maiden of the Wicca oracles?” Cade asked.

And then everyone was speaking?—

“What did she say?” Rowan demanded. “Every detail matters.”

“None of us met her,” Silas said. “She bailed on Barbie’s murder trial.”

“Lady Moirai came to my house with Lilith,” Killian said.

“Fuck secrets!” Louis snapped. “We promised no more hiding shit from each other.”

“The Maiden ambushed me in Windsong Woods, saying bad shit would happen,” I said.

“So I bounced before she could spew more negativity.”

“What bad shit?” Cade asked.

“You don’t need to share if you aren’t ready, Barbie,” Killian said. “I’ll make sure nothing bad happens to you.”

I sighed. “There are several parts to the prophecy. You all heard the first—about the One bringing back old magic. The Brides Selection started because of that. Here’s the second part: Magic fades. Mist reveals, and Ruin comes. The cursed and the blessed are One. The darkest flame has emerged. Fuse it with light, or its power will devour the worlds and all whom you love. The Wheels of the Fates have turned. ”

“When she was in my house, Lady Moirai warned about turning the Wheels of Fates before all ends,” Killian added. “Her exact words were: Ruin’s coming for her, for you, for all of us. He’ll consume her and then feast on us. Push her to the breaking point so she shall rise, or everything will fall, and the world ends. She meant Barbie. We must protect her at all costs.”



“How can you be so sure it’s Barbie?” Silas challenged. “Now she’s your true mate, you want her to be safe. Next, you’ll broadcast she’s the prophesied Bride, so you can use her to claim the high throne. We aren’t fools, Killian. Your fucking machinations won’t work.”

“I don’t want to be fucking High King,” Killian growled.

“Actually,” I said, “the oracle spoke of two Brides. New threads have been woven.”

The heirs froze. “Two Brides? Why did the prophecy change? What does it mean?”

“Beats me.” I shrugged, keeping my expression neutral. “But I won’t be one of the Brides in the Selection.” I turned to the shifter prince. “So chill. There are no machinations at work here.”

I wouldn’t stick around to see the Brides Selection play out. The Underworld held Heaven’s Arrow, and I had to retrieve it. The Maiden’s prophecy gripped me tight—I needed to split from Sy before my father got his hands on me.

Without my sacrifice, Ruin would consume everything I loved.

I kept that dark fate hidden from Sy. Where I was headed, no one could follow. Not Sy. Not my true mates. My chest squeezed tight and my blood turned to ice as I faced the reality of leaving them all behind.

While the heirs fixated on the second prophecy, brooding, the Fury slipped from Cade’s face. My show of weakness had fed her confidence.

She glared and stuck out her tongue, taunting me with a hiss. I’ll never let him go. He’s mine! And there’s nothing you can do. Your father will come for you. I can’t wait to watch him eat you alive.

A wave of rage surged through me at how she'd turned Cade's life into her personal torture chamber.

Take her down! Sy's snarl matched the Fury's challenge.

If I didn't strike now, this chance might never come again. Any shit could happen to me, and I'd be gone soon enough. What would become of Cade then? I could end this. I could end Cade's suffering right here.

One second, I was lounging against Killian. The next, I leaped across the expanse of water, my fingers morphing to claws as I slashed at the Fury.

She plunged into Cade, but not before my claws scraped her phantom cheek, leaving a trail of pale smoke in her wake.

She escaped again! Sy hissed.

Not this time, she won't, I said. My hands seized Cade's face.

Cade gasped, choking. I'd pushed too hard, his mage magic streaming away from him. My goal was to starve the Fury out, but I had to watch it—one wrong move and I'd wreck Cade instead.

Silas and Louis shot to my side.

"What are you doing?" Louis's voice cracked with panic. "His face is gray. Are you draining him?"

"Let him go, Barbie!" Silas ordered me.

"Just give me a fucking minute," I hissed, not letting go of Cade.

“He doesn’t have a minute!” Silas snapped. “You’ll kill him. Is that your plan?”

“You’re too ruthless, Barbie. Let go of Cade!” Rowan joined the shouting.

I ignored them.

Silas and Louis lunged at me, each grabbing an arm to pull me off Cade, only to curse profanely as their energy flowed into me as well. Now we were all locked—me draining them, them unable to break free.

“What the fuck are you?” Silas snarled.

“Break it off, Barbie!” Louis barked.

The three trapped heirs couldn’t pull away, terror draining the color from their faces.

“Stop, little scorpion.” Killian moved toward me.

I pressed on. The Fury had shown herself, leaving a fresh trail. She’d burrow deeper into Cade if I quit now. I just needed more time.

Let me take over, Sy urged. I can do this without draining them.

I gave her a look.

Trust me, she said.

Her own power had emerged. I nodded and gave up the reins. Sy erupted from me before Killian reached us. Darkness blanketed me until I broke through it and moved closer to Sy, and I was looking through Sy’s eyes once the vertigo faded.

“Sy?” Silas leapt back, his voice cracking.

“Hello, princelings,” Sy purred. Her claws remained pressed against Cade’s face as she flashed them a sultry grin.

The mage prince gaped at Sy, color flooding back into his cheeks now that Sy had stopped me from draining him.

Focus! I snapped. I didn’t let you out so you could flirt with some hot guys. Help Cade.

Chill your perky tits. Sy rolled her eyes. I excel at multitasking.

“What trick is this?” Louis’s pale blue eyes went wide with shock. “What the fuck is going on?”

“Sy is Barbie’s alter ego,” Cade breathed out. “I should’ve known—they never showed up together.”

“Sy isn’t Barbie’s shadow,” Rowan declared like he’d written a thesis on it. “They’re two people with two separate souls. Sy is nicer and obviously more talented.” Sy preened. “Sy is my fated mate.”

“No fucking way can Sy be your fated mate!” Silas burst out.

“You’re out of your mind, man.” Louis fixed Rowan with a scowl. “At least Barbie and Killian have a mating bond. Where the fuck is yours?”

“We can fight about Rowan and Sy later,” Killian cut in sharply. “Right now, Cade needs our help!”

“Let me go, Sy!” Cade struggled to pull away.

“Don’t worry,” I said through Sy. “She won’t drain you like I did.” Rowan shot everyone a smug look, as if Sy’s gentleness proved his point. “But she needs to hold on until we root out the Fury and her curse.” I paused. “Brace yourselves, princes. Whatever comes next, don’t fucking interfere.”

“I can’t wrap my head around this—seeing Barbie shift to Sy,” Silas said, dragging his hand over his tired face. “I knew Barbie was a shifter, but I didn’t expect her to be this kind of shifter.”

“Take what you need, little scorpion.” Killian spoke to me directly, even though Sy had taken over.

“We’ve got your back, little monster,” Rowan said, hovering over Sy like a shield.

Sy and I tracked the Fury’s trail through Cade. Our mind-eyes followed his blood flow through every vein until we spotted it.

A black alien vein had latched onto the superior vena cava near his heart, siphoning his energy. The Fury clung on tight, gorging herself.

“Kiss Cade, Sy,” I said through Sy’s lips, playing it up for Rowan’s benefit to keep both him and Cade from freaking out. “We found the Fury, and we’re gonna take her down.”

Sy grabbed the mage prince and slanted her mouth against his, all fierce lips and sharp fangs. When she growled and nudged, Cade parted his lips, letting her tongue sweep in.

Silas and Louis watched with undisguised envy.

“Is a kiss really necessary?” Rowan ground out.

“You want to save our brother or not?” Killian snapped back. His relief was obvious—better Sy kissing Cade than me. “Besides, that kiss isn’t even romantic.”

“Make it quick, little monster,” Rowan ordered Sy. “We don’t want Cade suffering through this longer than he has to.”

The Fury tried to retreat into Cade’s heart, but my darkest flame blocked her escape. Sy’s light wrapped around the mage prince, shielding him while my dark flame burned the black spells forged with blood magic and severed the Fury’s connection to her host.

Bayrose hissed, trapped with nowhere to run. In panic, she bolted from Cade’s body. Sy broke the kiss, her claws lashing out, her white light snagging the Fury.

“Going somewhere, little Bayrose?” Sy’s voice dripped with savage glee.

The princes gaped at the two-inch phantom Fury, her blue lips twisted as she squirmed and shrieked in Sy’s grip.

“Fuck, it’s real!” Silas shouted in alarm, jumping back in the water.

Louis’s eyes went wide. “Fuck me!” He made the sign of the cross.

Cade stared at the Fury, trembling, unable to utter a word. Terror and rage burned in his turquoise eyes, now free of shadows. Rowan’s vines emerged, ready to strike if the Fury slipped through Sy’s claws. That wasn’t going to happen on my watch.

“Kill it now!” Killian snarled.

“Make it confess before the execution.” Rowan had a different idea.

“I never wronged you, Bayrose. Why did you do this to me?” Cade asked, finally finding his voice, his face dark with cold rage. “Who worked with you?”

Bayrose threw her tiny head back and laughed.

“She won’t tell us,” I said through Sy’s mouth. “But I see the druid’s signature. We need to end her now. She’s no longer a being but the manifestation of a curse.”

Cade nodded for us to eliminate the Fury.

Sy’s white light poured into the Fury’s phantom mouth while my dark flame engulfed it, and together we erased the Fury’s soul forever.

“I’ve never felt so light,” Cade said, tears streaming down his face. He turned to Sy. “You and Barbie freed me. I owe you a life debt.”

“Consider it even, Prince Cade,” I said.

Suddenly, my familiar bond pulled taut. A second later, Pucker popped into existence above the water, making everyone jump.

“Ladies and gentlemen.” His grin faded when the heirs met him with stony faces.

No one liked surprises, especially when the heirs were still wrestling with everyone’s secrets—including their own—and failing to hide their shock and nerves.

Pucker shot Sy an uncertain look. “So the cat’s out of the bag?”

“Report, Pucker,” Killian interrupted. Always the hardass.

Mental note: remind him later that Pucker answered to me. I could get territorial too—no one liked their toes stepped on.

“Uh, I’ll just tell both you and mistress,” the ghost guardian said. “You there, Barbie? An army of Shriekers is heading here. They’re about two miles out. You wanted me to watch the other side of the Veil, and I did.”

We can battle in my form, Sy offered.

No, I said. You can’t channel the heirs’ magic. Plus, we can’t risk Ruin discovering you.

A rush of light and dark wind wrapped around me, and I surged forward.

Barbie

When we reached the Veil, a small army of supernaturals had rallied around the heirs—over three hundred strong and itching for a fight.

We pushed through the shimmering Veil. Cade and his team had fortified the ward, with Bea—now one of his high mages—flexing some serious magical muscle.

The army of Shriekers darted through the burned woods toward us, their clanking and rumbling echoing across the wasteland. They halted fifty yards away, a dead zone of blackened dirt stretching between us.

I’d scorched this land, draining its magic in panic while fighting off three Shriekers who had hunted me down. The guilt of siphoning the land’s magic still gnawed at me, but back then, I’d been backed into a corner.

The Shrieker horde emerged like walking nightmares—eight-foot-tall terrors with



mechanical torsos and massive scorpion claws. They lined up in battle formation, perpetual hunger twisting their monstrous faces.

I held my ground beside Killian, the other heirs flanking us with Rowan sticking closest, standing guard over me.

The largest Shrieker stepped forward, more humanoid than monster. It bore Ruin's mark, skulls in chains, between eyes that locked onto me. I could feel my father's presence swirling within them like inky smoke. This new commander was different. Not only was my father's presence stronger in it than his previous vessel, but his power was wrapping the abomination in a shield.

Ruin was leveling up.

Anxiety and revulsion scraped against my bones.

"Give us the princess and you'll live." My father's voice slithered from the commander, icing my spine.

Shit!

I'd planned to reveal my true identity to the heirs in a controlled environment within Underhill, but that motherfucker had just beaten me to it and ruined everything for me all over again.

"What princess?" Silas barked.

"Princess! Yes, princess!" The horde's chorus was like nails scratching over broken glass, making my teeth chatter.

"You'll die for defiling our land," Killian said, his voice arctic with rage.

