



Pain Run Rampant (The Cruel and Brutal Kingdom #3)

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Category: Action&Adventure

Description: A kingdom saved.

Things have changed for Rey. She played the hero and fought the ancient evil plaguing Laconia—and what's more, she won. She battled Invictis and stopped him from accomplishing his goal of total annihilation.

But there was a cost. The only way she could stop him was to bind him, every part of him, to her once more, and in doing so her magic is gone.

An ageless evil bound.

Invictis was never meant to be stopped. He does not remember where he came from or his beginning, but he knows his only purpose was to ever be a weapon. Bound to Rey yet again, he is beholden to her every command.

Destruction is all he's ever known, all he's ever wanted... until now.

A darkness that ebbs closer with each passing day.

When Rey decides to visit the labyrinths nestled deep within the wilderness in hopes of unlocking her powers, Frederick tags along, forcing her to not only face the budding feelings she has for him, but also for Invictis.

Battling her emotions is the least of her worries, though, as she learns Invictis isn't the only one of his kind. Somewhere out there lies the absence of light, a darkness so pure it's unstoppable.

Pain Run Rampant is a novella that takes place after the events of Bright Blinding Ruin and before the final book.

Total Pages (Source): 15

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There's nothing worse than blowing hours at the campus library, especially when you spent all morning in class. I don't have a laptop of my own, so any papers or research I need to do in order to get stuff done, I have to sit my ass in the library and force myself to do it.

It sucks. I hate it.

But once you get going, you can power through stuff even if it's the last thing you want to do. I'm currently writing something about social media's effects on kids for my psychology class, but it's not really something I care about. Then again, none of this is. I'm only here so I'll have a slightly better chance in the job market after this.

And for my dad. He never went to college, and even though he died almost ten years ago, I want to make him proud.

I've just found my final citation source when my eyes flick down to the time on the old computer screen—and I realize I should've been at work five minutes ago.

Shit.

I print off the article from the website so I don't have to go searching for it again, grab it off the printer, and stuff it in my bag. Throwing the bag's strap over my shoulder, I log out of the computer and do my best to hurry my ass out of there.

That's the thing nobody tells you: when you're juggling too much, sometimes you mess up and let a ball drop to the ground. It's bound to happen sooner or later.

I don't have a vehicle, so I book it through campus and zigzag across the streets surrounding it. It's early dusk, just after six. I'm a closer tonight, which means I'll be at it until eleven. What would've been a five-hour shift will now be a four-and-a-half-hour shift by the time I get there.

God. I can't believe I forgot. Got so caught up in that stupid paper that I forgot to keep track of the time. I should've set an alarm in my phone or something.

The store I work at is one of the few actual supermarkets around. Surprisingly, there aren't many in the area. Thankfully the uniform is hole-free jeans and a plain shirt. You grab a blue vest when you're in the backroom.

Yeah, kind of gross when those vests are shared among the employees, but whatever.

I'm out of breath by the time I race through the doors of the store, and I take one look at the front end and see it's a decently-busy night. My boss—the front-end manager—is standing behind the customer service area helping out a customer with an exchange, but once she sees me, she frowns.

There's no sneaking in this time. I'm late and she knows it.

I put in my code to get into the backroom and hurry to punch in as quickly as I can. Technically you're supposed to punch in after stuffing your belongings in the lockers and putting on your vest, but a few minutes is a few minutes. Depending on how it's rounded, that can mean a quarter of an hour's worth of pay.

I'm out on the floor in less than five minutes.

It's not a very rewarding job. It barely pays the bills—my textbooks, food shopping, the rent at Frank's—but it's the only job I could get around campus that I didn't need a car to get to. Yeah, who knew in America you're severely limited when you don't

have a car?

I'm hoping when eleven o'clock rolls around and it's time to close the store down for the night that Maggie, my manager, will have forgotten how pissed she was at me for being late again.

Don't know why, but I've been more and more forgetful lately. That, or the looming midterms are stressing me out more than usual. I'm not a good test-taker, and I hate studying more than anything. If I ever get a good grade on a midterm, it's sheer luck.

The hours pass slowly. I'm someone whose job it is to keep shelves stocked and clean, to help customers—ahem, sorry, guests—find whatever they're looking for if they ask, and to run to the front end to ring register if the regular cashiers get backed up. Basically, I do a bit of everything.

Still, it's boring, and as time goes on I can't help but feel like I'm stuck, like I shouldn't be here. Not only in this job but also in general. Who am I trying to kid? What hope do I really have that I'll actually make something of myself just because I'm going to college? There are no guarantees for anything in life; I learned that lesson young.

It's a shitty way to go through life, I'll admit, but it's also the most realistic. The real world doesn't cater to your every whim. When you're a child, you're so carefree and eager to grow up. For those of us that were forced to grow up sooner, we've had more time to accept the harsh realities that come with losing everything you've ever known.

Eleven o'clock rolls around and the store empties. Maggie makes a repeating announcement over the speakers, saying there's so-and-so minutes until close. Find what you need and come to the front end to check out. I'm hoping that by the time I go up there, she will have forgotten my lateness.

I mean, it's not like the store itself couldn't run without me. Being late affected no one.

Unfortunately, when I mosey to the front of the store, I see Maggie waiting for me near the door to the backroom. Her arms are folded, and her wrinkled gaze narrows in my direction. She gestures for me to follow her, so with my head hanging low, I do. Before I know it, I'm sitting in her tiny, cramped office.

Seriously, it's fucking small. Barely big enough for a desk and the computer on it, let alone her chair and mine.

Maggie stares at me for a while before she speaks, "You were late tonight, Rey."

There's no use denying it. "I know." Might as well own up to my fuck-up; it was my fault for forgetting to keep track of the time while I was at the library.

"This is the third time in a month."

I swallow. I have the feeling I know where this is going. All I do is shift my weight in the uncomfortable metal chair I'm in and lower my gaze to my lap. I could try to tell her it won't happen again, but that's what I said the last two times. You can only say things so much before they start to lose their meaning.

"Listen. You're a good kid. You're trying your best, but I think you're doing too much. You're a full-time student and you work damn near full-time too, when you actually show up. I think it might be time to consider you taking a step back."

I meet her eyes. I never particularly liked Maggie; she's near sixty, the kind of woman who takes her job very seriously. She doesn't joke around, and I've always felt like she has this giant stick up her ass, but at least she was never outright cruel—which is more than could be said of other bosses, I know.

“I have to let you go,” Maggie finishes up. “I’ve written you up too many times already. We’ll mail you your last check.”

Leaning forward, I tell her earnestly, “I need this job.”

“And maybe I’d believe that if you showed up on time,” she says. “But three times in less than a month? Come on, Rey. That doesn’t look good, and if I let you get away with it, it’ll set a bad precedent for the others. I’m letting you go.”

My luck is resoundingly awful, so it shouldn’t surprise me, but still, as I get up and leave her small office, I feel my head spinning. I take off my blue vest in a daze, grab my things from my locker, and walk out of that store for the last time.

Goodbye discount on ramen, and goodbye rent money. I need to figure something out, but right now, the only thing on my mind is getting back to my place and eating some late dinner.

It’s after midnight by the time I’ve eaten and showered, and I fall onto my bed. Though it’s dark and I have no lights on in the room, I pull out the picture of my dad I keep on me, the only one that made it through the tumultuous years that came after his death. A picture of him at the zoo, the smile on his face genuine and warm.

“What am I gonna do, Dad?” I ask him even though I know he’ll never answer me back. He never does. He can’t.

Because he’s dead.

He’s dead and I’m alone—and it’s times like this when I can feel it. Most of the time I can ignore how alone I am, how, even when I’m surrounded by bodies on campus, I’m alone. When I’m stuck working on a stupid group project with people I don’t know, I’m alone. When I’m trying to make myself feel better by hooking up with a

hot guy who gets my motor running in all the right ways...

Yep, still alone. It's like I permanently lost a part of myself when my dad died, and nothing I do will ever get that piece of me back. It's gone forever.

God, if this is what I'm going to feel like for the rest of my life, I don't know how I'm supposed to do anything. I thought grief was supposed to get easier as the time went on, but it never really does, does it? It's just a lie people tell each other to make them feel better.

I set his picture on my nightstand and curl up on my side. I've never felt more lost than I do right then.

What if I can't find another job? What will I do? Frank is nice, but when money is in the picture, you can't expect nice to last forever. Eventually he'll want his rent. And if I'm homeless, how will anything work?

Fuck.

Tomorrow I will spend every waking minute at the library, applying for any job in the nearby vicinity, even if I'm not qualified for it.

But tonight? Tonight's for wallowing.

Of course, I stupidly thought losing my job would be the worst of my problems, but life kept throwing me curveballs after that. I forgot to send in the necessary forms to continue getting my scholarship. Frank told me he needed his rent or I'll have to move out before he starts the official eviction process so it won't be on my record. All in all, the shit just kept hitting the fan.

Then I saw a glow across the street in an alley and everything changed. Suddenly I

was thrown into another world, a dark and brutal world where death waits around every corner.

And as a bonus? I wasn't alone anymore. I had Rune.

Now I have Invictis.

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It's a beautiful day in Laconia. I sit in the middle of a field of flowers on the northern edge of the Acadian region, far enough away from the farms on the cliffsides surrounding the main city. The sun shines overhead, not so intense that it makes me sweat, and a breeze blows past me every few seconds, gentle enough that it doesn't make my hair a mess.

Nature is finding its equilibrium again now that the threat of Invictis is gone. It will take years for the land to heal, even longer for its people to be as widespread as they were before, but now they have that chance.

Because of me. They have that chance because of me. Man, still feels weird thinking it. I never set out to be a hero, but that's exactly what I am to everyone who's left. I can still remember the moment when Kretia announced me as Laconia's new high empress and everyone in Laconia kneeled down to show me respect.

It was weird. Weird and uncomfortable, especially when I looked over at Frederick and his dad and saw they were kneeling, too.

My gaze falls to the red ribbon on my left wrist. Prim would be proud of me. She'd probably never stop saying I told you so and other variations of it. When she saw what I could do, she put her whole heart into believing in me.

Prim didn't know at the time that what magic she was seeing actually belonged to Invictis—but then again, if I have a piece of Invictis inside me, maybe the power really was mine all along.

But if that's the case, then where is it now?

I look at my right arm as I think that, and I take in the way the tattoo shimmers with gold in the sunlight. The back of my wrist, all the way up to my elbow; it's very similar to what it looked like before, only larger and permanently golden, the proof that Invictis is bound to me once again.

Only more of him this time. Yay.

The tattoo is like a golden flame, wisps all over my skin. Pretty I guess, but sparkles usually aren't my thing. Neither is gold. I've had enough of that lately to last a lifetime.

I tear my eyes away from the tattoo and close them. I focus on breathing in, filling my lungs with air as slowly as I can before releasing the breath. The nature surrounding me is unburdened by Invictis's power. I should feel more. I should feel the connection, the invisible magic others can't see.

But I don't.

I feel nothing except soft flower petals grazing the bare skin on my arms and the coolness of the breeze swirling around me. Nothing more. Nothing magical at all. Fuck.

How long have I been sitting here, trying to connect with the magic I know is all around me? How many days has it been since that fateful fight with Invictis, where I bound us together again—permanently this time?

Invictis won't drive me mad, but this just might.

As if sensing I'm thinking about him, his heavily accented voice fills the air behind me, "Is this how you plan on filling your time now that you aren't busy running away from me?" He sounds a mixture of annoyed and amused, and when I get to my feet

and turn around, I see he's smirking.

I can't forget that the face he wears is one that belongs to Empress Morimento's son, albeit way older than her son got before he died. Fair skin with sharp angles, a clean-shaven jaw and a square chin; his face belongs in a painting, not standing before me with a smirk.

And let's not forget how tall he is, even in this stolen human form. Over six-and-a-half-feet tall with wide shoulders to match. An impressive figure all around, no matter which angle you look at him from.

He's hot, yes, but he's also an ancient evil that's been killing everything for... well, basically forever. You can't come back from something like that.

And this hot bastard isn't supposed to leave the hut I chose as my own—something he knows.

I set my hands on my hips and cock my head at him as I say, "What are you doing out of the house, hmm? I'm pretty sure I told you to stay where you were. No one can see you." Because I still haven't told anyone that I didn't defeat Invictis, that I only bound him to me.

If people knew... they might not trust me, or they might tell me to leave. Maybe they'd think I'll lose my mind like their past empresses.

"You did, in fact, tell me to stay in the house, as you say," Invictis repeats me with a slight mocking tone, "but you did not say how long I should remain there. I took it upon myself to assume you meant a short while." His smirk only grows when he says that, as if he thinks he's found a loophole.

Right. Because now that he's bound to me, he's forced to listen to me.

He stands less than three feet away, still wearing the clothes I took from Frederick's hut. Meaning: everything is a little tight, a little short, and fraying at the seams. He needs actual clothes. I just... I don't know how to come clean about the fight.

Oh, sorry, Invictis? You thought I killed him? Nope. I just forever bound us together since he's literally the undefeated. What was that? You're asking me why I don't just kill him now? Well, you see, my magic has been kind of MIA since the binding...

Obviously, any which way I pretend to go about it in my head leads to one hell of an uncomfortable conversation. The only thing I might be able to do without raising suspicion is getting new clothes made for him.

"Go back and stay there until I say otherwise," I tell him with a smile. "How's that, dick?"

His blue gaze narrows, and he harrumphs as his figure is swallowed by a golden light. By the time that light disappears, he's out of sight, thank God.

Out of sight, yes, but not out of mind, because through our connection, I hear him say, "How long do you think you can keep me a secret, hmm? Sooner or later someone will find out. I can't help but wonder what they'll think of their new high empress when they discover she's been keeping secrets?"

I roll my eyes even though he's not around to see it. "Just shut up."

Thankfully he listens that time and doesn't continue talking. Sharing a link with him? It's not as fun as you might think. He's constantly popping up in my dreams, mocking me, taunting me, telling me how, one day, he's going to drive me completely insane.

Usually I tell him that he can't drive me insane if I drive him insane first, which then

pisses him off, but today... I don't know. I'm getting worried. If I have the magic of all the empresses before me, I should still be able to cast.

But I can't. I'm effectively magic-less, and it sucks ass.

I haven't told Frederick, even though he's the one I could probably trust more than anyone in Laconia. I haven't told Invictis either; I don't think I could bear hearing him gloat. I already have to listen to him talk way too much.

For an ancient weapon, he sure is talkative. Always has something to say.

Hmm. Maybe I should go talk to Frederick. He's smart, and maybe he'll know how to switch my magic back on. I mean, let's be real: I'm not much of an empress, high or not, without magic. I need my magic back.

I need it in case that vision comes true and I have to face down another ancient evil.

One thing at a time though.

I decide to hike back to Laconia. With no magic to get me moving faster, it's not exactly a short walk, but I've been across the kingdom and back again what feels like a million times, so at least I'm not out of breath when I approach Laconia's open gate.

They keep it open now so the farmers can come and go while trying to ready the cliffsides outside of Laconia's thick, high walls to be farmed once again.

The guards nod at me as I walk in, and I give them nods back. I tried ignoring them once and felt weird about it afterward; I didn't want them thinking I thought I was better than them or something. Still, they're not the only ones who bow their heads to me when I walk by. Damn near everybody in the city does it.

I go to Frederick's hut and don't find him there, which means he's probably helping out somewhere—which is what I do when I'm not sitting and trying to reconnect to my magic. Making myself useful around here helps me get my mind off things. Plus, there is tons to do. The list will never end.

I spend a while searching the markets for Frederick, but when I finally spot him, I find him in the cemetery, helping to herd the animals out of that section in the city. Now that you won't die immediately outside the city walls, the animals can have their own pasture again.

I lean on the wall that separates the cemetery from the rest of the city and watch as Frederick tries to get a rather lazy sheep to get up with the rest of the herd. He's forty-ish feet away, sweat lining his brow, his brown hair tinted gold from the sun, and the facial expression he wears is one of frustration.

He's obviously not someone who deals with stubborn animals often. It's clear he doesn't know what to do. He tries to nudge the sheep's butt, but the sheep acts as though it doesn't even feel him. Frederick then claps his hands—and yields no results. He then drops to his knees and tries to force the animal onto its feet, but the sheep remains on the grass near some headstones, unbothered.

Frederick's cheeks are flushed, and he gets to his feet and wipes off the sweat from his brow. It's right then he spots me, and he abandons the stubborn sheep to come over to me, an easy smile on his face.

His amber eyes sparkle with reflecting sunlight. "How much of that did you see?" His clothes are muddied, like he's been wrestling animals all day.

"Enough," I tell him. "I don't think you're very good with animals. People, yes, but animals? Not so much."

He leans in to whisper, “It’s not me. It’s these damned sheep! They won’t listen to anybody—” It’s literally as he says that that the shepherd of the flock waves at the stubborn sheep, and without further prompting, the sheep stands. “—okay, maybe they simply don’t like me.”

I chuckle softly. “I can’t imagine why. I think you’re likable.” The words are out of my mouth before I can stop them, and I have to look away from Frederick the moment I say them.

I’ve been helping around when I can, yes, but I’ve also made sure to do things Frederick wasn’t. Not because I’m scared to talk to him, but because... well, I wanted to avoid him a bit. Guess I am a little anxious to talk with him.

The man was seconds from confessing his love for me before the fight with Invictis, and I’m still not ready to hear it. I don’t know if I will ever be. Unfortunately for me, this whole magic thing needs to be handled sooner rather than later, and since he’s the only one I trust here, well... I’m out of options.

Frederick must sense my unease, because he doesn’t linger on what I said. “Were you looking for me, or did you just happen to walk by when I was making a fool of myself?” Even when he’s making self-deprecating jokes, he sounds earnest.

God, he makes it impossible to hate him. How annoying.

“I was hoping to get your help with something,” I say, glancing around. No one stands near us, so no one can overhear what we’re talking about. I would prefer to do it in private, but a part of me is worried that if we go to his hut, he’ll try to confess his love again.

And I don’t know that I’m strong enough to resist. What I do know is that I’ve never had a real relationship before. I don’t know how they look, how they work... and

besides that, no matter what I'm doing or who I'm with, Invictis is always in the back of my head.

"Of course," Frederick is quick to say. "Anything you need." He breathes harder than normal; helping out the shepherds must've really taxed him. He stands about eight inches taller than me, which puts his face much closer to mine than Invictis's, and it's harder for me to ignore the worried squint in his gaze as he studies me closely.

I fiddle with my hands. "I—" Fuck. I should've practiced how to say it. It doesn't feel like something I should just blurt out with no warning; I'm not telling him I got an A on my last paper. I'm telling him my magic is gone.

"I..." I say again, and a second time I stop myself.

"You..." Frederick starts. "You what?" The way he stares at me makes me feel some kind of way. Uncomfortable. He looks at me like I'm the most important person in the world, so how can I tell him that, somehow, my magic is broken?

The nerves become too much and I end up blurting out, "I was hoping you could tell me who makes good clothes around here."

Frederick appears taken aback, but only for a moment. His gaze dips low, taking in my clothes. "Ah, yes, you have been wearing the same clothes since I first saw you." He starts to reach for my shirt, where the dried blood is now black on the fabric from when Invictis stabbed me, but at the last second, he pulls back, as if remembering he shouldn't touch me or my clothes.

Hey, I've been washing them... as best I can. There's only so much I can do without a washing machine, you know? Or soap.

"There is a tailor in the upper district," Frederick says. "I don't know how much

fabric he has available, but we can go talk to him.” Thankfully he doesn’t reach for my hand or anything like that; I don’t think I’d have the willpower to pull away.

As I walk with Frederick through the city, I know I’ll have to come clean sometime—not only about the magic thing, but about Invictis, too. I just don’t know how. I’m good with confrontation, but those heavy-weighted conversations? Not so much. Those aren’t my forte.

In the back of my mind, I hear Invictis groan. “That one again? I have the ridiculous notion that, if you were to ask him to jump off a bridge for you, he would do it in a heartbeat. He is the doltiest of dolts—I don’t know why you go to him for anything.”

“Shut up,” I hiss, and I make the mistake of saying it aloud, because as we walk up the steps to the upper district, Frederick gives me a strange look. “Sorry,” I quickly say. “I just have a song stuck in my head.”

Song. Ancient evil. Take your pick.

“What kind of songs do you sing in your world? Any that I would know?” Frederick asks.

“Uh, I don’t think so.”

“Someday you will have to sing one for me, then.”

That makes me laugh. “I don’t know about that. I don’t have the best voice. I think a dying cat would sound better than me.” And that’s not an exaggeration. In ninth grade, I had too many free periods, so I signed up for concert choir. The teacher actually told me it’s okay for me to mouth the words during our concerts.

“I’m sure you’re too hard on yourself,” Frederick remarks with a glance my way.

“And, forgive me for saying this, but I feel as if that might be a common practice for you.”

We’re just through the upper gates when he said that, and I stop. He stops a second later. “What do you mean by that?” I ask him. I’m not sure if I should be insulted or not.

“It’s—” He rubs the back of his neck. “I get the feeling that you’re constantly hard on yourself. Maybe you’re hard on yourself because the world has been hard on you and you’re only reacting to that. Or perhaps you’re hard on yourself so when the world is hard on you, you’ve toughened yourself up, so to speak.”

I don’t say anything to that, mostly because, as much as I want him to be wrong, he’s not.

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said that. It’s not my place. Come. We’re almost to the tailor.” Frederick turns away from me and resumes the lead, but I have to take a moment to come to terms with what he said.

He’s right. I am hard on myself. I’ve always been hard on myself. After losing my dad, I guess it was my way of trying to be better so I could prove to my dad’s memory I could make it and do him proud.

What would he say now if he knew where I am and what I’m doing? I still don’t know if he knew the whole story about my mom and who she was, and I’ll never know. Some questions I have will never be answered because the only ones who can answer them are dead.

With a sigh, I hurry to catch up to Frederick.

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The tailor is disappointed when I tell him I want pants and a shirt similar to the one I'm wearing instead of a dress. To quote him, it's been so long since he's had the opportunity to create something truly magical.

But whatever. I just want a shirt that's like a t-shirt and pants that aren't so tight they'll restrict my movements but not so baggy that they'll drag on the ground since I'm short. He has to take some measurements for me.

Frederick returned to help the shepherds with the animals, leaving me alone with the tailor—which I'm fine with, because after my measurements are taken, I ask him to make me another set, but bigger.

“Bigger?” The tailor's eyebrows are as high as they can be on his forehead. The man is in his forties, wearing a ridiculous outfit I would never be caught dead in: feathers and pin-stripe patterns, all brightly-dyed. “How big?”

“You know Frederick? Bigger than that.”

“Why would you need—forgive me, my lady, it is not my place to question your desires,” he quickly says, catching himself. “Now, when you say bigger than Frederick, do you mean bigger as in—” He reaches in front of him and draws a fake belly in the air. “—or taller?”

“Taller. And wider, too.”

I help the tailor with the measurements for Invictis to the best of my capabilities. I've never told the asshole to sit still while I measure exactly how big he is, but even if

these clothes don't end up fitting him well, they'll still fit him better than the ones I took from Frederick's house.

The tailor tells me he's got nothing else to work on right now, so he'll have the clothes ready in a few days. Oh, and for Laconia's savior and new high empress, they are free of charge.

Not going to complain about that.

After I finish with the tailor, I go searching for Frederick's dad. There are a few questions I want to ask him, but I have to be careful in how I say everything, otherwise he'll spill the beans to Frederick and maybe even the whole city. Obviously, that would be bad.

Fred is in the library beneath the conclave's chambers, where he usually spends his time, his nose in a dusty book. Small candelabras illuminate the long, narrow library and all the rows of full bookcases. He's in the back, near where the door to Laconia's undercroft is—although the etching in the stone has been once more covered by a bookcase.

The only reason I feel comfortable enough to sit across from him at the table is the fact that he's alone in here.

Fred looks much like his son, only older. He's gained a bit of weight so he's not a walking skeleton anymore, and he doesn't have that mad glint in his eyes, the one he got while stuck in Acadia's dungeon for years upon years, kept alive by Krotas's—my mom's—magic. The same brown hair, the same honey-colored eyes, only with a few more wrinkles and gray strands.