My father's glacial gaze locked onto Killian. "So, you're the one she fucks. I remember you from last time, and I've marked you. I'll give you one last chance, foolish boy. Deliver Princess Ruin of North Kingdom, who calls herself Barbie now—a pitiful choice—and I'll spare your realm."

I snarled at the sound of Princess Ruin. My rage burned hotter when he dared insult my mate. He would pay for both. Yet beneath my fury, dread coiled in my stomach as I waited for the heirs to discover my identity.

"You won't have her!" Silas declared, his voice hard as steel.

Relief flooded through me, though I was surprised the shifter prince had jumped to defend me so fiercely.

"Barbie stays with us," Louis said, his lips curving into a snarl. "And you'll die today."

The heirs shifted forward, their shoulders aligned in a protective crescent before me.

Rowan smiled, cold and lethal, as he drew his fae blade from behind his back, steel glinting in the light. None of the weapons the supernaturals wielded could deal a death blow to the Shriekers—I'd told all the heirs this—but they still drew their weapons out of instinct.

"Then we'll pick the flesh off your bones," the commander said, its scaled lips pulling up in a grotesque smile.

The Shriekers screeched at their master's promise, scorpion-like claws pounding their metal chests, filling the battlefield with haunting echoes. Behind me, our small army of supernaturals winced at the grinding sound.

Rage pulsed through the heirs like a rush of electricity, and I felt every volt of it through our connection. Dark flame coiled inside me, eager to break free, but I held it back.

Not yet. Not yet.

“Steady, warriors!” Rowan shouted.

Our warriors straightened and bellowed battle cries, fire blazing in their eyes.

None showed fear, even though the enemies outnumbered us ten to one. Three hundred was all we could gather, but they were the best in the realm. The academy held over a thousand students, but they weren’t ready for this battle—they’d be slaughtered. Plus, only my Deathsong could slay these abominations. The supernaturals would slow down the horde while the heirs channeled their power into me. That was the plan.

“Courage!” Cade called. “Fight in groups. Guard your left and right!”

“Yes, sir!” the warriors answered.

“Kill them all! Only allow your princess to live,” the enemy commander bellowed, leveling its claws at the heirs.

The Shrieker horde rolled toward us like a dark tsunami.

“Formation!” Killian raised a fist and roared.

The heirs stepped behind me, hands on my shoulders, their magic channeling into me. The warriors from different houses spread into a V shape. Their role: engage and stall any Shrieker that broke past our first defense, which was the heirs and me, and stop

them from breaching the Veil.

Thunder cracked the air as Killian's lightning struck the commander, but my father's creature didn't fall, inky smoke pouring out of its eyes and shielding it. My father had grown much stronger. He could wield part of his power through his vessel.

Killian struck again, lightning arcing down from the sky and hitting the first row of Shriekers. A dozen dropped, but not all died instantly; some thrashed on the ground. Killian's lightning couldn't kill the commander while my father inhabited it, so he found a better use for his power.

We'd thin their numbers while isolating the commander until we could all deal with it together.

The heirs poured their powers into me. My body buzzed with their elemental magic. Fire, wind, earth, and water twirled and fused with my own power until I became a beacon of raw energy. Sy threw back her head and roared as I unleashed the channeled power. A wave of destruction swept across the battlefield, tearing through the Shrieker ranks like a scythe. Magic exploded against scaled flesh and machine parts.

One massive strike from our combined force demolished hundreds of Shriekers.

The heirs cheered and laid their heated hands on my shoulders again, ready to rinse and repeat.

The enemy commander waded through the web of lightning Killian threw in his path. I was his only target.

Rock charged toward the commander, Deathsong gripped in his hand. I'd offered him the blade that could kill Shriekers, and now I watched closely, making sure the evil

weapon wouldn't turn on him while my father's spirit possessed the commander. Cassius and a small supporting group joined Rock's charge, working to keep my father's vessel occupied.

Rock leaped up several feet, thrusting Deathsong toward the space between the commander's eyes, but the commander blocked him with a red broadsword. Fire sparked from the clashing blades. My father hissed a command, trying to summon Deathsong back. The evil blade flashed with dark light but stayed firm in Rock's grip. I exhaled in relief. I'd fed the blade my blood and imprinted my dark flame along its edge before the battle—its loyalty now remained with me and my people.

The commander snarled and slashed its claws at Cassius as the expert swordsman swiped his longsword at its neck. This commander, protected by my father's power, wouldn't fall easily. The abomination shifted forward and broke the blade-lock with Rock. When it swung its red blade toward Rock, the werewolf dropped to his knees and drove the evil blade up toward his opponent's groin.

That was an excellent move.

A column of smoke cocooned the commander, and my father's corrupted power blasted out, slamming into the warriors around him. Our warriors' shields held, but the force still drove them back several feet. Through his vessel, my father fixed his gaze on me—a clear dare to face him.

But I had my hands full working with the heirs to weaken the Shrieker force.

The heirs' combined powers surged through me, coiling tight and mingling with my touch. I unleashed another magic bomb and let it drop into the Shrieker ranks like a comet, reducing hundreds of them to ash.

Whooping, the heirs reached for me again, eager for another strike. Killian also

hurled a series of lightning bolts into the Shrieker mass, his death power riding their tail. Dozens of Shriekers crumpled into lifeless heaps.

Then all of a sudden, the Shriekers swarmed. Our backup warriors charged forward, colliding with the enemy from all sides. Swords clashed against metallic claws. Battle cries shook the earth and the burned woods.

Killian's lightning and the heirs' and my combined powers hammered the densest crowd of the Shriekers. But with these fuckers everywhere, the heirs and I couldn't spare time to build up our combined magic bombs. After a dozen strikes, burnout clawed at our edges. Then my heart dropped to my stomach when the second Shrieker army crashed in.

The battle raged. A spare team from different houses poured their magic through me, but our reservoir drained fast, exhaustion breathing down our necks. I couldn't let myself deplete, which would make me lose control, and then before I knew it, I'd drain the Veil and all the magic behind it.

The Shriekers pressed forward in endless waves, their shrieks piercing the air as more poured through the scorched woods. Even if I unleashed my ace and risked my father discovering my new power, I'd torch my own people too, as these abominations had broken our formation and tangled with our forces on all sides.

The heirs' magic bled out fast. Blood trickled from Louis's nose as he swayed on his feet. Silas fought to keep his wolf from taking control, his ragged breathing matching the amber flicker in his eyes. Cade's face was ash-gray. Even after I'd stripped the Fury and curse from him, the mage prince was running on fumes after too many years of being siphoned.

Rowan tried to play it cool, but the dull sheen in his silver eyes gave him away.

The enemies kept swarming us. The heirs had sent messengers sprinting to their kingdoms, but what good would the reinforcements do? Their magic and weapons couldn't even scratch the Shriekers. A fresh supply of magic to channel would be nice, but with Shriekers surrounding our warriors, I couldn't blast through hundreds of abominations without taking our people with them.

The battlefield erupted into a hellish symphony, screams mixing with the clash of metal and claws. I launched a small-scale magic bomb at the Shriekers surrounding two vampires and a shifter, obliterating the abominations. But I was too late to save a warrior from the House of Vampires, as a Shrieker's scorpion claws had already punched through him. A fae warrior dropped next, his eyes staring up listlessly. Then two witches fell, one's head nearly severed by Shrieker claws, the other with her chest ripped open.

Half a dozen wolves squared off against twice as many Shriekers. Some shifters had transformed, but their claws were useless against the metallic monstrosities. I watched, gut twisting, as Shrieker tentacles shredded a massive wolf. My magic bomb turned the remaining abominations to ash, yet more rushed forward. Killian's lightning and the combined force of the heirs and me had already taken down a third of their forces, but it wasn't enough. Now hundreds of them circled me and the heirs.

"Princess! Princess!" Their metallic voices grated through the air.

Pain, rage, and dread clogged my throat as I watched the battlefield become a graveyard of familiar faces.

This is war, and war has casualties, Sy cut in, ever practical. When it mattered, my soul sister always stepped up. Don't let it weigh you down. Push on!

She raged inside me, dying to come out to fight, but we both knew we couldn't risk Ruin spotting her. Now her magic had manifested, she'd shine like a fucking beacon.

My heart squeezed with sorrow and panic. I couldn't watch more people die. But surrendering wasn't an option. I carried Sy. If she fell into my father's hands, everything would be lost.

My eyes found Killian. My mate stood alone in the thick of the Shrieker ranks. The abominations closed in on him as his lightning grew weaker with every strike. He was spent, yet he still tried to draw their attention to him, keeping them from rushing me.

"Killian needs us!" I shouted over the chaos. "They've got him surrounded!"

Louis swung his sword at a Shrieker that had breached our line, but the blade glanced uselessly off its mechanical hull. His man bun had come loose, with patches of hair torn out at the roots.

"Tighten formation!" Rowan bellowed. "We have to protect Sy and Barbie!"

But it was a losing battle. The five of us could barely hold our ground under the relentless assault. The Shriekers had orchestrated this perfectly—dividing us, trapping us, and now closing in for the kill. Their metallic chattering and piercing shrieks grated against our already frayed nerves. Machine-cold claws raked across my back, drawing a gasp of pain. Through the chaos, I could see the heirs fighting desperately to reach me, but the distance between us only grew.

Rowan was closest, but five Shriekers kept him pinned, drawing frustrated roars from him. Our disadvantage stared us in the face—no one's weapons or magic could kill the abominations, except mine. We had only one effective weapon, Deathsong, and Rock was using it to hold the enemy commander back. Ruin's attack had already caused several deaths from the chaos house. Cassius danced around the commander, keeping it from pushing toward me while Rock tried to land hits where he could.



“Killian!” Cade shouted. My mate had pushed too deep into the Shrieker ranks. “To us! Fall back, everyone! Retreat to the other side of the Veil!”

“We need to regroup!” Silas yelled. “We can’t hold them like this. Those fuckers are too many!”

The survivors of our small army started falling back, fighting through the horde. By the Veil, Bea was helping wounded warriors retreat to the safety of the realm.

The heirs carved a path ahead, leading everyone toward the Veil, but Killian was stranded amid the enemy. Wave after wave of Shriekers, all nine feet tall, charged at him under my father’s command. He knew what Killian meant to me, even if he might not know Killian was my true mate.

“I can’t leave him behind!” I shouted, launching myself onto a Shrieker’s metallic head.

“Barbie, get back to safety!” Killian’s panicked voice cut through the chaos. “Leave me!”

Like hell I would.

Tentacles snapped at me from every direction, but I was already airborne, leaping onto another Shrieker’s head twelve feet away. Before I could find my footing, I sprang again, landing on yet another abomination, moving too fast for them to get a clean shot.

I plunged deeper into the Shriekers’ ranks.

“Princess! Princess! Come home!” Their shrieks echoed with sickening excitement.

Killian fought toward me, lightning crackling around him. The heirs and a team of chaos warriors carved their way through the horde. I was steps from Killian. My hand morphed into razor-sharp claws and plunged between the third eye of my current Shrieker perch before I dropped to Killian's side.

A path through the Shrieker army opened before us, and my stomach dropped. It was for my father. The commander charged toward us, fixated on capturing me. The shield around his vessel had shrugged off everything we'd thrown at it—my evil blade, Killian's lightning, even our combined magic bombs.

"Leave me, love!" Killian growled. "I'll hold him back."

"I didn't come all this way just to abandon you, you fool," I shot back.

"No one's called me a fool and lived to tell the tale!"

"Oh yeah?" I countered. "Then stop being one for once. When I come to rescue you, you say thank you. I don't run around getting all sweaty for fun."

"And you shouldn't," he said, his voice tight with worry. "Your safety matters more than anything!"

He pulled me to him. His lightning and starlight exploded outward, the shockwave driving the Shriekers back. An idea sparked in me. I'd combined powers with the heirs, but never with Killian. I laced my fingers through his, and he caught on instantly. His power surged through me, and I drunk it in deep, our mating bond flaring to life.

My back arched, burning need for him coursing through me. Killian growled in response, heat searing his storm-blue eyes.

But we couldn't get distracted now. I threaded my dark flame into his death light, the power he'd inherited from Hades. He was death, and I was ruin. We were made for this.