He doesn't notice me right away. He keeps his nose buried in that book. The thing that finally gets his attention is a cough from me, and he practically jumps out of his

skin when he realizes he's not alone.

"Oh, my." He nearly falls off the bench, and once he's righted himself, he places a hand over his heart. "My lady, forgive me, but you shouldn't sneak up on people like that."

"Sorry, I wasn't trying to. I thought you heard me."

"When I'm reading, I can easily tune out the world," Fred tells me with a slight smile. "It's quite useful when the world around you is nothing but chaos. What can I do for you, High Empress Rey?"

I wave that off. "Just Rey."

"Okay. What can I do for you, High Empress Just Rey?"

I stare at him, wondering if he's trying to be funny, but the way Fred stares back at me, I can tell he's completely serious. Whatever. Moving on. "I, uh, was hoping to pick your brain on a few things."

"Ah." Fred lifts a hand to his head and runs that hand through his hair. "I would be delighted to give you my, uh, brain—although I would prefer to be done using it. Can it wait some years?"

He thinks... oh, Jesus, he thinks I literally want to pick his brain. Like, take his brain out of his skull and pick at it. In what world—no. I have to remember where I am, and these people clearly don't have the same sayings we do back home.

Although this is my home now. I need to remember that.

"I mean I want to ask you a few questions," I speak slowly, careful in my choice of

words so Fred would understand me and not get the wrong idea again.

“Oh, wonderful. I do love answering questions.” He closes the book he was nose-deep in moments before and pushes it aside, and then he folds his hands atop the table and leans forward, expectant.

Wow. Okay. Um... what to ask first?

I decide to begin by asking about Invictis: “Have you found anything about Invictis and where he came from?”

“It, my lady, it,” Fred corrects me, not for the first time. However, he hasn’t seen the dick that Invictis is currently sporting, so it’s got to be easier for him to call him an it. “And, no, I have not. It seems any mention of Invictis was scrubbed from this library a long time ago. I only know what your mother told me.”

And she probably only knew that much because of the shared memories empresses leave each other—all of which I already have in my head. Hell, I even met the very first high empress, the woman who basically founded Laconia.

The one who used all of her power to separate Invictis and lock him away, and in doing so also separated herself, knowing that a miracle would need to take place before anyone could hope to defeat him.

Fred studies me. “I do find it odd, however, that you keep referring to Invictis as a he, as if you believe it is a person and not a weapon.”

After that vision I had, I don’t think he’s a person or a weapon. I think he’s a fucking god, but I’m not going to tell Fred that. Instead, I say, “He has emotions. Had, I mean. He’d get angry, jealous, snippy... sometimes even comforting.”

“Invictis was manipulating you.”

“I know. I know that, but... those emotions felt real to me. I think there’s more to the story than him just being a weapon. Where did he come from? Why was he so powerful? When I spoke to the first high empress—” I told Fred all about the encounter, and he was amazed at every single thing I learned.

All of Laconia’s history, everything that’s been forgotten to the sands of time; it changes everything.

“The city was already standing by the time she stepped foot here, built eons ago,” Fred says. “Perhaps by Invictis. There were no people until more came ashore, as if Invictis had already decimated the kingdom. Perhaps it’s some sort of cyclical wheel of nature, and we are simply at its end.”

“Wheels don’t end.”

“No, they continue to spin, but they spin anew. Perhaps, when the first high empress separated Invictis, she cracked the wheel, so to speak. Perhaps her intervention changed everything, so that Invictis could never have anticipated you. You are the daughter of an empress and a man from another world. That in itself shows just how unique you truly are.”

I look down. “My world didn’t have magic. My dad was just a man.”

“A man that fathered greatness. It is a shame I couldn’t meet the man, even if it’s just to shake his hand and thank him for you.”

Staying on the topic of my dad would make me depressed, so I try to get us back to the topic of conversation: “Do you think it’s possible there’s more out there? Another Invictis? What if he wasn’t the only one?”

Fred's brows crease, and he turns thoughtful. "I... frankly, I never thought about that possibility. Not once. I was so focused on trying to find a way to counteract Invictis's power and complete the quest my lady gave me that I never once stopped to wonder if Invictis is the only one of its kind."

Shit. I thought of something the researcher himself hadn't?

The man is silent for a while, and he leans back and folds his arms over his chest. "I suppose it could be possible. There could be more out there, waiting, biding their time. If that's the case, then Laconia is even more fortunate to have you at its helm: the only person who could ever truly defeat one of them. Perhaps they'll think twice before attacking us once they realize you defeated Invictis."

Damn it. Coming clean isn't going to be easy—hence why I'm not doing it now.

I don't say anything right away, too busy thinking, lost in my own head. Fred studies me across the table for a bit before he says, "Is that all you were wondering, my lady, or is there more?"

I want to know if it's possible for an empress to lose her magic, or her connection to the aether, but I just can't say it out loud. It's like if I say it, it'll be real. Stupid, I know, because it's already real and I can't cast a single spell or fling one tiny fireball no matter how hard I try.

Fred drops his hands to his lap and rubs his palms on his knees. "If there is more, you know I am always here for you, as I was for your mother. My son is at your disposal as well, though I'm sure he's told you that numerous times already—"

"Uh, yeah, yeah I know." I get up. "Thanks for the talk, Fred. I'll see you later." I walk away from that table before I let myself say anything more.

Well, I got no answers, and now I can't stop thinking about how there might be another Invictis out there, somewhere.

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Kretia, Aolia, Ravenno, and Hazor sit before me on their stone thrones, each focused on me and what I'm telling them. They must wear the same outfit every time they're out and about, because they each wear the same extravagant robes and jewels they wore the first time I saw them.

You know, back when I was brought here in chains and shackled to the floor.

Kretia, the oldest member of the council near sixty or so, wears grays, as her empress, Gladus, had. Her hair is long and braided, her body nearly swallowed up by her robes. Dark brown eyes set in dark skin, she commands the most respect out of everyone in the room.

Aolia watches me with acute, vibrant blue eyes. Her robes are rich in greens and blues, the colors of Acadia, of life. In her forties, yet she looks timeless. Her yellow hair is curled in gentle waves, a single blue jewel hanging around her neck.

Hazor, the councilman of the city of Laconia itself, wears white, a lion, the symbol of its people, on his chest. He is the youngest of the four, though with his cynical attitude, you wouldn't know it. His black hair is slicked back, and his green eyes always seem to be narrowed in my direction. Even now, I can tell he's not a huge fan of me.

And that leaves us with Ravenno, the man who used to hate me more than anyone else. Now that the truth is out and everyone knows I am Krotas's daughter, he doesn't hate me as much. Forbidden to have a family of his own, I am the only family he'll ever have. When he told me he was related to Krotas, I didn't want to believe him, but we both have the same reddish-brown hair and the same amber eyes. It's

impossible not to see. The fifty-year-old man wears shades of red in honor of Magnysia and its once-powerful empress.

The five of us aren't the only ones in the circular chamber. We don't have an audience sitting in the rows above, but we do have two men standing off to the side, watching and listening. Frederick and his dad. Both men are important to Laconia and its rebuilding efforts, and they're important to me.

"You have done much for us, High Empress," Kretia speaks. "If this is what you feel you must do, then you will go with the blessing of the conclave."

I can tell Hazor wants to argue, that he'd rather me stay here and help the city instead of going off on an adventure, but I'm not going to take no for an answer, and he must sense it, so he stays quiet.

Aolia nods in agreement with Kretia. "We hope you find the answers you seek."

"When will you leave?" Ravenno asks.

"Tomorrow," I say. "I don't know how long it'll take, but I'll be back as soon as I can." I know I'm the only defense the city has, other than the guards—but no amount of guards can do much to defend against a shadowstorm or other magical attacks. Just because it's been calm doesn't mean it'll stay that way.

Still, I can't shake the feeling. I need to go, see what answers lie within the darkest parts of Laconia.

Where, you might be wondering?

The crypts. Or labyrinths. Whatever you want to call them. The places where the first high empress locked pieces of Invictis away. I'm pretty sure, back when Invictis was

Rune, we stayed in the mouth of one during our journeys, but I can't be sure. Now, I have the memories of the empresses to guide me, so I know exactly where to go.

Kretia bows her head as she says, "Go in power, my lady." The others, even Hazor, bow their heads in respect and mutter the same well-wishes.

I awkwardly thank them before turning around and leaving, and Frederick and his dad are right on my heels. Frederick hurries to walk beside me as we emerge into the bright light of day, and as we walk down the stone steps, he says, "You never told me you wanted to go to the labyrinths."

"I just did," I say, referencing the talk with the council.

But it must not be enough, because Frederick grabs my wrist the moment we reach the bottom step. He holds onto it for only a moment before he drops it like a hot potato, though he doesn't take a step back to give me space, as he usually does when he realizes he's invaded my personal space.

Behind me, I hear Fred say, "Uh, I'll go scrounge up some food you can take with you." Without another word, the older man leaves.

And that means I'm alone with Frederick. Well, as alone as I can be in the wide-open space before the conclave and its library. It's the biggest open space in the city, other than the cemetery, all stone everywhere you look. People go about their lives, though they do spare glances in our direction.

"My father told me you went to him and asked if he thought it was possible another Invictis could be out there," Frederick says, proving my point when I assumed I couldn't go to his dad with the secret of my missing magic. "Do you really think there's more?"

I shrug as I meet his eyes. “I don’t know. Maybe.”

“What makes you think there’s another out there?” The look Frederick gives me is intense; it reminds me of the look he gave me right before my fight with Invictis, when I was on his lap and... things almost happened.

“I just get a feeling sometimes that... it’s not over. I don’t know. It’s hard to explain.” I bite my bottom lip to stop myself from saying anything more, and his gaze falls to my mouth almost instantly, like he’s drawn by the movement.

I stop biting my lip after that.

Frederick clears his throat as he brings his stare back up to mine. “You don’t have to be alone in this, Rey. You... you’re not alone anymore. You can talk to me about anything, you know that, don’t you? You don’t have to go to my father. You could... you could come to me.” He starts to stumble over his words a bit, awkward, but still kind of cute in a nerdy way.

“I went to your dad because I figured he might know a bit more about Invictis, since... you know.” Since Invictis isn’t in any books and no one here even knew about him before me.

“Oh. Yes, that does make sense. I just—” Frederick looks down, and he takes a small step toward me. Our bodies were less than a foot away before, and now there are mere inches between us. “—I want you to know you can come to me. I will always make time for you.”

“I know,” I whisper, and I mean it. I know he’ll always make time for me, just like I know...

I just know.

Frederick looks like he wants to say more—because of course he does—but now’s not the time. I pull away from him and tell him, “I need to go pick up my clothes from the tailor and get ready for the journey.” I walk away in a rush, mostly so he can’t say something silly like he’ll do all of that with me.

I don’t need Frederick. I don’t need anyone. The only person I need is myself.

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I walk through the door to my hut and deposit the new clothes on the small wooden table near the window. Invictis comes out of one of the small bedrooms and cocks his head at me. He folds his arms over his thick chest before he mutters, “I think I deserve some praise for not interfering in that terribly awkward discussion you and that Frederick had.”

Even now, the way he says Frederick’s name, makes me feel like he has to be more than a weapon.

He sounds annoyed, and maybe even a little jealous, just like he did when he was nothing more than a tattoo on my wrist and I kissed Frederick out of loneliness.

I scoff, “I’m not praising you for not being an asshole.”

“Why not? It’s very hard for me to hold back, you know, especially when—”

“Just shut up and put these on.” I pull out his new clothes from the pile and throw them at him, and he catches them with a frown. I watch as he studies them, then flicks those bright blue eyes at me.

Ugh. This would seriously be so much easier if he wasn’t wearing such a hot face. He’s an asshole. He’s a killer. He basically killed everyone—including my mom—and tried to kill me on multiple occasions. His sexiness shouldn’t matter one bit.

Invictis doesn’t have any witty retorts. He simply drops the new clothes on the floor and reaches over his head to pull off his shirt in one of the manliest movements I’ve

ever seen.

Fuck. It really has been a long time. I'm thirsting for something that's not even human, practically drooling over the way he took off his damn shirt. I need therapy or something. You can't get more messed up than that.

Once his shirt is on the floor, he doesn't hesitate to continue undressing. He kicks off the boots that are a size or two too small for him, all while never breaking eye contact with me, and then he unties the string on his pants and pulls them down. Before I know it's happening too, so I get an eyeful of dick.

I don't know what I expected.

I avert my eyes and hold up a hand to block out the thing dangling between his legs the same moment I mutter, "You could've warned me."

"What? You said to put them on. I had to take off the stolen clothes before I could put the new ones on." Invictis groans in annoyance. "It's nothing you haven't seen before, Rey. I don't understand why you're acting so... so... modest."

"Modest?" I laugh out the word. "Please. I just don't want to see your dick swinging every which way." My eyes are averted and my hand is still up, but out of the corner of my eyes I can see him pulling on his new pants—a dark gray color that I hope fit him better than Frederick's pants.

"There," Invictis states. "It is hidden. You can gaze upon me now without having to see my, as you put it, dick swinging every which way."

When I lower my hand and glare at him, I find him smirking at me. Smirking and still oh so shirtless, every muscle on his torso and arms on full display. The golden tattoo that matches mine seems to sparkle out of nowhere—and that's not to mention the

alluring V-shape pointing to his crotch and the dick now safely tucked away behind his new pants.

And yes, these ones do fit a lot better, even if the string is undone and I can see a little bit of his happy trail.

“Put on the shirt,” I huff out before grabbing the other clothes on the table and storming around him. My goal is to reach the bedroom I claimed as my own, but when I try to slam the door, a strong arm stops it from moving.

I don’t turn around. I know if I do, I’ll come face-to-face... or face-to-chest with a still shirtless Invictis who is taking way more pleasure out of this than he should.

“You and I are bound,” Invictis’s voice speaks behind me. Or over me, you know, since he’s so damned tall. “We share everything, as much as I hate to admit it. Putting a door between us seems a little... silly, doesn’t it?”

A forced laugh comes from me. “Are you saying you want to watch me change, Invictis? Careful. That’s an awful human thing to want.” My hope was to mock him enough that he’d pull back and let me go into the bedroom, but it doesn’t work out like that.

The opposite, in fact. Sadly.

“Until you go mad and unbind me, I am trapped in this human form,” he whispers. “So, if you think about it like that, this is all your fault, isn’t it?”

I close my eyes and slowly turn around to face him. He stands so close to me the arm that holds my clothes brushes against his bare abdomen. I tilt my head back before I open my eyes and meet his stare. “Sorry for not wanting to die,” I whisper. “Then again, the one time you almost killed me, you ended up healing me, so—”

A muscle in his jaw tenses, and his smirk morphs into a frown. “A momentary weakness.”

I want to ask him how a weapon could be weak, but instead I say, “I could force you to step back and let me go through that door. I’m the one who holds all the power now, remember?”

“Ah, yes. How could I forget?” Invictis moves his tattooed arm between us, its golden form a mirror image to mine, glittering on his tanned skin. “I’m your weapon now. You could force me to step back and let you change your clothes in privacy. You could even make me roll on the floor like a worm, too—”

“What a good idea.”

Invictis glares as he lowers his arm. “But where’s the fun in that, hmm?”

Where’s the fun in that? Honestly, I don’t think any of this is fun, but as we stare at each other, practically breathing the same air, the command doesn’t come. I don’t tell him to step away and give me room, to let me put my new clothes on in peace.

What do I do? I play the same game he is. I’m the least modest girl around, and I’m going to prove it.

I duck under the arm he still has on the door and return to the small table in the front of the house. I set down my clothes on the corner of said table. When I turn around to face him, I see he’s still watching me, his haughty gaze narrowing, as if he’s unsure what I’m about to do.

I slip off my shoes, and I don’t do it fast. Every move I make is slow and deliberate, and I never break eye contact with him.

This is a challenge. He's challenging me, and I can't back down. Using our bond to force him away would be cheating. I can handle this asshole without resorting to cheating, can't I?

I pull at the bottom hem of my shirt and take it off, letting the old, blood-stained garment fall to the floor. My bra has definitely seen better days. Women around here don't even wear one, but I'm not going to give that up until it breaks.

The next thing I undo is the button on my jeans and then the zipper, and once they're both undone, I bend over as I tug the pants down. I straighten up before stepping out of them. I step forward, one foot closer to Invictis.

He still stares at me, watching, waiting, not saying a single word. He knows he doesn't have to.

The tailor made me new panties, although he called them undergarments. Frederick left long before we got to that point—a good thing, because I think the man would've exploded in embarrassment.

Invictis thinks he's making a point, but in reality, I'm gonna be the one who's making the damned point.

Without breaking eye contact, I reach behind me and take off my bra even though it doesn't have to come off. I make sure to give him a quick smirk when it loosens and the straps fall off my shoulders. I pull it off me and let it drop onto the pile.

He doesn't move. His gaze remains zeroed in on my face.

I hook my thumbs through my panties and loosen them until they slide down my legs on their own, and then I'm standing a few feet away from him, naked. Also the very opposite of modest, thank you very much.

I'm skinnier than I was before, more toned, with a few new scars to boot. A result of constant travel and fighting in combination with eating less processed food and less food in general. But it's clear I'm still a woman. I have the hips and the tits to prove it, not to mention the lack of a dangling dick between my legs.

I don't know how long we stand there, staring at each other's face, before one of us breaks eye contact. And, hint: it's not me.

Invictis's blue gaze drops to my feet, slowly traveling up my naked body as he takes in my clothe-free appearance. He takes his time, too, studying me with a bored expression that starts to change into something else. I hear his breathing get harder, his bare chest moving a little more each time. He takes me in, all of me, every single bare inch of me, and he says not a word.

Out of all the things I could say, it's like every smart remark refuses to surface, and the only thing I can do is stand there and feel his gaze on me. A flushing heat creeps up my cheeks, I don't know why. It's not... I mean, I'm just doing this to prove a point to him, that's all.

He's the one who breaks the spell. He steps forward, and in less than two seconds he's in front of me, still locked on everything below my collar bone. Invictis says not a word, but he doesn't have to.

He doesn't stand before me as an ungodly weapon. No. As much as he'd deny it, he stands before me a man, a man who's struggling with himself each and every moment to contain himself.

Let's just say my face isn't the only thing that's hot now.

Invictis lowers himself to the floor. He finds his shirt, but his eyes never leave my body. The way he bends down, he gets even closer to me, so close I can feel his hot

breath on my skin, and I fight with myself to not move a muscle, to not react the instant I feel his breath on my outer thigh.

He's slow to stand, shirt in hand, and when he does, he leans even closer to me, his head tilted to the side, eyes on my chest. He stands as close to me as he can without touching me, his chest all I can see if I stare straight ahead—but I don't. I watched him drop to the floor and stand up again, my eyes glued to his face.

After what feels like an eternity, Invictis's stare meets mine. I'm not the only one who normally has a constant smartass streak; he does, too. Right now it seems we're both at a loss for words, like I called his bluff and now we both don't know where to go from here.

I don't know how long we stay like that, so close and yet not touching, but it feels like an eternity. Neither one of us says a word. Neither one of us moves. We're stuck where we are, frozen, caught in a sea of uncertainty and trepidation.

Invictis is the one who finally pulls away first, breaking whatever spell is between us. He gives me his back before he puts his new shirt on—very similar in fit to my old t-shirt. It hugs his body a lot better than the shirt I took from Frederick.

Of course, he's not fast enough, and what I mean by that is I totally see the bulge in his pants before he turns around.

Right. He's just a weapon, ain't he? I already know the answer. It's an answer I've known since I first met him, since he was nothing more than a magical tattoo on my wrist. Some might think he's a weapon, and in a sense they're right, but that's not all he is. Invictis is more than that.

There's no reason for a weapon to get a boner.

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I can't sleep that night. I don't know if it's because I'm too wound up over the upcoming journey or if it's because of what happened earlier with Invictis. Or, hell, if it's thanks to me not being able to cast any magic. Maybe it's a combination of all three.

It's well into the night when I roll out of bed. I took the bigger bedroom in the old wooden house; the floors creak once I set my bare feet on them. The room fits the bed and a tiny dresser that's only as tall as my hips. The surface of said dresser holds the satchel that stayed with me throughout my previous comings and goings; it's now restocked and ready to roll.

My feet shuffle me towards the satchel, and I open the flap and shove a hand inside, digging around its full contents to find what I'm looking for: the Hilt of Storms.

The members of the conclave made such a big deal over this hunk of metal that I took from Gladus once I defeated her. Ravenno did try to pick it up, and it burned him. It wouldn't let him touch it, and yet, even back then, it somehow could sense I was special.

Only I didn't want to believe it.

I guess that's not really too different from how I feel now.

The Hilt of Storms in my hand, I move toward the open window, where the silver light from the low-hanging moon streams in. This house has no glass and no screens, only shutters that if you close make the house damn near unbearable to be in. I lean my arms over the open window and stare down at the magical metal in my hand.

It's not burning me, so it must still think I'm special, even without magic. The only reason I kept it with me was the simple fact that no one else can touch it or pick it up. If I left it anywhere, that's where it would stay, so it might as well come with me, even if I never use it.

Don't get me wrong, when Gladus used it, it was kickass, and as much as I can appreciate a magical sword, I think it's sort of pointless. If you have magic, you could literally make a sword without the Hilt. It's unnecessary, redundant, even.

I try to focus on the hilt and its lack of magical blade, but nothing forms. No magic comes to create a sizzling sword that would strike fear into the hearts of any foe it faces. It remains a hilt and only a hilt.

I close my eyes and lean my head down as the night breeze caresses my cheeks. "What's wrong with me?" I whisper so lightly I can hardly hear myself.

That question can be asked about more than one thing, too. I'm magic-less. I'm lying to literally everyone about both the magic and Invictis. Add onto that I feel some type of way about the golden bastard—something I definitely shouldn't after everything he's done: wiped out most of Laconia, nearly killed me, and killed my mom.

Yeah, there's a whole host of things wrong with me, and I don't know how to fix any of it. And that's ignoring the way I refuse to face the music when it comes to Frederick.

Frederick is nice. He's cute. Much more appropriate for me than Invictis, given everything. But he's so earnest, so serious, and I... I'm not used to that. I don't know how to handle it. Maybe a part of me is anxious that, if I let him confess his feelings for me, I won't be strong enough to resist him, and by not resisting I'll eventually fuck up and hurt him.

I've never done a relationship before. Not a real one. Not one I actually wanted. Never cared to. I don't know that I can see myself in a normal, long-lasting relationship with how fucked-up I am.

Heaving a sigh, I pull away from the window and stuff the Hilt of Storms back into my satchel and wander to bed. I roll to my side, facing the old, slightly-smelly wooden wall, and try to get some rest.

Spoiler alert: rest doesn't really come, and before I know it, the sun is poking through the window, telling me it's time to get up.

Fuck.

I groan when I get out of bed, groggy as hell. I'd be groggy if I got sleep, but I'm practically dead with next to none. I slip on my shoes, grab my satchel, and push out of the bedroom.

Invictis stands in the front area of the house, his blue gaze narrowed toward the door. Thankfully, he's fully-clothed, so there's nothing too distracting about him other than the intensity on his handsome face. He stares so intently at the door, it takes me a moment to realize that he's staring at it for a reason.

Someone's knocking.

Who could... fuck.

I hurry over as I fix the satchel's single strap over my shoulder. "You need to hide," I hiss.

"I thought we were going on a grand journey," Invictis mocks me with a smirk, almost devilish. "We can't do anything if I'm busy hiding—" After I snap my fingers

at him, he closes his mouth, frowns, and then disappears into his bedroom.

After waiting a moment, I turn around and answer the door, not too sure of who I'm about to see. I swing open the door, and the moment I lock eyes with the man standing on the other side, the only thing I can say is his name: "Frederick."

Frederick? What the fuck is Frederick doing here? My gaze drops to the straps on his shoulders, and it takes me a few seconds to realize he has a bag with him.

"Good, I caught you before you left," he said, and even though I don't invite him in, he steps around me and comes inside the house regardless. His brows furrow, and he glances all around. "Were you just talking to someone? I thought I heard a man's voice—"

"Nope. Just me. What do you want? What, uh..." I trail off when Frederick looks around.