I threw my palm up. A beam darker than midnight shot toward the commander as it lunged for me. The lethal strike landed between its eyes, sank deep, and ripped through it. The thing burst into flames, my father's inhuman scream cutting off as it died.

A plume of smoke exuded from the Shrieker commander, spreading across the battlefield like a dark canopy.

A thunderous, sinister voice boomed from the living smoke. "You can't run from me, daughter. Now I've learned everything I need. I will come in my true form, bringing an army as vast as the ocean, countless as the sand. All will kneel and tremble in terror before me. Until you surrender, daughter, I'll spare no one. I'll start with the one you've been fucking while you watch?—"

I raised a hand to summon my dark flame to shut him up, but only a trickle came. I was more drained than I'd realized, and Killian was just as spent. We'd thrown everything we'd left into destroying Ruin's vessel.

The horde of abominations shrieked with bloodlust, thousands pushing toward us. Killian and I stood alone, trapped deep in the enemy ranks. The heirs fought to reach us, but I screamed for them to fall back. They'd never make it in time and would die trying. I couldn't watch any of them fall. There'd been enough death already.

I trembled, and Killian held me against him. His heat and courage comforted me.

"He won't get to you," my mate vowed. "I won't allow it."

“I don’t want anything bad to happen to you, even though you’re a hardass fool sometimes,” I said, my mouth full of ash and fear.

“I can live with being a hardass fool,” he said. “And nothing’s going to happen to either of us. Now get on my back.”

I didn’t ask why. Sometimes you just needed to listen and have faith. Trust didn’t come easy to me, but Killian had proved that he could be trusted.

A flash of starlight and fire rolled through the air, and Killian shifted. His dragon exploded into being beneath me. I was suddenly perched on Tyson’s back, my arms wrapped around his neck, hanging on for dear life. Light glinted off his black and sapphire scales, his massive wings ablaze with fire.

Tyson was a force of nature, deadly, beautiful, and ridiculously protective. While Killian and I were drained dry, Tyson was bursting with energy. He launched into the air and roared his challenge, blasting a jet of fire straight into the vast sentient smoke of my father’s essence, toasting it.

Dear old dad hadn’t expected that one, had he?

“Eat shit!” I bellowed.

“Eat fire, as my flame isn’t shit,” Tyson corrected primly.

The smoke shrieked, an inhuman sound, before vanishing under another blast of dragon fire. Ruin’s spirit fled back to his lair. It would take him days to return; Tyson had bought us precious time.

The sky cleared above us.

The dragon rained fire on the army of abominations below, but the Shriekers were endless.

The ground shook. A portal ripped open from the blackened woods, its edges crackling with hellfire. From its center poured an army of horned demons, each wielding an ax wreathed in infernal flame. Something stirred in my blood, my genetic knowledge telling me these weapons were forged in Hell's inferno.

My breath caught as Queen Lilith emerged at the head of her thousands-strong force. She strode forward in gleaming black armor, crowned in darkness, wielding a flaming archangel blade.

She crashed into the Shrieker horde like an avenging storm, her blade carving through them with deathly precision. Her army surged behind her, their infernal weapons finding purchase where mortal steel had failed. They carved through the mechanical ranks with efficiency.

The battle kicked back into high gear without my father around, our warriors jumping right back into the fray. Demons dropped left and right, but fresh ones popped up to replace them instantly. Demons got off on violence.

Lilith fought with lethal grace, the abominations crumbling before her. She was breathtaking and terrifying—everything a queen of Hell should be.

I didn't like that she looked so damn glorious. I wondered what Killian thought of his maybe-ex-betrothed as he watched through his dragon's golden eyes. Was she even his ex? He hadn't exactly made their breakup official.

I bit my lip as guilt crept in to replace my insecurity. Great timing for relationship drama—right in the middle of a freaking battle.

Good timing. Sy gave me a nod.

Tyson rained down streams of fire on the Shriekers the demons had missed, while I shielded his vulnerable belly from the barrage of iron arrows with the wisp of power I had left.

The battle accelerated into a blur until suddenly, it was over. Silence blanketed the battlefield for one breathless moment before Tyson shattered it with his victory roar. I purred encouragingly, and he let loose a few more triumphant bellows, shooting flames skyward as we soared. His massive wings cast sweeping shadows across the carnage below.

He commanded every eyeball on the field, completely upstaging the demon queen. Even she craned her neck to stare at us, her gaze landing on me. Yep, I was the girl riding the dragon. A legit dragon rider! And I'd bet on my stolen treasure that Tyson wouldn't let anyone else up here.

I'm not a horse. You're the only one who'll ever get on my back, mate, Tyson said.

Sy pouted at that exclusion; even she didn't make the cut.

My triumph over Queen Lilith evaporated as I took in the carnage below. My heart clenched at the sight of our fallen warriors who'd never rise again, their bodies scattered among the Shrieker remains. Something else hit me hard as I watched the horned demons swarm the battlefield. The five houses had always distrusted demons for good reason, but today they'd been the ones to save the day under their queen's command. Now our realm owed her.

My stomach twisted. Deals with demons always came with a brutal price tag. I felt Killian's growl rumble through Tyson. We'd won the battle, but I wouldn't exactly call this a victory.

I knew with chilling certainty that my father would come in the flesh soon, just as he'd threatened. Ruin had scored valuable intel today. He'd seen how the princes and I operated, witnessed Killian's death light, my dark flame, and his dragon in action. He knew our strengths and weaknesses now, and I'd bet those demon weapons weren't news to him either.

When he returned, he'd come prepared. And he'd bring an army big enough to wipe every supernatural off the map.

My mouth tasted like ashes thinking about what the future would bring.

Everyone's watching you on the dragon, Sy said. Sit straight and tits up.

We should get down and join the others, Killian told his dragon. You've had your moment. Now don't milk it and ruin everything.

Tyson snorted, clearly not ready to give up his spotlight.

Think you're the smartest one here? Killian said. The best move is to enter the scene late and leave early. Keep them wanting more, talking about you because they didn't get their fill.

Tyson blinked, mulling that over before turning to get my take.

We can hit the skies again after we handle some business, I said.

The dragon dove. I leapt off his back the second he touched down. Lightning exploded, and Killian surged forth. Where the dragon had perched now stood the chaos prince, just as intimidating as his beast form, with starlight and darkness swirling around him.

The bell tolled from the depths of Shades Academy, announcing that reinforcements from all the kingdoms had finally shown up. What a joke. But hey, they were left with the cleanup job outside the Veil.

Queen Lilith glided toward Killian, shining like a star, even though she was fallen.

“Will you celebrate with me tonight in my house, beloved?” Her voice was musical, nothing like my husky growl. I was never the cultured, civilized type, and I wasn’t ashamed.

We’re beautiful savages, Sy said with pride.

“I need to talk to you about something important,” the queen pressed.

Rage surged in me, clouding my vision. Sy urged me to sink our claws into the queen’s back as she tried to stake her claim on Killian.

“Tonight doesn’t work for me,” he replied, his face blank as stone, not even glancing my way. “The heirs and I need to plan a masquerade ball.”

The rest of the heirs had reached us by then, momentarily looking confused.

“Oh, right, that.” Cade caught on quickly and grinned. “We were planning a party before those damn Shriekers paid us a visit. We’re hosting it in Trailblazer Courtyard tomorrow night. Everyone’s invited.”

“Time to officially welcome the sixth house to Shades Academy.” Killian nodded at Queen Lilith. “Your house earned that honor today defending Mist of Cinder.”

He turned and strode toward the Veil without another word to her. I sidled up next to him. The rest of the princes fell in line behind us while the queen watched us go.



18

Barbie

Killian, the rest of the heirs, Bea, and I trekked to the leyline in the Valley of Mist. I'd insisted on bringing Bea as I trusted her with my life, and it was time to let her in on my secrets. After the battle, we'd all hit our houses to clean up before regrouping to sketch out a plan. Better to figure shit out before our kings and queens summoned us to their courts.

My eyes caught on the mist ahead. It felt like another lifetime when Rowan and I had our "date" here. Everything had flipped so fast. Now Sy was Rowan's mate, and I belonged to Killian.

The leyline—reserved strictly for royals—branched off to different destinations. Bea's eyes went wide with awe. She stuck close to me, still nervous around the heirs, though whenever I landed in a shitstorm, she'd transform into a fierce bulldog ready to throw down for me.

"There're more wonders to see, Bea." I smiled at her. "You can shut your mouth now unless you're trying to catch flies."

She smiled back and nodded, her cheeks going pink.

"Last time you brought a pumpkin carriage, Prince Rowan," I said. "Will we ride in style again?"

“Of course,” he said before sticking two fingers in his mouth and whistling. “No need for formality now that you know Sy’s my mate.”

In a flash, a massive open carriage burst through the mist, powered by seven stallions—three black ones leading, four white ones following.

My sugar’s got some moves, Sy shrieked in delight.

The heirs motioned for me to hop in first, but Rowan stepped in my path.

“You’ve had your turn in the fairy carriage, Barbie,” he said. “How about letting Sy have a go?”

Sy perked up and nudged me. Let me experience it!

“No way,” Killian cut in. “Barbie rides the carriage. She earned it today!”

I held up a hand. “Sy can ride, but we’ll shift inside the carriage discreetly.”

Rowan stepped aside to offer his hand, but Killian shoved him away.

“You don’t hold Barbie’s hand; I will,” Killian said.

He stepped in first to check things out before extending his hand to me.

I shook my head at the alpha male drama but took Killian’s hand and ducked inside. Rowan slid in right after, boxing me between them. Bea climbed in next, the other heirs joining her in the back seat.

The carriage could easily fit a dozen people with room to spare.

Come on, let's shift! Sy bounced with impatience.

I rolled my eyes and gave up the reins. As Sy pushed to the surface, Killian wrapped us in darkness, hiding the transformation. Sy materialized in a pink cardigan and dress pants, pure modern chic. Rowan yanked her close and kissed the crown of her white hair. She could switch up her hair color on a whim.

She leaned into her lover but twisted around to flash a grin at every heir. Killian was the only one immune to her charm. He straight-up ignored her, clearly annoyed she'd gotten my spot. He'd wanted to spend more time with me, even in a carriage shared with the other heirs.

"Princelings, hello," Sy purred, living for the spotlight.

The heirs lurched forward, caught in her web of charm and sex appeal.

"Sy, great to see you," Silas said.

"You look stunning, Sy," Louis said.

Cade shook his head, fiddling with his designer scarf. "It's going to take some getting used to, seeing them swap bodies like that."

Bea gawked at Sy. It was her first time seeing us shift, even though I'd warned her about the whole Sy situation before we'd met up with the heirs.

"Barbie?" Her voice came out small and unsure. "You in there?"

"She's here," Sy answered for me. "Hey there, little witch."

She's a high mage now, I corrected.

“Uh, hi, Sy, nice to meet you,” Bea said with a shy wave.

The horses launched forward, the carriage flying at high speed. We plunged into the mist. One blink, and we were gliding over an endless desert under a starlit sky. Next blink, the stallions were trotting across a bridge spanning a crystal lake, stopping at the foot of broad stone stairs that climbed to a glass mansion.

We were in the fae realm. This villa was Rowan’s safe lair, just like the dragon realm was Killian and Tyson’s sanctuary.

The group climbed the stairs flanked with exotic trees, shrubs, and blossoms, then entered the mansion. In no time, they all gathered on the terrace overlooking the lake. The air tasted of wine and spring.

The outdoor setup was the same. Plush chairs circled a long handcrafted wooden table laden with cheese soufflés, tarts, and cream puffs. My mouth watered, but I held back from taking control. This was Sy’s moment—her time to savor it.

Sy was beside herself, her eyes darting everywhere to drink in the view. She’d tagged along last time, but experiencing it firsthand hit on a different level.

Everyone settled around the table, Killian and Rowan flanking Sy while the heirs lined the other side. Bea perched at the end, taking it all in.

Rowan poured champagne for Sy before telling the heirs to help themselves. Sy grabbed a cream puff, fighting back tears of joy. She’d never dreamed of having a life like this, of being accepted this way.

That was all she wanted.

I want more, Barbie, she said. I want us to have a real future with children one day.