He goes to poke his head in my bedroom, like he's some investigator or something and I hired him to sweep the house. "I know I heard another voice. It was muffled, but strangely clear. A fellow with a foreign accent—" He moves toward Invictis's room, but before he can take a peek inside, I grab him by the arm and pull him away, and the act instantly draws his attention back to me.

"What are you doing here, Frederick?" I ask, still holding onto him. If I have to use my feminine wiles to distract him from the fact that he heard Invictis's voice, then that's what I'll do. A little smiling, a little flirting, some batting of my eyelashes... shit like that.

What he says next makes me choke on air: "I came to join you."

I'm so shocked at his response that my hand slips off his arm and I stand there like I

didn't quite hear him right. "You're coming with me?"

"Yes. I spoke with my father about it, and he agrees you shouldn't go alone. Plus, if you do discover anything ancient in there, I might be your best bet to translate. I also brought some empty journals to write anything we find down. We have no records of these labyrinths in Laconia. By all accounts, I will be the first non-empress to ever step foot in them—other than the ones who released Invictis from his prison."

Okay, the reasoning makes sense, but that doesn't change the fact that he can't go with me for obvious reasons. The first one being the asshole in the other room, who's probably leaning against the door, eavesdropping on this entire conversation.

The asshole no one else knows about.

It takes me a few moments to formulate an argument against him not coming. "You can't come with me. It's too dangerous."

When I say that, he taps his hip, drawing my gaze to the new leather strap and the dagger resting there. Ah, that's definitely new. Frederick never walked around with a dagger on his hip before.

"Frederick, look. I appreciate the thought behind it, but I can't let you come. It's just too dangerous." I try to say it as nicely and sweetly as possible. Anything and everything to get him the hell out of here.

"And I appreciate the thought behind that, but I'm coming with you whether you like it or not." Frederick stands firm, not letting himself be swayed by anything I say. When I look into his warm amber eyes, I can see his resolve is resolute.

Shit.

“Frederick, I—”

He takes a tiny step toward me, lowering his voice to a bare whisper as he says, “Look, if you’re worried about me slowing you down, I won’t. I know you’re capable and can take care of yourself, and I’d be lying if I said I’m okay sending you off again, but even if I ignore all of that, this is a once in a lifetime opportunity for me, Rey. I want to see these labyrinths.”

All I can do is swallow hard and look away. My right hand fiddles with the strap on my bag. Every reason I have, everything I could say to him, he’ll have a retort ready. I won’t be able to convince him not to come, which means...

Fuck me.

“Frederick,” I say his name again, softer this time. “There’s something I should tell you.”

The moment he reaches for my face to tuck some of my hair behind an ear is the moment I realize I should’ve said it differently. The way I said it, it kind of sounds like I’m about to confess my undying love for the man—and that’s not what this is.

“You don’t have to tell me anything you’re not ready for,” he whispers, his body inches away from mine. “There’s no rush. We have time. You know I’ll always be here.” The hand that tucked some of my hair back falls to my cheek, and I swear to God, it looks like he wants to kiss me.

My eyes fall to his lips. They were soft lips, from what I remember. And, really, that kiss wasn’t even a real kiss. It was too desperate, too needy. It might be nice to kiss him again, to really lean into it and forget about all of my problems...

It’s right when I think that that the door to Invictis’s room swings open and the

asshole himself steps out. Frederick whirls around as he pulls away from me, his eyes widening at the sudden interruption.

“I believe she meant me,” Invictis says with a smirk, “not whatever that pathetic display was.” He moves to stand a few feet away from Frederick, and seeing them together really puts in perspective just how tall and wide Invictis’s human form is. Frederick is maybe eight inches taller than me, but Invictis puts him to shame, too.

“What—who...” Frederick’s brows furrow, and he glances at me. “Rey, who is this? I don’t recognize him from Laconia.”

Invictis saunters around Frederick and places himself near me. “No,” he muses, blue gaze twinkling, “I don’t suppose you would recognize me. That’s all right, you’ve always seemed a bit slow on the understanding. Here’s a hint: I am much closer to Rey than you will ever be.” Unless I’m mistaken, the asshole sounds incredibly smug when he says it, and when he says it, he even puts a hand on my back.

Oh, my God. He’s posturing. Invictis is posturing, having a testosterone contest with Frederick. I cannot roll my eyes hard enough at how stupid this all is... and at how awkward they’re both making this.

“What?” That word is about all Frederick can seem to say, and he finally looks at me instead of Invictis. His gaze does drop to the hand Invictis placed on my lower back, but only for a moment. “I... I guess I... misread things. I should go.”

Invictis quips, “Yes, run along. You’re not needed here, Frederick.” The way he says his name makes it sound like an insult.

Frederick starts to leave, but I can’t let him go like this, thinking that... that Invictis and I are together or something. We’re not. We won’t ever be, no matter how tempting his body and face might be. The things he’s done are unforgivable, and I

hate him for all of it.

But Frederick is nice and he deserves more, so before he can step around us to leave, I move away from Invictis and that damned hand on my back to stop him. “Wait,” I say, pleading as I put a hand on his chest. “It’s not what it looks like.”

Wow. Never thought I’d say that cheesy as fuck line.

“You don’t have to explain anything to me,” Frederick says. “I thought—I assumed—”

I glance at Invictis and find he’s grinning so hard he’s flashing his teeth. Or showing his fangs like an animal would. Seeing the smug expression on his face makes it clear to me: I need to tell Frederick the truth, because fuck that guy.

“I, um... haven’t been completely honest with you or anyone else,” I start, slow in pulling my hand off Frederick’s chest. “After the battle, when I said I defeated Invictis, everyone assumed I killed him, but that’s not exactly true.”

As I talk, Frederick keeps glancing between me and Invictis. I don’t know if he’s putting it together, if he’s finally noticing the matching golden tattoo on the man’s arm and wrist, or if he’s still wrestling with envious thoughts. Either way, he says nothing.

“I could only stop him by binding him to me again, all of him this time,” I say in a hurry, the words tumbling out of me before I can think better of them. “Frederick, this—” I gesture to the tall asshole behind me. “—is Invictis.”

“Oh.” That’s all Frederick says for a minute, and the tension is palpable in the air of the hut as he takes in Invictis in a new light. “Oh.”

Behind me, Invictis mutters, “I would kill you if she’d let me. I find you terribly annoying, and I abhor your affection for Rey. I find it disgusting.”

Frederick blinks, and then he turns his attention back to me. “That’s... nice. Very nice. Um, do you think I could speak with you privately, Rey? Without the, um, ancient weapon looming over us telling me how he wants to kill me?”

“Don’t take it personally. I’d kill everyone if I could. It’s what I do.” Invictis grins before he gives us a mock bow. “But I can sense an order is coming, and for now I am forced to listen to Rey and her every whim. It’s most unfortunate.”

I glare at him as he retreats back into his bedroom, and a mere second passes before Frederick grabs me and hauls me outside, putting more distance between us and Invictis.

Frederick releases me once we stand under the sun, out in the bright light of the early morning. I can tell by the look on his face he’s not thrilled, and that’s exactly why I didn’t want to tell him.

“You should have told the conclave,” he says. “You should have told me! Everyone in Laconia has the right to know that the reason they’ve been stuck inside those walls is now living just down the road!” He actually raises his voice; he’s understandably upset, and I can’t be mad at him for that.

“I know,” I whisper. “I just... I didn’t know how.”

“We could’ve been researching on how to, I don’t know, take it apart again.” Frederick shakes his head and runs both hands through his brown hair, messing up its length. And then, he does something strange: he chuckles.

“What’s so funny?”

“Nothing,” he says. “Nothing’s funny. Now I understand why you keep referring to Invictis as a he.” Even though he’s upset, he can’t hide the jealous tones in his voice.

Softly, I say, “He can’t hurt anyone. I won’t let him.”

“That thing is a monster, responsible for the deaths of countless—and what about the madness that thing brings with it? What if you lose your mind because of this?” Frederick shakes his head again, as if the thought of me losing my mind is one of the most painful things he can think of.

“He won’t make me crazy. I’m not like the other empresses.”

“Because you’re from a different world?”

“Because I’ve always had a piece of him in me,” I say, and when I say it I hear him suck in a hard breath, like I physically hit him with the words. “When my mom, Gladus, and Morimento tore him apart and trapped him into three soul gems, a fourth piece of him went inside me. My mom was pregnant when they trapped him.”

Frederick’s face scrunches as he thinks. “Empress Krotas was pregnant with you at that moment? You’ve always had a piece of the weapon inside you... of course. Otherwise you would’ve lost your mind sooner, when you first came here. You must’ve been strong, even in the womb, to be able to adopt a piece of Invictis and overcome it.”

I shrug. “Or it was a small piece, but enough. I don’t know, but... I did all that I could. I don’t think Invictis is just a weapon.” I lower my voice, afraid to say these next words out loud, “I think he’s a god.”

“A god?”

“Yeah, you know, all-powerful, ancient, beings beyond our mortal comprehension, that sort of thing. I know Laconians worship their empresses, but maybe before the first high empress, the people who lived here worshiped him.”

He pinches the bridge of his nose. “If the ancient Laconians worshiped gods, if they worshiped that thing in there... then why would Invictis wipe them out?”

I shrug. “I don’t know. I do know that the old gods in pretty much every mythology back on earth can be fickle and mean and cruel. They’re gods. They do what they want when they want and they never apologize. I don’t know if that’s what he is, but... he’s not just a weapon, Frederick. He’s more than that, I know it.”

The way Frederick looks at me after that makes me feel as if he’s disappointed in me, and I instantly hate it. “You could be saying that because of its influence on you. It could already be changing you and you don’t realize it yet. I don’t want to lose you to that thing.”

“You won’t,” I promise him.

Frederick glances back at the small hut. “Well, even though it seems you won’t be alone on your journey after all, I am still going with you.”

My mouth falls open. “But—” When those amber eyes turn toward me, I shut up.

“I will not let you go off and wander the regions of Laconia while in the company of that thing in there.” He points to the hut. “Perhaps you see it as a man, but I know it is not. I would never trust you to be alone with that thing.”

“I can take care of myself.” Even though I don’t have magic currently, which he doesn’t know, but I think today he’s had enough truth bombs.

Frederick sighs. “I know. I don’t mean that I don’t trust you with it. What I meant to say is I don’t trust it with you. It might look like a man, it might sound like a man, but it is not a man. That thing is the reason I had to leave my home as a child. It’s the reason you grew up on another world. It has killed so many people, led to the deaths of so many more. Our mothers, our empresses, our families. That thing in there is a monster, nothing more.”

He’s right. I can’t argue with him. He’s totally right, and I know it. I’ve known it this whole time. It does hit a little differently when you hear someone else say it, though, especially when that person is the normally calm and quiet Frederick.

“So, yes, I am going with you. I’ll watch your back around that thing.”

In my head, I hear Invictis mutter, “He’ll watch more than that, I’m sure. Shall we tell him of the time you undressed for me? I’m certain he would love to hear all about it—”

Ignoring that comment is the hardest thing I’ve had to do in days, and I address Frederick by saying, “Fine, but you have to learn to ignore the shit he says. He will say anything he can to get under your skin. You think he’s just a weapon, but trust me, he’s as annoying as any other man, no offense.”

“Uh” is all he says to that, and I can tell he doesn’t like being lumped in with the asshole, but it’s true. Men will be men and all that shit.

“Come out here, Invictis,” I say, and in a flash of yellow light, he appears beside me, still wearing that blasted smirk. “I guess you’re both coming with me. That means you will both be on your best behavior. We’re going to be one happy family on this trip, is that understood?”

Invictis folds his arms over his chest and frowns. “I don’t see why I should. I don’t

like him.” When he says that, Frederick scoffs. “See? Even the way he breathes makes me murderous.”

Frederick huffs, “What—wait. Are those my boots?” He notices the one thing I didn’t have the tailor replace.

“You will get along with him because I’m telling you to,” I say to Invictis, and to Frederick, I add, “Yes, those are your boots. Now, shall we get this show on the road?”

I stump both men by that saying, neither one understanding it. You never know how many weird sayings you have in your vocabulary until you’re transported to another world and you’re faced with people who just don’t get it.