I swallowed, and my chest tightened. That future wasn't for me, but I'd fight to give her that. Sy could live for both of us. My heart ached for Killian and Tyson, but they'd have to learn to go on without me. The oracle's words were branded into my skull, and I knew that piece of dark prophecy was coming for me.

Sy took a big bite of a soufflé and moaned in pleasure. I remembered how rich and fresh it tasted. Funny how this worked—I could tap into her lust energy, but watching her enjoy food was like pressing my face against glass. Hunger clawed at me, but I shoved it down.

“So, a goddess, aren't you, Sy?” Louis asked and swirled his crystal champagne glass. “No wonder when I first tasted your blood, I tasted nectar and a piece of heaven.” He threw his blond head back and laughed. “Now it all makes sense. I drank from a goddess—the only goddess in existence.”

Sy snatched his champagne glass and downed the golden liquid.

“I'm not a goddess, princeling. Barbie is,” she said with a sly smile. “You drank from her. I enjoyed it, but she wasn't thrilled.”

Killian shot Louis a harsh look. “I don't care if you're my brother—you'll never drink from her again.”

“It's about time we had a goddess among us,” Cade said.

“I knew Barbie and Sy were extraordinary from the moment I welcomed them into my house,” Silas said. “And I recognized right away that Barbie was a special shifter.”

Yeah, right. He'd pegged me as some low shifter, and when he'd been drawn to my power, he'd been pissed, thinking I wasn't good enough for him, and backhanded me.

But I let it go. After all he'd done for me, it was water under the bridge.

"If you aren't a goddess like Barbie, then what are you, Sy?" Cade asked. "And how does this work—the two of you share a body like twins?"

"They aren't twins," Rowan snapped, sounding every bit the irritated expert.

I figured I was best qualified to answer that question, so while Sy was mid-bite into an almond cookie, I took over. Sy sank within me, stumbling and hissing in displeasure as the cookie tumbled onto the plate.

Everyone at the table jumped except Killian. The other heirs would need time to adjust to seeing Sy and me shift back and forth. Bea pressed her hand to her heart, trying to steady herself.

"Next time, give us some warning, would you, Barbie?" Silas said with a smile.

"Couldn't you at least let Sy finish the cookie?" Rowan scolded.

The dragon in Killian growled, a trail of fire departing his lips. Rowan didn't seem impressed.

"If you want answers, that's how it works," Killian said. "Like it or not, my mate is the primary. She fought the battle and she's drained. She needs to feed more than Sy." He ignored Rowan's scowl. "Eventually, we'll need to solve this body-swapping situation."

"I'm working on a way for Sy and me to separate," I revealed, letting out an unsteady breath. "I need to find Moirai—she knows how to get it done."

Killian and Rowan straightened, hope and joy lighting their eyes at the possibility.

They had no idea what it would cost me.

The oracle's warning echoed in my head. "A separation is coming. It will bring you the greatest pain, worse than the worst labor pain...When you're in the pit of the darkest place where all lights go out and you think no one will ever come for you, and when you walk through the valley of death, utterly alone, and evil touches your soul..."

I'd fled before hearing the rest of her prophecy, too terrified to face the truth it held. The inevitable weighed on me, but I'd bear this terrible fate and find a way to separate from Sy, no matter the cost.

Sy stiffened, her emotions churning—hope, fear, and sorrow all tangled together. She yearned for her own life, dreaming of waking in her mate's arms. Our separation was her only path forward, though part of her ached to stay with me.

We'd shared a soul-bond since the beginning, but that connection had to end soon, and I kept my final destiny hidden from her.

"I once thought I created Sy to help me survive the terrors I was subjected to under the thumb of the God of Ruin," I said, sucking in a shaky breath as emotions rioted within me. "I even thought she was my other persona, not knowing that—" I paused to gather my thoughts and get my emotions under control. I'd been carrying all these lethal secrets, but now I was letting it all out and trusting my friends. "I've been carrying the last drop of the oldest magic since I was born. Sy is that last drop of old magic becoming flesh. The Maiden confirmed it."

Pure shock painted everyone's faces—even Killian's. The entire realm's hope clung to the prophecy of the One bringing back old magic. The Brides Selection existed based solely on that promise. And now the last drop of living magic made flesh was right in front of them.

The heirs gaped as the magnitude of this revelation sank in, clearly struggling to process that their salvation wore a pink cardigan and liked bubble tea.

They stared at me, but none of them questioned my truth. They'd witnessed Sy nearly single-handedly extract the Fury curse from Cade, and they could feel her magic, drawn to her more than they were to me.

Sy remained deathly quiet within me. All these years, she'd thought she was my protector, yet I'd been shielding her, hiding her within me to preserve her.

"No one else could carry such magic except me since I'm at least three-quarters goddess," I continued, my voice soft and low. "But don't ask about my mother—I don't know who the fuck she is. I can assure you, no good woman would mate with Ruin, but she was powerful enough to mate with an ancient god. Now that you know what Sy is, I need you to protect her at all costs. She's more important than me. I'm disposable, but she's not."

Killian growled. "You're not disposable. Never!"

Tyson growled too, fire escaping Killian's lips.

Sy hissed at me. Don't you dare say that. You and I are together forever.

I placed my shaking hand on Killian's as I fought back tears, knowing that one day I'd have to break his heart and the dragon's too. He cupped my hand in his palm and kissed my lips. "My dragon and I will protect you with our last breaths. All my brothers will protect you and Sy." He stared down at the heirs, waiting for their promises as well.

"Everything will be okay," I said softly. "I have my duties too—to protect the realm at all costs." I scanned the heirs. "She's the one thing all of you have been searching



for. I've carried her and brought her here. After our separation, it'll be your duty to take over the torch and guard her and her secret."

"I'll give up my life for you and Sy," Cade said. "I already owe you a life debt."

"I won't let anything happen to you and my Sy," Rowan vowed.

"You can count on all of us," Louis said, nodding at me. "As for who is Sy's real mate, that has to be decided. May the best man win."

Whoever mated Sy might become the High King.

"May the best man win," Silas echoed the vampire prince, ignoring Rowan's growl.

Silas and Louis had stopped courting me, but they wouldn't give up on Sy. She sat straighter within me, curling her clawed toes while beaming and scheming.

"Let's put aside this stupid competition," Killian said, "and focus on winning a war against a god. If we lose, nothing else matters. Our priority is to protect Barbie, Sy, and the realm."

"That will be our new pact as gentlemen," Louis said.

"Hello? Three ladies present!" I protested.

Hello! Sy shouted too.

"Let's make it a Covenant," Cade said, waving his wand. "We protect Barbie and Sy at all costs. We'll rally all five kingdoms to wage war against the God of Ruin."

"Hell yes, let's take on the fucking god," Silas said, grinning. "With the five of us

plus Barbie and Sy? We can take down anything that fucking moves.”

“Bea is a high mage,” I added. “She’ll contribute greatly too, especially with spells and runes. We need weapons that can kill the Shriekers. Otherwise, we’ll be done for when Ruin comes in the flesh and brings his biggest army. Today, we learned that besides my evil blade, weapons forged in Hell’s inferno can also kill my father’s creatures.”

You’ve stepped into your role, Barbie, Sy said.

I stretched out my hand, and Deathsong fell into it. Runes glowed on its ebony blade, and it giggled eerily in the heirs’ heads, Hello, princelings. I’m the famous evil blade.

The heirs blinked.

“What the fuck?” Silas jumped.

“As it said,” I shrugged, “it’s the evil blade, but it can kill Shriekers. Better to be useful than nice. And it’s loyal to me, even though it was forged by my father.”

You’re more fun than that old god, mistress, Deathsong said in my head. And I love to betray him. I’m an amazing evil blade.

“May I?” Cade asked, stretching out his hand. I passed Deathsong to him.

Good to see you up and about now that the evil Fury’s gone, Prince Cade, said Deathsong.

“How did it learn my name?” Cade asked in a tense voice.

I know all about you, all of you, Deathsong said. And before you went to rescue my

mistress, she had a very low opinion of all you princelings, her mate included.

Don't overshare, I commanded the blade while stuffing cakes into my mouth at rapid speed, washing them down with champagne from two glasses.

"Slow down, little scorpion. Don't choke yourself," Killian murmured, kissing my frosting-coated lips. "There's enough. There'll always be enough for you."

I smiled at him. "I won't choke myself."

Cade studied the evil blade while Louis and Silas leaned in to examine it too. Deathsong preened at the attention. Look your fill, princes, it said. Take your sweet time.

Bea scooted over to join Cade. "I think we can use Deathsong as a model to forge more weapons like it, but we'll need Barbie's blood for the runes on the blade."

I nodded.

"No!" Killian and Rowan shouted in unison.

"We'll trade with Queen Lilith for a supply of weapons," Killian said.

"Your betrothed and her demon army aided us," Silas said, pushing on despite my snarl at him calling her Killian's betrothed, "but it doesn't mean they're our friends. You know that, right, Killian? Queen Lilith still wants to sit upon the High Queen's throne."

"It's not a good idea to have so many demons roaming our realm," Cade said, worry creasing his brow.

“And what are you going to do about Queen Lilith?” Rowan pressed. “She’s still officially your betrothed, isn’t she? You need to do right by Barbie.”

“I’ll take care of it,” Killian growled. “Right now, we need to focus on bigger issues than my love life.”

I shot him a hard look. For me, his relationship status was a big issue, but then again, I couldn’t offer him a future. Soon, I’d leave him behind. So as long as he stayed true to me while I was around, I wouldn’t push for anything official. But if she came near him again...well, I was just as territorial and dominant as him and his dragon.

“Queen Lilith knew I was the daughter of the God of Ruin,” I said. “She’s been targeting me, and I’m certain she’s allied with Ruin.”

“None of us trust her,” Cade said, his jaw clenched. “But she came through today while our own armies left us hanging.”

“Every kingdom sent mere hundreds of warriors,” Rowan said, disgust dripping from his words. “They’re all hoarding their main forces to guard their own territories. Face it—they’re just waiting for Shades Academy to fall.”

“We’ll get to that later,” Killian said. “If things keep going this way, we’ll have to take the thrones from our parents.”

“That’s treason!” Silas exclaimed.

I didn’t want them diving into politics, as the debates would drag on forever.

“I have every reason to believe Queen Lilith is the mastermind behind kidnapping me,” I said loudly. “Remember my duel with her ward and how Grace struck me down in the first round?”

“That was a brilliant strategy.” Louis smirked. “You let her think she defeated you, and then you lured her into a trap.”

I shook my head. “I was down, but none of you saw her use the knuckle guards made of the same dark material as the chains and torque the CrimsonTide kidnappers used on me. That’s how I put two and two together and connected Queen Lilith with the kidnappers.”

“Lilith did hijack my mate’s mind after the druid poisoned her with the Seed of Heaven,” Killian said, his voice tight. “And how else would a druid get his hands on a heavenly weapon? Only one being has a connection to the celestial realm—someone who was once a star.”

We all knew who he meant.

“Speaking of which,” I said, “Moirai said I must venture into the Underworld to find a golden arrow Lilith brought from Heaven.”

Killian’s eyes flared with fire, clearly hating the idea of me going to the Underworld.

“You aren’t going there, little scorpion,” he said. “I forbid it.”

“I don’t want to go there either,” I said, shuddering. “But the oracle said the fate of the realm relies on it. I don’t think she lied.”

“What’s the golden arrow for?” Silas asked, and the other heirs paid rapt attention too.

“It’s called Heaven’s Arrow,” I said. “The oracle told me I’d know it when I saw it. Here’s my plan: we need intel on this weapon before I waltz into enemy territory. Since you’re throwing this masquerade ball anyway, you can keep Lilith and her

ward busy while I sneak into the sixth house to hunt for clues. She's got to keep important stuff there—she is a queen, after all. Most importantly, I need a map of the Underworld.”

“Killian should have a detailed map of the Underworld,” Louis said. “You’ve been engaged to Queen Lilith for a long time, right? Even without a map, you must be able to sketch one from your visits to her realm.”

Killian glared at Louis. “Never set foot in the Underworld.”

All the heirs stared at him; their brows furrowed in judgment.