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Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 12:53 am

Traveling with Frederick and Invictis is the least fun thing in the world. Though I try to make them get along, for obvious reasons, they don't. They bicker, their personalities clash, and it makes the days stretch on to infinity.

We don't follow any maps; I know where to go. It's intuitive. I guess some magic must still be inside me, because how else can I explain how I know where to go?

We go to Pylos first, mostly because the route we're going to take doesn't have many streams or rivers. We'll be eating the food we brought with us on the trip. Throughout the days, we keep a good pace, though Invictis says he could get us there in the blink of an eye if I unbind him and let him ascend into his six-winged form. He can also blink us there with his light, but Frederick refuses to partake in anything of the sort, so we're stuck doing this by foot.

I don't blame him. I wanted to do it by foot so that I can try to, I don't know, reconnect with nature on the way and get my magic back.

One night, we're resting near a campfire Frederick made when Frederick asks, "If you can travel across Laconia in the blink of an eye, can you do the same between worlds?" When Invictis only stares at him from across the campfire, he adds, "Could you take Rey home, I mean? Not that I want her to leave, but... I know how much you miss it." That last part is spoken to me.

I give Frederick a soft smile. I sit a few feet away from both men, neither one wanting to be near the other.

"The only reason I was able to bring us here was due to the fact that I was still

connected to myself,” Invictis mumbles unhappily. “I was separated, a piece of me with Gladus and a piece of me trapped on a throne in Acadia. Without a link like that, I could not transport any of us to Rey’s world.”

“My mom cut the threads between worlds after she left me with my dad,” I whisper, warming my hands by the fire.

“Yes, what a pain, that,” Invictis says.

“So this... face,” Frederick goes on, “it’s not yours. Whose is it?”

Invictis doesn’t answer, but I do: “He possessed Morimento’s son. She died casting the spell that bound her son and Invictis to the throne. This probably is what he would’ve looked like, if he wouldn’t have died on that throne.”

“Ah, that’s right. You did say you were tricked.” Frederick frowns, and I bet he’s thinking something along the lines: another reason to hate Invictis.

“Tell me, Frederick,” Invictis speaks slowly, his accent leaning more heavily on certain words, “what bothers you more? The fact that I’m not truly defeated, or the fact that I am now bound to the woman you—”

“Don’t,” I say, stopping him from finishing that question.

Frederick’s hands curl into fists, and he glares at Invictis over the fire as he leans forward. “Why don’t you tell me what bothers you more? The fact that you were bound by Rey, or the fact that even though she’s stuck with you, she likes me more?”

I throw up my hands and say, “Remember what I said about getting along? This ain’t it. I don’t need to hear you two constantly trying to piss the other off or trying to prove something. Seriously.”

I turn away from them both and lay down, giving the campfire my back. If there's one thing it should tell them, it's that I'm done with that conversation.

The funny thing is, I'm not tired. I haven't really been tired this entire time. Granted, only a few days have passed—and we have a lot more to go before we reach the labyrinth nestled deep within Pylos—but usually I'm knocked out cold by now. Sleep has always been something I've lacked in the past, so I made up for it any chance I got.

Now? Now it's like the opposite. I can't make up for it. I'm constantly awake, too anxious and concerned over every little thing. Who knew becoming a kingdom's high empress would mean I'd lose sleep over it?

The guys don't say anything else, so at least they get the picture. Eventually, I hear one of them smother the fire, and the night goes silent. In spite of all the irritation inside me, I manage to fall asleep.

Except can you call it sleep when you dream in such vivid detail it's basically like being awake? Because that's what happens. Yay me.

I stand near the front end of the store I got fired from a few weeks before everything changed. A cart with returns sits in front of me, although the items it's full of, I don't recognize. I have a split-second panic about not knowing where to put everything before realizing this is just a dream.

How do I realize it's a dream? *Invictis*.

The damned asshole himself is checking everything out, looking at the registers, and the high warehouse ceilings, even at the tiled floor. Once I see it's him and I know it's a dream, the objects in the cart materialize into real things: toys, clothes, the like.

“What an interesting place,” Invictis muses as he finally struts over to me.

“It’s not interesting. It’s a hellhole that barely paid the bills,” I mutter. I set a hand on my hip as I glare up at him. “Stop antagonizing Frederick. He’s only here with us because he doesn’t trust you to be alone with me.”

The smirk he flashes me after that makes my stomach twist... and not in a bad way. It’s the kind of bad boy smirk that makes girls weak at the knees—and if there’s one thing I like, it’s a bad boy.

Invictis is just ten thousand times worse than any bad boy I’ve hooked up with in the past. Maybe even ten million times worse with all the death and suffering he’s caused.

“Nor should he. If we were alone, imagine the things I would do to you.” He has no business saying something like that to me given the fact that I control him and not the other way around, and yet that doesn’t stop him from saying it.

And sounding way too sexy while saying it.

Of course, he probably means he’d hurt me, try to kill me, yada yada yada, if we were alone, and not anything of a sexual nature, but I can’t help where my mind goes. Usually it’s to the gutter, and if I’m being honest, the way he stared at me when I was naked didn’t help.

The indifference that slowly changed, second by second, until something else took its place, something primal. The hunger that made him take every part of my naked body in with no hurry whatsoever.

Fuck. I need to stop myself from thinking about that. There’s no way that can lead to anywhere good.

“It’s kind of funny you think you can do anything to me,” I say, angling my head up to him as I abandon the cart and move closer to his tall frame. “Last I checked, I’m the one with the power here, not you. What did you say before? You’re my weapon now.”

“Your weapon, your chaos, and ultimately, your undoing, yes,” Invictis says with a vicious smirk. “I am all that and more, and the fact that I am bound to you and your... commands is incredibly irritating, but one day you will set me free, and when you do—”

He steps closer to me, his towering frame all I can see. The intensity comes off him in waves, and even though everyone in their right mind would be terrified if they were in my place, I’m not. The opposite, actually.

I’m not scared of him. His threats don’t make me cower in fear. If anything, they’re amusing—and I only say I’m amused so I don’t have to face the reality that his threats make certain parts of me clench in anticipation.

“I will destroy you,” he whispers, that smirk of his fading into an incredibly serious mask. “Everything you are, everything the people of Laconia believe you to be, I will destroy it all, Rey. It is my purpose.”

“Is it? Or are you still under whatever spell the first high empress put on you before she locked you up and threw away the key?”

Invictis’s gaze narrows at me, and the frown that fills his face tells me he did not anticipate me saying that. “I am under no one’s spell. Not anymore. My destruction is now my own.”

“Why?”

“It is what I do.”

“But why? Why is it what you do? Why can’t you do something else, anything else? If your will is your own, why can’t you just let things be and, I don’t know, not destroy all civilization in Laconia?”

Invictis cocks his head. “Does the hunter stop hunting when it catches its prey? No. It feasts and then it hunts again—”

“Uh, no. It feasts and then it probably takes a nap. Animals don’t kill just to kill—and if they do, then they’re not hunting. They’re defending their territory or trying to protect themselves from something they see as a threat. Is that how you view humans? You think we’re a threat to you? Or maybe every square fucking inch of Laconia is your territory?”

He leans over me, his tall frame enough to stifle and intimidate, but all I can see is the vibrancy of his blue eyes, the way they seem to shimmer even though they have no business doing that here, in a memory of the store I used to work at.

“You cannot define me in mortal terms. I am eternal. I have always existed and I will continue to exist long after your kind is gone,” he whispers.

I don’t know what makes me say it, and it’ll probably fall on deaf ears, but the words leave me before I can stop them: “It doesn’t have to be like that. You don’t have to wipe everything out. You can let them be, let them live.”

A minute passes before he mutters, “And why should I do that? Why should the most powerful being alive bow down to mere mortals?”

“Because if all you do is kill, if all you bring is destruction... what’s the point? Sure, you’re infinite, but isn’t the point of life to live it? Don’t you want to experience

everything you can? Eat all the food you can get your hands on, go swim in the ocean, get drunk—” Okay, maybe that’s not the best suggestion. “All I’m saying is there’s so much more to life than death.”

“For a short-lived race, it is understandable why you would feel this way, but I am not like you. Not like Frederick or anyone else in Laconia. I am more.”

“Trust me, I know exactly what you are and what you can do.”

“Then why tell me I should go against my nature?”

“Because you’re not an animal!” I practically yell that at him, although given the fact that he looms over me like a fucking tower, the effect is minimal. “You have a choice! Maybe you’re not human, but you’re not a mindless animal following its instincts, either. You don’t have to be a mass-fucking-murderer!”

Invictis is quiet for a few seconds, and then he whispers, “You have such a narrow view on eternity, and you will never comprehend what I am. My purpose is—” He pauses. “—I must clean the slate. It is the only way.”

I don’t yell this next part. I say it quietly, so quiet it’s hard to hear, “The only way for what?”

“The only way to continue.”

I want to ask him what he means, but before I can, I wake up to the early light of dawn, the shared dream nothing but a memory. Slow to sit up, I bring a hand to my head as I groan, and I spare a glance at Frederick and find that he’s already up.

On the other side of camp, Invictis sits, a hard frown on his face. He stares at me hard, so intense it’s like he’s right here beside me and not twenty feet away. I wish I

could peek into his head and see what he's thinking.

Everything I said to him in the dream was true. He's not an animal. He can make a choice, and that choice doesn't have to be total annihilation.

But from what it sounded like, when I spoke to the first high empress, Laconia was barren when she first was exiled here, which means Invictis had already wiped everything out. Or, at the very least, all humankind—and that tells me this cycle has gone on longer than I can imagine.

The last thing he said to me in the dream echoes in the back of my mind. It's the only way to continue.

What did he mean by that?

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We reach the entrance to the labyrinth in Pylos after another week and a half. Nestled between an ugly crag of a mountain, its stone door is so far removed from the main road that no one in their right mind would ever come across it on their own.

Even before Invictis fucked everything up, Laconia was a dangerous kingdom, with giant beasts ready to take a bite off you. People who traveled between the capital city and Pylos, Acadia, and Magnysia always took the main roads and, from what I understand, always traveled in caravans.

“Amazing,” Frederick mutters as we approach the giant stone door. The labyrinth seems to have been built inside the foot of one of Pylos’s many mountains; who knows how large it’ll be inside. The mountain itself is huge. “There are no records of these labyrinths anywhere in Laconia.”

The stone door is triple as tall as Invictis. Plain, nothing inscribed on the stone. I tell Frederick, “The empresses knew. They passed the knowledge down with their memories. If they would’ve told anyone... it would’ve been a risk.”

“And yet, somehow, agents from another kingdom still discovered them,” Frederick says. “I do wonder how people from another kingdom knew while us Laconians were kept in the dark. Such a thing doesn’t seem possible, does it?”

“It is weird,” I agree, but unless we raise the freaking dead, there’s no way to ask the assholes who unleashed Invictis twenty years ago. I gesture for Invictis to open the door. “Be a doll and get the door for us, buddy.”

The growl Invictis lets out when I say that is record-setting. I can practically feel him

seething as he stalks toward the door with a hard frown on his face. What might be difficult for Frederick and me is an easy job for him, even though he's being a little bitch about it. He pushes open the door, and inside, we see a long, dark hall continuing into the depths of the mountain.

"Can you light up the path for us, too?" I ask with a smile, taking way too much enjoyment out of pissing him off.

Hey, it ain't like I can light up the way. It's him or me, and right now it's gotta be him.

Invictis groans again, but he does as he's told. He lifts a single finger, and simultaneously magical balls of yellow light appear on either side of the hall, lighting the entryway section by section.

"Ah, that's handy," Frederick states, earning himself a hard glare from Invictis.

"Let's do this thing." I push past the guys and walk into the labyrinth. I thought, back when Invictis was Rune, that I took shelter in one of these one night, but it had to be some other old ruin.

This place feels different. It feels ancient, eerie, like it doesn't want anyone inside it.

Like it's alive.

Frederick and Invictis are behind me as we traverse deeper into the labyrinth. We're about fifty feet in when the sound of the outside door closing on its own echoes in the stale air, and I nearly jump out of my skin.

This place... I don't like it. I don't like it at all.