“How was I supposed to know we’d need a map?” he snapped. “I spent all my time dodging Lilith’s advances and pushing back the wedding date. She’s got the strongest mental powers in the realm. If I’d gone down there, I’d have been a goner.”

“Aren’t you Hades’s heir?” Silas snapped. “You should be able to shake off her control.”

“Wasn’t about to risk it, okay?” Killian growled. “Fine. I’ll set up a meeting with Lilith and check out this Heaven’s Arrow business in the Underworld myself.”

“No, you’re not making any appointments, and you’re definitely not going with her,” I said firmly, my chest tight at the thought of him taking that risk.

A spark lit his eyes. “Worried about me, little scorpion?”

“Don’t get cocky,” I said. “As I said, let me sneak into her house first.”

I can go, Sy chimed in eagerly. Everyone knows your face, but I’m still a mystery. I can even glamour myself to look like a demoness. I’m magic in the flesh!

That might actually be a better plan. Sy could be surprisingly capable when she set her mind to something.

“Sy’s offering to handle the spy work,” I said.

“Then I’ll be her backup,” Rowan jumped in.

As the heirs started hammering out the details and assigning roles, I stuffed more cakes in my mouth before letting Sy take over and enjoy herself. Rowan even broke out the last bottle of 1666 from his treasured cellar.

19

Sy

The blossoms on the ancient tree glowed. Light radiated from five towering sculptures that symbolized the guardians of the tree of life, each representing one of the houses. The buildings spread around Trailblazer Courtyard like compass points: Clockwork in the north, Infinite Library in the east, Pathfinder's obsidian dome of classrooms in the west, and Jubilee Haven in the south. The masquerade ball filled the courtyard below.

The House of Mages had outdone itself with this year's ball design.

The invitation had gone out through Spinchat. Thousands of masked students, faculty, and guests now packed the courtyard, the crowd flowing all the way to Windsong Woods. Only the sentinels went without masks, their watchful eyes scanning the campus as they patrolled.

After we returned to campus, rumors spread like wildfire, blaming Barbie for the Shrieker army invasion—and all those deaths. Word was she'd face another court trial.

It's like an endless freaking lawsuit, she said, rolling her eyes. But we ain't gonna worry about that shit.

She brushed off trouble with her usual swagger, an attitude I supported. Shit always seemed to find her anyway. She was a magnet.



One step at a time, I offered, but anxiety churned in my gut. For the first time ever, I had this nagging feeling that Barbie was keeping something major from me. I was afraid of bad things happening to her more than to me. Maybe it was all this separation talk. The thought of being apart from her terrified me, but I desperately wanted to be my own person. I dreamed about building a life with my fae mate.

The music swelled. Rowan extended his hand. “May I have this dance and all the dances after, little monster?” The possessiveness in his voice made my face flush with glee.

I beamed at him. “You may, sugar.” I slid my hand into his.

This dance was ours, and we’d keep dancing until that bitch queen Lilith showed up. Then Killian and the heirs would keep her and her ward occupied while Rowan and I slipped away to the demon house. Actually, Barbie and Rowan would pair up instead. I’d volunteered to do the spying, but Barbie had come up with something cleverer—she’d infiltrate the sixth house by impersonating her own replica.

We spun into the center of the courtyard. My lover looked devastatingly handsome even with the mask hiding most of his face, leaving only those moonstone-colored eyes and gorgeous lips visible. His otherworldly fae beauty stole my breath away.

The prince heirs wore identical black tuxedos, each cut perfectly to their frames and paired with matching dragon masks. They mirrored each other so precisely that it was impossible to tell them apart.

Their matching outfits shouted unity. The heirs fought like cats and dogs among themselves, but no outsider had ever managed to drive them apart. Hell, even when Killian and Rowan had tried to kill each other over Barbie and me, their brotherhood stayed unbreakable. The heirs were ruthless assholes, but they were our ruthless assholes now—mine, Barbie’s, and each other’s.

Rowan led with precise, lithe steps. No one danced better than him, and I moved with him as if we'd done this a hundred times before. That was how perfectly we fit together.

This time I hadn't needed to conjure my own dress. Rowan had gifted me a backless golden gown that made my eyes glow. High slits on both sides showed off my long, toned legs. Instead of hiding my savage side, the design flaunted it.

My sugar fae celebrated my wild beauty rather than trying to force me to fit into high society, and that meant everything. Any man foolish enough to try taming or changing me would learn just how stupid that mistake was.

I'd crafted my mask purely from magic, my own special creation. The design seamlessly integrated ocean, mountain, land, and sky. No one else could work magic quite like me, and I'd finally started owning that power. The pride and heat in my lover's eyes said he knew it too.

We spun across the center of the courtyard, drawing every eye. Our moves flowed with the beautiful music. Rowan's hand pressed possessively against my bare back.

I was wild. I was free. I was his.

The music slowed as whispers rippled through the crowd. I turned with everyone else to look.

Queen Lilith stood in the limelight, the crowd parting without her command. Her hair, two shades darker than Barbie's, flowed like captured golden sunlight. Her green eyes brimmed with raw power. Now that I looked straight at her, a flicker of familiarity caught my eyes—something about her echoed Barbie. But the moment I tried to focus on it, the similarity dissolved like morning mist.

I took in every detail. Her green silk gown hugged her perfect, regal figure. Sheer mesh formed the bodice, adorned with intricate floral designs. The burgundy skirt traced her curves before cascading to the floor, its train flowing behind her. The fabric trapped light in impossible ways, some mysterious material I'd never seen before. With each movement, her dress swirled around her like cosmic mist.

Her mask was crafted from polished quicksilver and studded with diamonds. Delicate wings swept up from her temples. Her intense green eyes scanned the crowd, hunting for Killian.

The air shimmered around her, infused with the power of the Underworld. She might be a fallen star who outshone Heaven, but she wouldn't outshine me.

Just as I gathered my magic to pull attention back to me and challenge the queen, Barbie yanked my raw magic back. I froze, stunned that she could sabotage me like that, but she was right about not exposing myself in front of our enemy.

Just then, Silas and Louis swooped in on Lilith, their black tuxedos and dragon masks identical as they circled her like seductive predators. The bad boys knew how to work a party. Silas beat Louis and reached the queen first, his hand finding her slender waist with practiced grace, his low chuckle sensual and irresistible.

Lilith tilted her head to regard her unexpected partner, as tradition demanded Killian approach her first, even at a masked ball.

As she peeked into Silas's amber eyes through his dragon mask, the shifter prince spun her against his chest, releasing her only to draw her back again. A smile played on the queen's lips as she let him lead their playful dance. Their movements flowed with the changing tempo, making them quite the striking pair.

Yet her eyes kept searching for Killian as they twirled. Before she could spot him,

Louis glided in, sweeping her into an elaborate dance. Light swirled across their sleek masks and her flowing gown.

The crowd couldn't look away from their queen, the night's brightest star.

Close by, Cade was waiting for his turn to engage the enemy, ready to pass the queen between them like a dark secret, a game that the queen could only guess at, never knowing the real truth.

Killian lurked in the shadows, alert and deadly, ready for damage control. His gaze burned into me, but I knew he was really watching Barbie through me, just as she gazed back at him. Their connection buzzed through my skin like electricity in sunlight, making me their unwilling bridge. Rowan drew me closer, offering his warmth and moral support.

"What's wrong, little monster?" His whisper against my ear sent a different kind of shiver through me.

I told him about being stuck between Barbie and Killian's intense connection.

"Assholes," Rowan murmured. "Those two are the most obnoxious pair. They just need to wait their damn turn like everyone else, like us!"

Lilith's gaze locked onto me right as Rowan and I were about to slip away for our mission.

Shit! I froze.

Do not react. Don't you dare twitch even one of your eyes, Barbie warned. Now that she'd mentioned it, fighting the urge to twitch was all I could think about.

Rowan spun me away from the fallen star. He didn't look in her direction but fixed his attention solely on me, as if I was his whole world.

I was, wasn't I?

“Are you making me guess your identity, Prince Louis? Is this a new game you princes play?” Lilith's voice held light amusement as she danced with him. “And who's that girl with Rowan?”

Her power ran so deep she could spot each prince despite their matching masks. Before Louis could respond, Cade swept in and whisked her into his arms, spinning her further from Rowan and me.

Our timing in dealing with the Fury couldn't have been better. Now curse free, the mage prince could dance with the demon queen without fear—could touch anyone he wanted.

“Party hard and dance, everyone!” Silas's voice boomed across the floor from the musicians' stage. “Life waits for no one. There might be no tomorrow!”

The crowd surged into motion, masks and bodies blending into a dizzying waltz of mystery and desire as the music soared.

In the chaos of shadow and light and dancing bodies, Rowan and I slipped away.

20

Barbie

“Slow down, girl,” the fae prince called after me.

He used “girl” to keep my cover intact.

“Time waits for no one, man,” I said, glancing at him over my shoulder as I zipped through the woods between buildings.

While the heirs kept Queen Lilith and her ward busy on the dance floor, Rowan and Sy had gotten away. Sy and I had swapped places in a school bathroom.

I darted past witch-lights dangling from branches. Students packed the woods too, swaying to the pulsing music. I zoomed past them, so fast I was nothing but a blur to their eyes. Back when I first landed in this realm, I’d snagged a bit of magic from a group of students to cloak myself. I no longer needed to steal magic, especially after mating with Killian.

Rowan caught up, still rocking his dragon mask.

“You can run. I’ll give you that,” he grunted.

“Sy runs faster with her longer legs,” I said.

Sy lit up. Let me take over. I want to run with my sugar.

You're being rude, Sy! Your lust is leaking out of my pores, I said in annoyance. Try not to distract me. I'm on a job.

Just remember when you get back to the ball, she said. I'll have a quickie with my man.

The House of Vampires, a maroon building with high, narrow windows on every floor, loomed ahead and stretched two blocks. Crimson letters perched above the twin doors.

Gunnar prowled the perimeter with a group of senior vampires, his black trench coat packed with weapons and spells. With the party in full swing on the campus, every house had cranked up security. No one took chances anymore, not when the Shriekers had come to our door.

The House of Vampires had admitted me when I first arrived in the realm, so Gunnar and I went way back. He'd never respected me and found me super annoying. He used to call me little shit or chihuahua and enjoyed intimidating me. Between patrols, he'd spend hours looking at himself in the mirror and playing with his hair, until I made him bald with my magic. I wished he'd gotten over it by now. Good looks fade anyway.

Gunnar's sharp eyes caught me, filled with suspicion, but he didn't rush to intercept me. First, I wasn't on the vampires' turf, and I had a giant escort—the fae prince with his dragon mask and longsword. Plus, my costume and mask kept him from spotting who I really was.

We zipped past the vampire house, the music fading to a distant beat.

A cathedral rose to our left, its obsidian walls eating every speck of light. The demon house sigil—a pointed star above a crown of hellfire—stretched across the crimson

metal door.

“We didn’t plan how we would get into the demon house,” Rowan whispered. “I was about to bring that up, but you just took off. You’re all impulse and no discipline.”

“Keep listing my flaws, sir,” I said. “Just know that I don’t care about bad reviews—don’t even bother reading them.” At his frown, I added, “Don’t you worry about the plan. I got this.”

He let out an exasperated sigh and rolled his eyes right through his dragon mask. People these days? Zero respect.

I strode toward the House of Demons like I owned the joint, working to steady my racing heart. Powerful supernaturals—especially shifters and vampires—could pick up on heartbeats. I hadn’t tested it on demons, and today wasn’t the time to find out.

Rowan strolled beside me like he was strolling in a park. Being born into privilege had its perks.

“I hope you know what you’re doing,” he said. “If this goes to shit, I’ll have to step in and save us from any embarrassment.”

“Embarrassment should be the least of your concerns,” I offered.

A group of demons in their house uniforms made a beeline toward us, and Rowan stiffened. I had history with their light-skinned leader, Amon. I’d beaten the shit out of him once and earned both his grudging respect and secret admiration.

At over seven feet tall, he towered over me.

“Stop!” he barked, cutting us off.



I paused, and Rowan halted beside me. He eyed the demons with distaste but kept his mouth shut—he'd agreed to let me take point on this one.

I pulled off my mask and shook out my golden curls, letting my pink flowery gown with its attached wings swish around me—the same gown Grace wore to the party.

“What, Amon?” I snapped.

“Princess Grace?” Amon's voice held a note of uncertainty.

“Who else would I be?” I demanded, narrowing my eyes.

His crimson eyes peered into mine, trying to make out their color in the dim light.

Sy had used her new power to glamour my eyes honeydew green, an exact match to Grace's. My double had tried to seduce Killian by changing her eyes to match my two-toned ones, so it only felt right to return the favor.

He nodded, satisfied after confirming my eye color.

“Just making sure Ugly Barbie doesn't sneak in,” he said. “She's too clever, and she always shits on her opponents.”

“Don't flatter her,” I barked, indignation creeping into my voice. “And you're vulgar!”

“Best not to underestimate Ugly Barbie again,” he said, shaking his head. His twin ebony horns caught the hellfire's glow. “According to our moles in other houses, she's stolen from and raided every single one.” Rowan tensed at hearing that there might be moles in his own house. “Who's to say she won't get into ours?”

“She won’t be able to trespass,” I said cockily. “We have the tightest security.”

“They say every house’s magic does her bidding, and even Underhill made a lair for her,” Amon said.

How did he know that Underhill had built a whorehouse for Sy?

I sneered. “Barbie isn’t all that. Stop licking the bottom of her boots. Now move.”

“Why are you back? Shouldn’t you be at the party?” he pressed, but he stepped aside as he asked.

“I got an itch,” I said with a shrug.

Amon glanced between me and Rowan, letting out a lewd chortle. Rowan growled beside me, and I gripped his arm to keep him from blowing our cover with his self-righteous indignation. Sy’s fury at the demon matched his.

“Well, I get it,” Amon said. “But isn’t your task to lead the chaos heir astray?” He gave Rowan another once-over. “I’m certain this guy isn’t him.”

“I need a break, all right,” I snapped. “And the next time you ridicule me, I’ll remind you exactly where you stand in the hierarchy.”

He raised his hands in a gesture of mocking surrender. “You’re very sensitive these days, Your Highness.”

He didn’t respect Grace—no surprise there. Supernaturals only respected strength, and demons took that rule to the extreme. No wonder—Sy and I had made Grace look weak on multiple occasions.

I strode past the demons with Rowan beside me. Amon shoulder-checked Rowan, and the fae prince stopped and hissed.

“Come, sugar,” I said. “Ignore him. Everyone knows Amon has no manners.”

The demons stayed put, watching us. I knew if I tried too hard to shoo them away before I entered the demon house, it would raise suspicion. They would only resume their patrol once they saw how the house received my guest.

I stepped through the archway toward the metal door, and Rowan gave me an uncertain sideways glance. The massive door glided open silently at my approach before a hellcat shot out—all fluffy black fur, snow-white paws, and eyes glowing with hellfire.

Before Rowan or I could react, the hellcat leaped into my arms.

Shit. I’d just met the house magic of the demon house. All house magic regarded me as kin, but this demon cat acted like he knew me, like he’d been waiting for me to come home.

He felt familiar, connected to me even, though I was sure I’d never met him before.

The hellcat was bigger than any housecat, and he lifted his chin for attention. I obliged, supporting his chunky bottom with one hand while scratching a spot under his chin with the other.

He purred loudly, hellfire from his silky fur falling onto my hand like embers. Rowan watched, intrigued, but kept his guard up. After all, this was a hellcat made of notorious demonic house magic.

“The hellcat has never acted like that before, except with our queen,” a demon

murmured from inside the house, poking his head out the door. “Strange that he’s suddenly taken a liking to Princess Grace.”

“Well,” I smirked, gesturing toward Rowan. “I brought a treat.”

Many demons burst out laughing. Sex and violence were their trade. They probably thought I was bringing in my new squeeze to fuck then maybe I’d murder him afterward if his performance wasn’t up to standard.

I waved Rowan forward. He half-bared his fangs at me, not appreciating the humiliation, but he had to play along to get the fucking job done. My heart pounded as I stepped over the threshold of the demon house, Rowan in tow, but the hellcat suddenly swatted his claws at the fae prince’s mask.

Rowan hadn’t expected it, but he was quick enough to duck. His back slammed into the metal door. The demon guards roared with laughter. Sy hissed through me, flexing her claws, wanting to shred the hellcat for messing with her mate.

Back off, I ordered Sy. This isn’t the time for you to get into a pissing match with a house cat.

A house cat? Sy narrowed her eyes at me.

The hellcat, on the other hand, wasn’t too pleased about missing her mark. He leapt from my arms and sailed toward the fae prince, claws out and fangs flashing, but he missed by a whisker. Spitting mad, the cat shot a stream of hellfire from his claws toward Rowan.

“Hey, hey! Let’s all be friends,” I called.

I spun around and planted myself between Rowan and the hellcat, curling Sy’s claws

to prevent her from using them on my new favorite cat.

He's our guest, I negotiated. If you want me to be your new best friend, let him in too. I added firmly, No negotiation.

No negotiation? the cat asked, narrowing his fiery eyes.

No, unfortunately, I said.

You say you'll be my new best friend? the cat pressed aggressively.

BFF, I said, crossing my fingers. I like you, and I'm not lying.

The hellcat purred. You should've visited my house earlier to meet me. You went to all the other houses!

Better late than never, right? I asked.

I'll let the fae prince in just this once, the cat declared. Our secret. I don't want the queen to get mad at me, not even for you.

Rowan growled, drawing his longsword at the sight of his scorched suit.

"The hellcat is under my protection," I warned him in a whisper.

"Since when?" he grated. "It tried to maim my face, and I happen to be fond of my good looks."

Sy nodded in agreement. My sugar doesn't have a single scar. He's perfection.

Please. The cat rolled his eyes.

“Since now,” I said. The hellcat purred, gazing at me in adoration before turning to hiss at Rowan. “Put away the sword, sugar . Even if you attack him, you won’t win. The hellcat is actually very friendly. He just doesn’t like strangers, which is totally understandable. Aren’t we all like that?”

No sleeping over for him! The hellcat gave Rowan one last indignant glare before trotting into the house, tail held high.

Of course. He must follow your rules. I followed the cat inside. Rowan muttered something under his breath as he fell into step behind me. A couple of demons tried to dash in after us, but the hellcat swished his tail, slamming the door shut. He even tossed out the demon who lingered in the doorway.

The interior of the demon house stretched up to impossible heights, its walls a fusion of blackened steel and volcanic glass. Ivory pillars rose from the floor around a vast inverted pentagram on black marble, its lines precise and cruel.

The demonic power made Rowan whisper under his breath, and the hellcat turned to hiss at him.

The demon house was just as sentient as the other five houses in Shades Academy. After meeting the hellcat, I reveled in how magic had borders and wrote its own rules.

As we ventured on, orbs of malevolent hellfire drifted through the air. Even with streams of hellfire coursing through the house’s framework like blood through veins, an unnatural chill crept through the space.

With limited time, I skipped the exploring and headed straight for the ivory-and-ebony stairs reserved for the queen.

Though Killian had refused to step into the Underworld, he'd visited the House of Demons when Lilith set up the sixth house here. I'd memorized the floor plan drawn by him, so I knew exactly where we were going, and somehow, I didn't think the hellcat would stop me. He seemed more interested in playing conspirator, curious to see what I'd do next.

The hellcat was a naughty boy.

Our steps echoed in the empty space. The hall barely had any furniture. There was no bar and no lounge area, unlike the other houses, as if the entire demon house was ready to pack up and leave at any moment.

During our clash with the Shriekers, we'd uncovered an ugly truth: demons could open portals outside the Veil. And when the Shriekers crumbled to dust, tens of thousands of demons had melted back into Hell—vanishing like a dark dream. It was unnerving. Shriekers were horror incarnate, but a demon army running wild in the realm?

I pushed back the dark, chilling thought and climbed the stairs quietly, and soon we reached the top floor. The fae, the hellcat, and I strolled down a long corridor lined with paintings of Hell's landscapes until we reached an ivory door that shimmered with dark spells.

"It's warded by blood," I told Rowan as he paused beside me.

"You deflected my blood ward last time," he said. "What's stopping you now?"

I gestured for the hellcat to help me out, but he just sat on his haunches and licked his paw.

"This is a blood ward set by the Queen of the Underworld," I said with a sigh. "I

don't know if I can break it." I admitted that I was intimidated.

"You won't know if you don't try," Rowan said.

"Easy for you to say," I retorted. "I have to give my blood."

Shedding blood in a demon house was never smart.

"I don't mind giving my blood, but I doubt it'll suffice," he said.

I sighed again and let my fangs sprout out.

Rowan blinked. "You got fangs too?"

"Surprise," I said, piercing my palm with a fang before pressing my bloody hand against the ward.

The shimmer dimmed and the lock clicked. Rowan gave me an appraising look before he turned the handle. When it didn't resist, he let out a breath of relief and quickly pushed the door open. Then he strode in first to make sure the coast was clear. Ever since learning that Sy and I cohabitated, he'd gotten protective of us both. If I got damaged, so would Sy. He'd been very tense even before we reached the demon house, ready to pounce at the smallest threat.

The door clicked shut behind us. The hellcat hadn't followed.

Rowan and I traded stunned looks at the queen's outer study. The space barely met noble standards, let alone royal ones. Just an ordinary wooden table flanked by two folding chairs—minimalism taken to extremes.

The only marker of status was the floor-to-ceiling window that commanded a view of



the shimmering Veil beyond.

I wondered if Queen Lilith had chosen this spot—pressed against the Veil’s edge—for tactical advantage.

“Maybe we’ll find something useful inside,” I murmured, sliding into the inner study.

The air was cooler than the outer room, carrying the scent of brimstone and ethereal flowers that didn’t grow on Earth’s surface.

The only furniture was a midnight-blue chaise longue and a towering glass cylinder perched on ebony stone like a sentinel.

“The sixth house doesn’t plan to stick around,” Rowan murmured.

My attention snapped to the glass cylinder, cloaked in writhing shadow and hellfire.

“That might be what we’re looking for,” I said, prowling toward it.

I wiped the blood from my wounded palm—courtesy of breaking through that ward—and thrust my hand toward the shadow. The moment my fingers touched the glass, shadow and hellfire peeled back like dark curtains, revealing what lay within.

I staggered back as if I’d been punched.

What the fuck?

Inside the glass, a holographic picture displayed a baby with chubby cheeks, golden curls, and two-toned eyes—one green, one sapphire.

“That’s not Princess Grace,” Rowan said, sucking in a breath. “That’s you , Barbie.”

I didn't even know I had a baby picture, yet here it was in the Queen of the Underworld's possession. A foreboding feeling swirled in my head, and chills filled my bone marrow.

"How did Queen Lilith get a baby picture of you?" he asked, frowning deeply, worry darkening his eyes. "Does she know about Sy too?" he demanded.

The sound of a turning doorknob echoed through the room. Rowan and I locked eyes, alarm mirrored in our faces. My heart skipped a beat. Queen Lilith was supposed to be at the party, dancing with the heirs.

Shit. Shit!

My gaze landed on the closet door, and I yanked Rowan's sleeve before he could shift into a fighting stance. In one swift motion, I wrenched the door open, shoved him inside—earning a startled blink at my strength—and slipped in after him, pulling it shut behind us.

We heard someone enter, then move around in the outer study. I pressed deeper into the closet, only to hit the wall that was the fae prince's hard chest. I gestured for him to move further back to give me more room, but he shrugged. When I raised my gaze in annoyance, I realized there was no more space. We'd gotten ourselves into a closet that wasn't exactly a closet—more like a hole in the wall. Then it hit me—this door hadn't been there when we first entered the inner study.

The hellcat had made it temporarily so we could hide.

I appreciate it. I mind-talked to the hellcat. And I'd appreciate it even more if you could make the closet bigger?

Only a low chuckle answered in my head. The hellcat had done this intentionally.

I didn't feel the demon queen's presence—her powerful magic was too distinctive to miss. Someone else was here, someone just as powerful. I held my breath and extended my senses to feel the new arrival, but their magic was cloaked. Not many beings could hide their magic signatures from me, but I restrained myself from poking further to avoid revealing our presence.