Tiny balls of golden light hover like torches all the way down the hall. The hall must be half a mile or more; it's the longest goddamned hall I've ever seen. At the end of the hall, we reach a door similar to the one that separates this place from the outside world—however, this one is different in that it has words etched into its stone face.

Words and an image.

“To those who must enter, a trial you must face,” Frederick whispers. “It's in ancient Laconian. I'm fairly certain that's what it says.”

As he speaks, I can't look away from the image below the words. Time has made the etching not as sharp, but even so, I can tell it looks like a damned monster. Fuck me. Are we going to have to fight that thing in order to get to the depths of the labyrinth? Just my luck.

“Interesting. It seems to be some kind of guardian meant to keep most people out,” Frederick explains. “It didn't work twenty years ago, though. Perhaps they defeated the guardian and we'll find nothing but a skeleton.” The hope in his tone is cute but pointless; if it's a magical guardian, there's no way it's dead.

There's only one way to find out. We came all this way, so we're going in.

I go for the doors, using all of my body to push them open. Look at me, practically running headfirst into danger even though I don't have any magic to speak of right now. If the guardian is still around...

One thing at a time.

It's a strange thing, walking out of a narrow hall and stepping into what's basically an underground colosseum. As Invictis and Frederick step inside behind me, Invictis lights up the arena with his magic, more golden balls of light floating around the

circular area. Bigger than a football stadium, built underneath a mountain; I can't imagine the power creating something like this took. The first high empress really was the OG.

Nothing but dirt so fine it's like sand on the ground, the stone walls of the mountain surrounding us on all sides and above our heads. We see nothing; no skeletons, no great beast. It's a large, empty space.

"Well, it seems we are in luck." No sooner does Frederick say that that the ground starts to tremble beneath our feet. When I glare at Frederick, wordlessly thanking him for jinxing us, he gives me a sheepish look and a nervous laugh. "I'll, uh, stay back and let you two handle it." He does pull out his dagger though, just in case.

Invictis and I step forward. The ground shifts, and suddenly something long and slithery erupts from the ground, letting out an otherworldly shriek that makes my ears want to bleed. It pulls itself up, from the dirt, and stretches its body to its full length.

Holy shit. It's fucking huge.

A snake mixed with a lion. That's the best way I can describe it. It has a lion's head, a lion's strong legs and claws, but the long, thin body of a snake. From head to tail, it's got to be at least two or three hundred feet long, and when it stands tall, it must be fifty or more feet taller than me.

And, add onto that, it's made of magic. Its form is ethereal, like it's not truly here, not a solid creature. Its body shimmers in and out of existence, and yet when it growls and snarls, the sound is so very real.

It might be made out of magic, but I don't doubt it can pack a punch. A thing like that can easily kill a dozen or more normal soldiers. For the ones who unleashed Invictis twenty years ago, they must've thrown everything they had at this magical creature to

get past it.

“Holy shit,” I whisper, and right when the words leave my mouth, the magical beast launches itself at Invictis and me. Invictis flashes away, reappearing a good twenty feet to the left, but my reflexes aren’t as good now that I don’t have any magic behind them. I narrowly avoid its first attack by jumping backward, but it’s not far enough.

The half-snake, half-lion creature swipes a claw at me moments after I dodge its first attack. I’m too slow, and with no magic to shield me, its claws find their mark. Two of them dig into my side and scratch the fuck out of my arm.

As hot, searing pain engulfs me, I hear Frederick yell my name. The creature curls around, swinging its long tail in my direction, and before I know it, I’m swatted aside like an insect. I fly through the air a good twenty or thirty feet and land with a thud.

I try to get up, but my side hurts too damn much. I’m not steady on my feet. I fall back down, and the creature is readying another attack—this one an attack I can in no way evade. I set a hand on one of the wounds in my side and close my eyes, waiting for the inevitable.

But the inevitable doesn’t come, because Mr. Inevitable himself flashes between the creature and me and throws up a golden, shimmering, semi-translucent shield to protect me. The creature is pushed back the moment it connects with the shield.

I’m on my knees, already feeling weak and woozy.

Shit. Guess this wasn’t a good idea after all, huh?

Frederick races over while the creature is recoiling from the sudden shield, and once he reaches me, he drops his dagger into the dirt, a look of pure worry on his face. “Rey, what—” He touches my side, just for a split second, and his hand comes away

bloody.

Yeah, those claws are fucking sharp. I don't know how deep the wounds are, but the way my body is on fire, I'd say they're pretty deep.

Invictis glances at me over his shoulder, still holding up the magical shield. I can't read his expression, because everything's getting a little blurry around the edges, but I can tell he's waiting for something.

So I give him what he's waiting for. I tell him, "Kick that thing's ass." I swear, before he turns to face the creature again, I see him smirk, like he's going to enjoy this.

And he does. He doesn't transform into his ascended, eight-foot-tall, six-winged form, but he doesn't need to. Invictis is free to use any of his magic to defeat that thing, and honestly, even with Frederick fretting over me and my injuries like a mother hen, I can't take my eyes off him.

He's here, then he's there. He flits around, golden light following him anywhere he goes. Spears of light, spheres of molten gold; he launches everything he can at the magical creature, overpowering it by sheer force in mere moments. It's the opposite of a fair fight, and it just proves once again how strong he is.

Invictis really is the inevitable, isn't he? He may be a god, he may not be; either way, he's a weapon of absolute destruction and he is in his element when he is destroying something.

"Why didn't you use your magic?" Frederick is busy asking me, though I can hardly hear him, too busy watching Invictis take care of the giant creature. "These wounds are bad, Rey. You're losing a lot of blood. I need to make a tourniquet. Here." He takes my hand and holds it firmer over one of the punctures in my side. "Keep pressure on it." He then starts to dig inside his bag.

I don't answer him. I can't. Mostly because I'm getting lightheaded, and also because I can't stop watching Invictis.

Now that he's not fighting me, I can appreciate just how beautiful he can be when he's giving the battle everything he has. The tattoos on his arm glow a glittery gold, and I'm pretty sure I see the markings on my arm doing the same, but I can't be sure. He is destruction personified. How in the world could I ever believe something like him could change?

This is what he is. This is what he does. He fights and he wins.

Am I only delaying the inevitable by binding him to me? Is Laconia not safe after all?

The creature, as incredible as it is, is overpowered by Invictis. Invictis's golden light comes from all angles, surrounding the magical creature, and that light shifts into a hundred blades. They launch themselves at the creature all at once, digging themselves into its flesh, in its body, in its legs, in its head.

And just like that, the creature dies—although it vanishes before its large body collapses onto the dirt. Within seconds, it's as if it was never there to begin with.

Invictis is on my other side within another second, kneeling down and reaching for me, but Frederick stops him. "Whoa. What do you think you're doing? I'm making a tourniquet, and then—"

My fingertips are cold all of a sudden, and it's hard for me to speak, but I manage to whisper, "He can heal me, Frederick." My lips feel cold, too, like the blood that should be in my fingers and my lips all raced down to the wound to spill out.

Frederick says not a word as he moves back and gives us space. Invictis kneels on the opposite side of the wounds, so he has to lean over me to get to them. I stop applying

pressure to my side and let him pull my shirt up to expose the wounds. The only reason I don't fall back due to a lack of strength is because his left arm curled around me to hold me up.

I hold my breath when I feel Invictis's hand curl around my side, touching me right where the wound is. If I wasn't so cold, it probably would've hurt, but as it is, I think I've lost too much blood and went numb.

The tattoos we share glow when he heals me, and I swear to God I can feel the skin on my side stitch itself back together. I may have fast healing thanks to being an empress, but you can't beat this. This is instantaneous.

Once the biggest puncture hole is healed, his hand moves to the next, and I breathe a sigh of relief when I feel his magic fix me. Of course, it can't fix the amount of blood I lost already, but that's okay. At least I'm not going to die here.

I meet Invictis's gaze and find that it's blue color was replaced by a glowing, molten gold. An unnatural set of eyes, and yet it's just his true self peeking through his human mask. His golden eyes are reminiscent of his other form, shimmery and ethereal, like the color moves around his irises.

"Thank you," I whisper once the wounds are all healed. I'm caught by those golden eyes. I can't look away; it's physically impossible.

Invictis doesn't pull away from me. His hands still rest on my side and my back, our shared tattoo glowing in a similar way to his eyes. "I didn't have a choice," he mutters with a slight frown.

But he did. I said he could heal me. I didn't order him to. Granted, the end result would have been the same, but he chose to do it before the command came and he was forced to. And beyond that, it's not the first time he's healed me—the first time

he did so all on his own, right after he...

After he killed my mom.

Invictis pulls away from me after that, giving his back to me as Frederick helps me fix my shirt and lets me lean on him as we get to our feet. I'm still a bit woozy; a glance at the ground where I was shows just how much blood I lost. That fucking beast got me good.

"You need to rest," Frederick advises me, the only reason I'm staying upright and not wobbling back and forth. "You lost a lot of blood, Rey."

"I can rest after we see what's on the other side of this arena," I tell him. My fingertips are still numb, but the feeling is coming back to my lips, so that's a good sign. Once we're out of this stupid labyrinth I'll rest a bit, but for now, we push on ahead.

On the other side of the arena, another door sits. This door was closed before, but when the creature fell to Invictis, it opened on its own, magically, like the death of the creature was its key. I have to use Frederick for support as we walk, but he doesn't seem to mind. I have the feeling my lack of magic use will be brought up again... and I'll have to tell him the truth.

Past that door is another long hall, although it's not as long as the entry hall. Invictis lights the way with his magic, and soon enough we enter the room the hall leads to. A smaller, circular room that, square-footage-wise, is probably as big as the apartment I had above Frank's bar. Not large at all, but apparently big enough for a piece of Invictis.

In the center of the room is a box. That box rests comfortably on a stone altar, faded etchings on the stone around it. A gilded silver color, the box appears almost alien,

like no metalworker could have created it, way too perfect of a square.

I lean on the altar instead of Frederick so he can study the room. As I study that box, I hear Frederick say, “Incredible. I’ve never seen anything like this. These etchings...” He touches the inscribed words on the altar. “They’re not old Laconian. It’s another language. I don’t know what it says. Do you?”

Whether he’s asking me or Invictis doesn’t matter. I can’t read it, and Invictis just shrugs.

“It almost looks like it’s incomplete.” He reaches into his bag and pulls out a blank journal and some charcoal. “I need to take an etching. Rey, you should sit down.”

I should. I can’t feel my feet. But I can’t pull away from the box. My mind can’t wrap around the fact that a part of Invictis was inside that box twenty years ago. I can’t grasp it. It seems insane to me to think about the first high empress facing him on her own and separating him into three pieces, creating these boxes and these labyrinths and locking him away—and not only that, but placing a spell on him that, if he’s ever awoken, he would have to bend to the will of those that brought him out of his slumber.

The first empress was the most powerful out of them all. Pit her against any of her successors, and it’d be no contest. I thought I was pretty badass with the magic, but after binding Invictis to me, it’s like all my magic is gone.

How am I supposed to live up to the first high empress? Laconia deserves better.

My fingertips brush against the closest edge of the box, and just like that, the lights go out. I pass out.

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Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 12:53 am

I stand in an empty city built before my arrival. Everything is foreign but familiar. Standing at the precipice of change, I know I will not back down. I cannot. This land is cursed, tainted by a force no one can understand. The aether is the lifeblood of Laconia... and all it would take for everything to change is a single drop of poison.

I did not know it then, but my arrival in the land that would become Laconia would be that poison. I was the first drop. Every empress after added to the poison, until that poison became strong enough.

Until you.

Me. Until me.

I wake with a start, my breathing unsteady as I slowly sit up and feel my head. It pounds a little, but I can ignore it—mostly because my mind is too busy remembering what that inner voice told me after I passed out.

It was the memory of the first high empress. The memory must've been stored inside that box with Invictis, and when he was unleashed, the memory remained, waiting for someone to activate it.

Waiting for me.

It takes me a moment to realize I'm outside. One of the guys must've carried me out of the labyrinth when I passed out. I'm by a fire, a sky of dusk above me, pretty colors dancing off the few clouds there are.

Frederick notices I'm awake, and he comes to sit near me, his brows drawn together like he's studying a science experiment he can't quite figure out. Behind him, I see Invictis on the other side of the fire, pretending not to watch us, but not being covert enough to get away with it.