We were fucking stuck here until that person went away.

I peered up at Rowan, and he gazed down at me as we squeezed against each other in this confined space. It got more and more awkward as seconds, then minutes, trickled by. The intruder had no intention of leaving soon—I could hear them browsing pages loudly. Where had they even found a book?

The longer I held my breath, the more I wanted to sneeze.

The fae prince's body heat felt like a torch. We tried to push away from each other, but there was nowhere to go, and our elbows kept getting tangled.

Sy's lust poured from me in waves, and Rowan's nostrils flared, his eyes glowing like mercury behind his mask. The scent of his arousal filled our hidden space.

Fucking hell!

Let me take over, Sy demanded.

This isn't the time, I snapped.

Another wave of pheromones leaked through my pores before I could stop her, and a growl rumbled from the fae despite his attempt to suppress it.

Let me have it, Sy said aggressively.

It'd be bad to fight her now—she was too reckless.

Just don't do anything too stupid! I warned. Stay quiet until whoever is here leaves.

Better to let Sy press against Rowan with his breath on her face. I was getting more uncomfortable in here with him by the second, and I didn't want Killian going berserk later if he smelled Rowan on me like this.

Sy surfaced in the cramped space, and he joyfully held her to him. She grinned at him, her curvy body stretching against his.

He mouthed to her, "I miss you, little monster."

She mouthed back, "Here I am, sugar."

I rolled my eyes at their cheesy display, then rolled them harder when they started exploring each other's horny bodies, hands everywhere.

The fae prince wasted no time slanting his mouth over Sy's, completely forgetting we were on a mission!

Seriously?

21

Sy

My sugar was as hungry for me as I was for him. His hard length pushed against my front, sending sparks of delight through me. I ground my hips into his, desperate for contact, craving skin on skin.

We devoured each other's mouths, swallowing our moans and groans. Barbie strained to catch any movement from the outer study, pricking her ears like a rabbit caught in a spotlight. She remained wound tight despite having gotten laid with Killian. I didn't bother telling her my magic had already soundproofed us—only very powerful beings could sense our presence, and those were rare enough to count on one hand.

I slid my tongue against Rowan's, tasting him and inhaling him. His pale eyes seared with lust. My man wanted to strip me bare, and I'd made it easy for him by wearing just my usual two pieces and nothing underneath.

His hand traced down my spine, sending a shiver of pleasure through my body.

My pussy ached and throbbed with burning need. He breathed in the scent of my arousal, his hand palming my pussy roughly and possessively. A silent moan built in my throat, and I barely caught the gasp that followed when he thrust a finger into my heat.

Raw sensation flooded my every fiber, my knees buckling. He pulled me against him as I sucked his tongue, letting him know my urgent need for a quick release. Foreplay

would come later, after he sated me nice and quick.

He withdrew his finger to rub my swollen clit. I whispered his name over and over. My lover smiled and hooked my leg over his forearm. As he adjusted his stance, I shifted to match him, giving him the perfect angle to place his thick crown between my plump folds.

With a powerful thrust, he buried himself in my molten core. I threw my head back at the intense pleasure. He started to move, pulling back a couple of inches before driving back in. I arched my back to take him in deeper. I'd let him do anything to me.

Waves of pleasure sparked through me as he kept thrusting into me, smooth and powerful while careful not to make a sound, which was getting harder to do as passion overwhelmed us. Barbie, the party pooper, kept running her commentary of complaints while monitoring every sound and movement like a prison guard. I was grateful my sugar couldn't hear her snide remarks—they'd kill the mood instantly. In moments like these, I understood why so many people couldn't stand her.

I blocked out her negative energy, losing myself in my sugar's possessive rhythm. As he delivered another brutal thrust, his eyes darkening with unbridled lust, I bit back another moan. Staying quiet was sweet torture.

Our hearts thundered together, wild and perfectly matched. My fingers digging into his shoulders, I ground against him, chasing that delicious friction, and he reciprocated by fucking me vehemently. Oh man, I loved his cock. Loved the feel of it deep in me. My lover had the best cock ever. (Barbie, the eye-rolling drone, was doing it again.)

With his unmatched skill at hitting the sweet G-spot, my prince drove me to the edge over and over. No one else could make me feel this good.

I shuddered as waves of pleasure danced across my nerves. I fought hard not to make a sound. Rowan tensed like a bow, struggling with his own control. He adapted to slow, long thrusts to keep our coupling quieter, yet I could still hear the sound of flesh slapping against flesh within the cramped closet. Our lips crashed together again, drinking in each other's passion and hunger.

Lust energy surged between us, but Barbie lurched forward and snatched it first, feeding with her usual greed. Pleasure rocked me, my walls squeezing his thrusting length, milking his cock so hard that his face twisted in ecstasy.

His next rapid thrusts hit home again and again, tossing me into the land of no return. I came so hard that I melted against him, blissful and completely spent.

He rode through my orgasm before he found his own release, long and hard.

I grinned up at him, catching his answering smile.

"Little monster," he mouthed against my lips. "I can never get enough of you."

"That's enough!" a sharp voice barked outside the closet, followed by decisive claps. "I can't stand one more second of this. And since you're finally done, come out before the queen returns. We don't have all day."

22

Barbie

Rowan stepped out of the closet, extending his hand for Sy—only to find that I’d taken over.

“Let me do the talking. The oracle can be a little crazy and a lot negative,” I said, nodding toward the Maiden, who’d made herself comfortable on the chaise longue.

The last time I’d seen her, she’d been clad in a white robe. Now she wore a lemon-yellow dress, her traditional veil discarded. Her once-sightless eyes sparkled with ancient wisdom and viciousness. Divine energy rolled off her in waves.

Rowan sucked in a breath and dipped his head respectfully. “Lady Maiden.”

“The one and only, Prince Rowan,” Moirai said. Then her crystal gray gaze turned to fix on me. “What you seek isn’t here. I’ve told you before—you must go to the Underworld for Heaven’s Arrow. It’s the only way to sever your bond with Sy. The last drop of old magic must be protected at all costs. If she’s lost, the realm falls, and desolation follows. When your father returns, you must let him take you if you wish to save those you love.”

“Stop!” Rowan snarled. “What kind of twisted advice is that? My brothers and I won’t let Ruin take either of them!”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about, prince,” Moirai said, making it clear she



knew about his bastard origins. “One sacrifice saves this planet and beyond.”

“You excel at freaking people out,” I said flatly. Tough love. Part of me had accepted her truth.

She nodded, sorrow in her eyes, but her tone remained steely. “Heed my warning, child. Go to the Underworld before he seeks you out. Time grows short.”

Don’t listen to her! Sy hissed. Maul her face. You’re not sacrificing yourself for anyone, especially not me!

“How?” I asked. “How do I separate from Sy?”

“I’ll come after you get the arrow,” she said.

“How can I trust you? You only bring terrible news.”

“I’m sorry, Barbie.” A tear of blood slid down her left cheek. “I wish I could spare you this dark fate, but you were born to it. I’ve seen all your pain, felt every bit of your suffering.”

“Don’t lie to me,” I snapped, my eyes on fire. “The only one who’s felt my suffering—who’s taken that pain into herself—is Sy. You’ve been hiding, doing nothing but spewing prophecies. You only surfaced now that you see I have a chance to beat my father.”

She dropped her gaze, shame etching her face. “I wasn’t made of strong material like you. You’re forged from star power, stronger than anything, goddess. I couldn’t risk letting him take me, make me his pawn. In the end, he’d absorb both me and my gift of foresight.”

I pointed at the glass case shrouded in shadow and hellfire.

“There’s a baby picture of me inside,” I said. “Why does the demon queen have my picture displayed like some shrine? What am I to her?”

“It’s not my secret to tell,” Moirai said, her voice softening with sadness. “But in time, all will be revealed. Lilith has sacrificed more than anyone—and she wasn’t of demon origin.”

She was a fallen star.

“Go now, goddess,” Moirai urged. “You have two minutes left before your doppelgänger comes looking.” She waved at the closet. “You can exit through that door. You used it the wrong way.” She darted an amused look between Rowan and me. “I remember when I was young and careless, and everything was all about fun.”

“I didn’t have fun with him,” I said, jabbing a thumb toward Rowan. “That was Sy.”

Sy preened. It was me. And I’d do it again.

“Lilith passes through that door sometimes,” Moirai added.

“Where will it lead?” I asked.

“Where you want to go,” she said.

“I have some questions too, Lady Maiden,” Rowan chimed in. “If you don’t mind.”

“Oh, I mind,” Moirai said. “There’s a reason not all oracles should be revealed. We should not tempt the fates and risk making things worse, should we?”

“What could be worse?” I shrugged. “You already dropped all your terrible truth bombs.”

“What I told you is just the tip of the iceberg,” she said.

A clamor rose from outside the study.

“Go, Barbie,” Moirai urged. “I’ll be waiting here for Lilith.”

She said it like they were best friends.

“Let’s go,” Rowan said after giving Moirai a rueful look. “Time to return to the party. I promised Sy the last dance.”

We went into the closet again, and this time, a bridge shrouded in mist stretched before us. Together, Rowan and I lifted our feet.

23

Barbie

The bridge collapsed beneath us, a scream erupting from my throat while I cursed Moirai. Rowan shouted for me, twisting to grab me, ready to take the impact when we hit the ground. His earth magic lashed out, vines and greenery shooting forth to catch us.

A blink, and we touched down instead of falling on our asses. Music, laughter, and chatter swirled around us. We had materialized at the courtyard's edge, crouching in shadow, the cathedral with its obsidian walls and hellfire nowhere in sight.

"Are you okay? Is Sy okay?" Rowan asked as we stumbled to our feet, still dizzy from the transition.

A hand snaked around my waist, another clamping over my mouth, smothering what might have been a whimper—or a scream.

"I'll take it from here," Killian told Rowan. "You need to join the dance with our target." He added drily, "The others are running out of moves."

"Just so you know, Sy and I will have the last dance before the night ends," Rowan said before striding toward Queen Lilith and Cade.

Cade didn't seem to mind holding the queen in his arms. He'd gladly hold any woman to celebrate his freedom after we helped rid him of the Fury and her death

curse.

Killian's darkness twirled around me, hiding us from view. My back pressed against the stone wall, with Killian's arm anchoring me in place. His other hand tilted my chin up as he inspected me to make sure I didn't have a single scratch.

"Are you all right, my little scorpion?" he asked.

"Not exactly," I said, ready to complain.

"Why do you have Rowan's scent on you again?" he demanded, rage starting to rise. "And it's the scent of sex!"

"You don't want to get me started," I said, annoyed. "We were searching the place and got nothing. Then we heard someone outside the door and had to hide in a tiny closet. Sy took over, and she and Rowan fucked like fiends right there in the demon house."

"Unbelievable," Killian said with disgust. "I sent him to guard you!"

I nodded. "Those two have no shame. They don't care what anyone thinks. They'll screw each other in public if you let them."

"I'll have a word with Rowan," Killian growled. "He should know better than to drop his pants wherever he pleases."

"Good luck with that," I said. He'd need it.

"Forget them," he said. "I was worried sick about you, my brave little scorpion."

"But I failed the mission," I said.

“We’ll figure it out,” he said. “I’m on your side, no matter what. You know that, right?”

“And you should know that I’m an independent modern woman who takes no shit,” I said.

He let out a low chuckle. “Is that a line from one of your smutty romances?”

I glared at him.

“Even so, you can still depend on me,” he purred, making my blood heat.

“You think I’m the weaker one?” I narrowed my eyes. I wasn’t done challenging him in order to make him a better man.

“I’ll depend on you too,” he said.

“Co-dependence isn’t healthy,” I said.

“You think so, little scorpion?” he teased, his thumb stroking the column of my throat.

My breath caught at the intimate gesture. We were an island in a sea of thousands, cloaked by his shadow in the crowded courtyard. It felt surreal, him courting me in plain sight.

“I missed you,” he murmured. “Every second without you drives me mad. I need to know you’re safe, need to know where you are at all times.”

His worry for me only made me hotter. Lust seared through every cell in my body. Killian could smell my arousal even before our mating bond formed—now I was an

open book to him. I wasn't sure I wanted to be an open book, though. Shouldn't we maintain certain feminine wiles and mystery to keep our men coming back for more?

Killian inhaled deeply, letting out a low growl, his eyes blazing with primal male need, so intense it made me shudder. He rocked his hips, grinding against me. I let out a whimper, wanting to thrust back and feel his hard-on, but one thing would lead to another. Then we might end up fucking here shamelessly. Between Sy and me, I was the shy and responsible one, and

with Queen Lilith twirling in the center of the courtyard, still searching for Killian, I wouldn't risk getting caught. I could feel her gaze roaming in our direction, trying to pierce through Killian's shield.

My mind drifted to how Killian had fucked me when I was in heat. And now with him pressing against me, caging me in, I fantasized about what he'd do next—his fingers would trace the line of my panties before pushing them aside to find my slick pussy, and he'd know my body burned for him, my skin buzzing with raw lust. As if he and his dragon could see the fantasy playing in my head, a low rumble vibrated from his chest.

My breath hitched. My pulse sparked. Maybe I should let him tug down my panties and just fuck me here and now. Or maybe we should get out of here and go to his place to fuck without an audience. But we couldn't abandon the heirs to their tasks. We needed to execute the exit plan first, ensuring they could safely untangle themselves from Queen Lilith.

"You need to chill," I said, resisting the urge to fan my burning face at the charged sexual tension between us. "No one can be safe all the time."

"My little scorpion." He let out a low chuckle. "Only you'd say things like that while in my arms. Most of the time, I don't know what to do with you."

He was talking nonsense, but only because this was his first actual relationship. None of the other heirs were good at relationships either, despite their prowess in bed. They just weren't brought up that way. So they defaulted to alpha male shit.

In the romance department, I should take the lead. All that smutty romance reading paid off.

"Then I'll lead and you follow," I said.

"Lead me then, little scorpion, and I shall follow," he purred, humoring me while pushing my gown up to my hips. It was a gift from him—he'd taken to dressing me now.

The crimson gown commanded attention, its finest silk flowing from a one-shoulder design into an elegant cape. The fabric created an ethereal effect with every step, while a daring thigh-high slit made me blush and grin at once. I'd never worn anything this beautiful or bold, but that was exactly Killian's intention—to make a statement.

Wearing the dress he chose was probably my first step toward trusting him. I just had to have faith in his taste.

I caught his slow, appreciative once-over, his gaze smoldering. "You look irresistible, little scorpion. Now I'll have to do something about that."

His fingertips traced a path along my thigh and paused at the center of my core. I shuddered at the sensation before letting out a gasp as he boldly slid a hand into my panties and palmed my pussy roughly.

"Killian," I whispered.



“Say my name like that again,” he demanded. “And add a ‘please.’”

Just as I was about to rebel, he flicked his thumb over the apex of my swollen clit.

“Please,” I breathed, and clung to him, my nails digging crescents into his shoulders.

“Please what?” The tease in his voice made my knees weak.

“I need you,” I said. “Right now.”

“Need me for what, little scorpion?”

“Just fuck me!” I was losing patience.

The heir and his games!

He chuckled. His fingers rubbed up and down my slick slit before fondling my plump lips. I arched into his touch, drowning in heat and lust. He played me like an instrument, but he wasn’t as controlled as he pretended. Behind his dragon mask, his storm-blue eyes burned with hunger, his lips twisted with pure male need.

His heartbeat thundered, matching my own frantic rhythm. A low laugh escaped my throat as I curled my fingers around his massive erection through his pants. My hand could only cover half his width. When I gave it a hard squeeze, Killian’s groan came out rough and raw, his heavy-lidded eyes dark with lust.

I grinned. Me and my games.

He was about to hook my leg over his hip and take things further. I shut my eyes for a second, savoring the image of his steel-hard cock driving into my heat.

But we couldn't just fuck now and let the world burn.

"We still have business to take care of," I reminded him.

He let out a tormented breath, settling for thrusting two fingers into my pussy.

Pleasure pierced me, pulling a moan from my throat. His starlight traced patterns on my skin, setting every nerve ending alight. His fingers thrust deep, pulled out, then thrust back in. His mere touch was enough to make my blood burn, and this?

This was sweet agony I couldn't get enough of.

He added another finger and quickened the thrusts, watching me with obsessive fascination. Every sound he made set my blood on fire. My clawed fingers sank deep into his shoulders and drew blood. He was tough and could heal faster than anyone. I never needed to hold back. Not with him. His dragon rumbled, enjoying my rough treatment.

I rotated my hips, riding his fingers in a wild rhythm. This time, he was sensible enough not to demand I scream his name—I might just oblige and blow our cover to kingdom come. Even with his magic cloaking us, we needed some discretion with hundreds of supernaturals twirling around us in their frenzied dance.

I tangled my fingers in his hair, dragging him down for another kiss as waves of pleasure crashed through me. Ecstasy soaked into every cell until I fell apart, coming undone in his arms.

He pulled his fingers out after the last spasm left me and sucked the juice of my come, his eyes bright and dark at the same time, brimming with undiluted lust.

"It was just a preview for what's to come, little scorpion," he promised. "Later, when

we're done here, I'll show you so much more. And I'll do all kinds of things to you. But now, dance with me. Let them see you shine."

Before I could catch my breath and steady myself in his arms, his shadows receded to reveal us, and he swept me toward the center of the courtyard, spinning me seamlessly into the dance.

"You're the most beautiful woman in any universe," he said, his heated gaze moving from the diamond at my throat to my eyes.

That's not true, Sy protested. My sugar says I'm the most beautiful!

I touched the blue diamond necklace he'd given me earlier, still stunned by its perfection and price tag.

Every house had its signature gemstone. House of Vampires claimed black opal, House of Shifters wore emerald, House of Fae chose ruby, and my House of Mages adorned itself with sapphire. Everyone knew blue diamond belonged to House of Chaos.

Was Killian making a statement by having me wear his house's gemstone tonight? What would Queen Lilith's face look like if she saw his token around my neck? It was the finest thing I'd ever owned. I'd snapped that clasp shut the second I lifted it from its box. Even if Killian dumped me, at least I'd have this stunning piece as a consolation prize. Who said breakups had to leave you empty-handed?

Keep telling yourself that, Sy said. We both know you'd chuck that necklace straight at his too-pretty face.

Killian's arm locked around me, and I swayed into his hold. He towered over me, but our bodies aligned like puzzle pieces. I could've used my goddess powers for a height

boost, adding a few more inches, but I liked being short. Let them underestimate me.

When he spun me, my crimson dress bloomed like fresh petals catching sunlight.

As he drew me back against his chest, my breath caught. “I need to tell you about the Queen’s Suite—and who, or more precisely, what dwells there.”

“Tell me when we’re back at my penthouse—our place,” he said. I bit back a smirk. Classic alpha move, offering up his kingdom. “We have time, little scorpion. Let’s just enjoy our dance tonight.”

“I won’t fight you on that,” I said. “We’ll visit the red room tomorrow. You need to see it, as I don’t like keeping secrets from you.”

My heart stumbled. Except for that one lethal secret burning in my chest—the kind that would break his heart and leave him feeling betrayed beyond repair. If I could spare him the pain, I would. But I had to push forward, offer myself as sacrifice, so everyone else would live. So he’d live. So Sy would have a chance at life.

Power rippled across the courtyard as the music flowed like rushing water.

Killian and I moved in perfect sync. He spun me against his chest, and I swirled down, deliberately grinding against his hardness. His growl made me chuckle, low and husky. I was discovering a sultry side I rather liked.

Sy watched, transfixed. Seemed she could learn a thing or two from me after all.

“Where did you learn to dance like that?” Killian asked.

I smirked. “I’m a woman of many talents.”

While on the run, Sy and I hadn't just hidden. We'd seized every chance to improve ourselves, and we were both a quick study. What might take others a decade to master, we could absorb in days. We devoured knowledge and learned skills as quickly as we siphoned magic and colors.

"Mm." He dipped his head lower, his lips hovering over my earlobe and making me shiver with need. "I'll enjoy your talents in my bed for hours tonight."

My skin flushed hot, my breath catching, even as danger prickled between my shoulder blades. I turned just as Queen Lilith's piercing gaze locked onto us.

Killian didn't spare her a glance. His eyes were only for me as he spun me, putting on a show.

The crowd sensed the shift, their attention drawn to us like moths to flame. Some might have guessed my partner was the chaos prince, as his power and presence were unmistakable. But besides the heirs, no one would connect this mysterious woman in her bold crimson dress and blue diamond necklace to me. And once they did? No one would dare call me Ugly Barbie again.

My only regret was my fish-head mask. Talk about killing the mood. Maybe Sy was right—I did need help with my fashion choices.

I can help you, Sy offered, smug as ever. I won't even charge you.

But who had time for style when I was constantly being hunted.

Being hunted never stopped me from looking fabulous, Sy said.

At least Killian wasn't put off by my fish mask. He knew exactly who was behind it.

Our bodies rode the music's pulse, separating only to press back together. His hand traced up my spine as my hips matched his rhythm. When the tempo shifted, he bent me back, my leg coiling around his waist. Then he spun me again, gripped my hips, and tossed me skyward, catching me as if I weighed no more than starlight.

I slid down his hard chest, savoring every inch of the delicious contact.

Everyone watched us, their eyes hungry and dark. I didn't care. The night belonged to my mate and me.

Louis approached, trying to cut in. "May I have this dance, milady?"

Killian growled. "Fuck off."

The other heirs abandoned their posts, all except Cade, who kept dancing with Lilith. The rest of the heirs surrounded us, drawn to our display, unable to resist the pull of my magic.

"I'll dance with Sy before the night is over," Rowan reminded us for about the hundredth time now.

Killian's dragon responded with a threatening snarl.

"You need to dial it back, Killian," Silas muttered beside us. "Unless you want the queen connecting the dots."

"That's the idea," Killian said ruthlessly.

The music hit its crescendo, our bodies moving as one.

"I hate being a liar," he said, yanking off his dragon mask and tossing it into the

crowd. Someone yelped in pain. “Tonight, I’m done with secrets. No more hiding what we are to each other. No more pretending you’re not mine.”

He lifted my fish mask away, sending it sailing over the nearest rooftop. I blinked, caught between vulnerability and freedom. Killian tilted my chin up, ignoring the shocked silence that rippled across the crowd.

Then the heir of House Chaos kissed me in front of everyone.

24

Barbie

My toes curled and my spine arched in Killian's embrace. Need coiled tight in my core as he claimed my mouth, his kiss a savage tenderness that made me dizzy.

My dark flame intertwined with his starlight, our mating bond snapping to life and burning brilliantly. Every supernatural in the courtyard now knew that I belonged to the chaos prince. I was his true mate by right and magic.

When I broke away, breathless, I caught Queen Lilith watching from across the space, icy hellfire crackling in those jade eyes.

I met her gaze head-on, my body deadly still, ready to fight with fangs and claws and every drop of power I possessed. The queen could challenge my claim, but she'd learn exactly what happened when someone tried to take what was mine.

The stars stared down at this corner of Earth, awaiting the showdown between me and the powerful fallen star—and the inevitable bloodbath. The heirs tensed around Killian and me, sensing the violent shift in the air, but they'd defend Sy and me to the death.

The queen's lips curled in a mocking smile. She winked at me, and a heartbeat later, thunder split the sky. A vortex slammed into the center of the courtyard, its raw force ripping me from Killian's arms. He lunged, but I was already spinning away. I screamed his name, my fingers stretching desperately for his. His dark lightning



struck the vortex, the other heirs' power joining his as they fought to break me free.

My dark wind and flame surged toward their magic, desperate to connect, to claw my way back to my mate.

But the power hurling me skyward was unstoppable—only one force could rip us apart like this. Around me, students screamed as the vortex snatched them up, trapping us all in its merciless grip.

“Due to the current threat, we’re bringing forward the second bride trial. It begins now!” The bell’s toll sliced through the furious roars of Tyson, Killian, Rowan, and the other heirs. “Steel your hearts, bride candidates—half of you won’t survive the cull. But your sacrifice will be remembered, as Mist of Cinder stands strong.”