"Are you all right?" Frederick asks me, his tone laced with concern. "When you passed out... I thought the worst." He starts to reach for my face, but he stops short of touching me, settling for saying, "I told you you lost too much blood. Your body decided to rest for you."

"Did you get everything you needed from the labyrinth?" I ask. My voice comes out dry, and Frederick hands me a flask of water, which I gratefully take and drink.

He nods. "Invictis held onto you while I... I said we could go back, but I didn't want to risk having to fight that creature again. I'm sorry."

"It's fine. I'm glad you got what you needed," I say, slow to return the water.

Frederick frowns at me. "Rey, why didn't you use your magic against that beast? Why did you let it attack you like that?" The way he keeps looking at me, I can tell he's not going to let it go. He wants an answer and he won't stop until he gets one.

"I..." My feeble response trails off. I practiced coming clean in my head so many times, and yet not once did I ever expect we'd be where we are, so far removed from civilization, just me, Frederick, and Invictis.

Fuck it. Might as well just spit it out.

"I haven't been able to cast anything since I bound Invictis to me," I say. "I don't know why, but... it's like it's just gone."

“What? It’s gone? It can’t be gone. You’re the high empress. You have all of the magic from your predecessors. That magic can’t just disappear,” Frederick tries to reason, as if sound reasoning will bring back my ability to sling spells. And then something must occur to Frederick, because he whips his head around and glares at Invictis. “This must be your doing.”

Scoffing as he rolls his eyes, Invictis huffs, “It is not. Although, you could convince her to unbind me and see if that helps anything—”

“Fuck off,” I hiss, causing Invictis to smirk. “You’re not getting unbound. You’re stuck with me from here on out, magic or not.” Quieting my voice, I tell Frederick, “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you. I didn’t know how. I didn’t want...” I look at my lap and sigh.

Frederick knows what I was going to say, because he says it: “You didn’t want to worry anyone. You’d just saved Laconia. You wanted everyone to have faith again.”

“I don’t know about faith, but... yeah, pretty much.” My eyes shift to the golden tattoo on my right arm.

“Is that why you wanted to visit these labyrinths with Invictis? To see if you could find a way to regain your magic?” When all I do is sigh, Frederick shakes his head and gets to his feet. “I need a moment.” Without another word he walks away from the campfire, away from me.

“Frederick, wait.” I try to call out for him, but he doesn’t stop. Fifteen feet away, Invictis is busy frowning, and I can tell he wants to say something, but I don’t let him. I get up and go after Frederick. Still woozy and a little light-headed, but my legs hold me up.

A ways from camp, I find Frederick standing just before a sharp drop-off, one of

countless in Pylos thanks to its mountainous land. His back is to me, and his arms are folded over his chest, a stance he doesn't often take.

I stand behind him for a moment, trying to think of what to say to him, but he beats me to it. He doesn't turn around, though. He simply says, "You should have told me." The hurt in his voice is plain, and it's like a knife in the gut.

Or a claw in the side.

"I know" is all I can say.

Frederick is slow to face me, and his arms fall to his sides. "You should have told me, Rey, about all of it. About Invictis, about your magic. Do you not trust me? Did you think I'd tell everyone the moment you told me?" He lets out an exasperated breath. "Emperors above, Rey, if you would have told me and asked me to keep it to myself, I would have—I would have gladly done so while trying to help you."

My eyes fall to the grass between us, although it's more like dry weeds here than actual grass. "I know."

He takes a step toward me. "Do you? Do you know? I don't think you do. You're so engulfed in your own problems you never stop to think. I can help you, Rey, but only if you let me."

"It's not easy for me, Frederick, to let anybody help me! Don't you get that? Ever since my dad died I've been on my own. My foster family was a joke. I grew up when I was ten years old. I've had to depend on myself since. I'm the only one I can count on. Me. Not anyone else. Just me."

"The circumstances might've been different, but I was forced to grow up in much the same way." The expression on Frederick's face is pained. "You can count on me. I

thought you knew that.”

“How can I know that? Let’s not forget the first time we met, you lied to me and said if I went looking for your dad’s stuff you’d help me get home.” I don’t know why, but I throw his lie back in his face. Maybe Frederick lying to me in the beginning hurt me more than I wanted to admit. How else can I explain why it so easily came to the tip of my tongue now?

He inches forward, his brow furrowed. “And I’ve regretted lying to you every single day since. You were a stranger who could somehow walk through shadowstorms as if they were nothing. You were my only chance at finding my father’s research. I never imagined—” He stops himself from saying more.

But I need to know. “You never imagined what?”

“I never imagined you’d bring him back. I never could have anticipated the way things have gone. Rey.” Frederick reaches for me, and before I know it, his hands are around mine, holding onto me so softly the tender gesture freezes me in place. “In the beginning, I saw you as a possible solution to our problems. To the woes, to all of the hard times that fell upon Laconia. But now...”

Frederick’s hands squeeze mine, and I know I should pull away, but I don’t. Blame it on the recent blood loss, blame it on anything, but I stand right where I am, gazing into Frederick’s amber eyes like they hold the answers to everything.

“Now, everything is different,” he whispers. “Everything changed. I don’t know when. It’s not like I planned on it. You’ve changed everything, and I need you to know that you can trust me with anything. I will never do something that will lead to your harm.”

With every whispered sentence, he sounds more urgent, and his body keeps inching

closer until there's nothing between us but our hands—which he then drops so he can cup my face. Gingerly, like he's scared or nervous, like he doesn't quite know what he's doing, or maybe he's afraid I'll push him away or stop him.

But I think, just this once, I won't.

His head bends and his eyes close, and I let him take the lead. My own eyelids flutter shut mere moments before his mouth brushes against mine. Tentative, unsure, the softest kiss I've ever felt—and that includes the ill-fated kiss I shared with him before.

Why does this feel more intense, even though it's ten times gentler? Why can I feel this kiss in every part of me, from my fingertips to my freaking toes? I don't do soft and gentle. It's not my thing. But this... there's something special about this.

Maybe it's the blood loss, but I swear I could kiss Frederick all night.

One of Frederick's hands drops to my side, slow to curl around my hip, around to my lower back. His mouth on mine is warm and soft, and the slowness of the kiss does anything but dull the urgency. I can still feel how much he needs me, how much he wants me. It's almost enough for me to give in completely. I've never let my walls down for anyone before, but this kiss makes me want to let him in.

The keyword there is almost. I don't know what would've happened if we would've kept going, but we don't. The kiss is interrupted by a harsh yank as Frederick is pulled away from me, and the moment my eyes open, I see a tall, wide, glowing man standing in between us with his hand around Frederick's throat.

"I think it would be best if you kept that mouth to yourself," Invictis hisses out, the tattoo on his arm glowing gold, like he's ready to use his magic against Frederick for kissing me—which is ridiculous because A) Invictis shouldn't give a shit about who

kisses me, and B) I forbade him from hurting anyone.

That command must be the only reason Frederick is still alive right now, because when I step aside and see the pure fury on Invictis's face, I don't doubt he would've gone for the kill immediately if he would've been able to.

Frederick tries to peel the hand off his neck, but he can't. Invictis is too strong. It takes me a good moment to snap out of my shock and say, "Let him go, Invictis."

"I could let him go off the edge of this cliff," Invictis muses with a certain type of evil glee no one else could ever master. "By the time he hits the ground, he will surely regret placing his mouth upon yours."

"I said let him go now ." I emphasize the final word, and I watch as Invictis huffs and frowns—but pulls himself away from Frederick all the same, finally removing that hand from around his throat.

As he rubs his neck, Frederick glares at Invictis. "I thought you said he couldn't hurt anyone?" That question is spoken to me even though his eyes rest on the glowing individual in front of him.

Invictis sounds rather bored when he mutters, "I did not hurt you. I simply pulled you off of her. That mouth of yours should be nowhere near hers—"

Letting out a chuckle full of disbelief, Frederick says, "I don't think you get to make that decision. If I want to kiss Rey and she wants to kiss me, it is none of your concern." As he says that, Invictis's hands clench into fists, and I don't doubt the godlike-man is imagining pounding Frederick's face into the ground.

I let out a chuckle, too, which causes Invictis to glare at me, his eyes a beautiful, molten gold. "I just think it's funny. You threw a hissy fit the last time I kissed

Frederick, too.” I slowly cock my head at him. “Are you sure you’re not jealous, hmm?”

“Jealous?” Invictis echoes. “Of that mortal? The last thing I would ever be is jealous.” The way he says the word makes it sound like a curse, something he would only wish upon his enemies.

Which is, you know, basically every single person alive, but whatever.

Frederick must’ve had enough of this conversation, because he moves around Invictis and starts to reach for me again as he says, “Come on. Let’s get back to camp and ignore Invictis.” But his hand doesn’t reach me, because Invictis steps between us once again, blocking the movement.

“Touch her again, and you will be the first human who dies the moment I am free,” Invictis growls out. Maybe it’s just his accented voice, but the threat sounds kind of sexy.

Yeah, yeah, I know. I shouldn’t find anything about Invictis sexy, but we’ve already passed that point a long time ago, so let’s just move on and pretend I never had that thought.

“I don’t believe this,” Frederick huffs. “This is asinine. What—”

Before Frederick can say anything else, Invictis turns around to me. Our eyes lock as the glowing tattoos fade and the gold in his eyes are replaced by a pretty, clear blue. He says not a word more—but he does do something that catches me so off-guard, I’m too stunned to command him to stop.

He picks me up. Yep. Invictis just picks me up and throws me over his shoulder like I weigh nothing. His large hand remains on my ass so I don’t topple completely over

him.

My mouth falls as Invictis marches to camp ahead of Frederick, my body swaying with each step he takes. It's like he thinks if he doesn't separate me and Frederick, more will happen, and he won't let anything else take place on his watch. Which is ridiculous and stupid.

I should really yell at this asshole to put me down, but the bastard actually rendered me speechless.

Even Frederick is stunned. He stands, motionless for a good five or ten seconds, watching Invictis carry me off, anything he might've said completely forgotten about.

Invictis marches us back to camp, where he finally takes that hand off my ass and sets me down near the campfire, where I was passed out before. He stands beside me like a watchdog and waits for Frederick to come along, and once the man does, he glares and points at a spot on the other side of the small fire, wordlessly telling him where to sit.

Frederick stalks to the spot, muttering, "I'm sitting here because I want to, not because you told me to." He runs a hand through his hair, and I can tell through the flames he's a mixture of pissed off and embarrassed.

Me? I don't know what I am, besides stunned at Invictis's balls. I mean this in all seriousness: what the hell?

Invictis is slow to lower himself to the ground beside me, sitting only inches away from me, the closest he's been this whole trip. It's like he thinks he has to sit near me to keep Frederick away.

Instead of making him get up and go away, I lay down and give Invictis my back. My

head still kind of hurts and I'm a little woozy—something which that kiss did not help. I need sleep. If I pay any more attention to the asshole next to me, I'd only give him what he wants.

Invictis says he's not jealous? I'm calling bullshit. Everything he did was some alpha male crap that should only piss me off.

I'm not pissed, though, and that's a bigger issue.

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Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 12:53 am

Invictis invades my dreams that night, and the second I see him, everything he did comes crashing back. Pulling Frederick off me while we were kissing. Threatening him. Being so jealous that he literally threw me over his shoulder and carried me off so I wouldn't walk hand-in-hand back to camp with Frederick.

The asshole overstepped massively.

We're in a giant lecture hall. I can't remember exactly what class I had in the room. Maybe Intro to Psych 101 or something. Either way, it's an auditorium-like room with countless rows of chairs.

Invictis walks along the front row of the room, studying it all without saying a word.

That's fine. He doesn't have to talk.

I walk down the aisle on the side of the room, step by step until I reach the front of the room, the lowest level, where a whiteboard sits. Totally old-fashioned, but that's because this is an older building on campus, not redone with new technology everywhere you look.

I snap my fingers and get Invictis's attention, and once those blue orbs look at me, I point to a seat in the front row and say, "Sit. It's time for a lesson."

He is slow in sitting down, and he chooses a seat in the middle. It's almost funny seeing him in such a small seat; his body hardly fits. That's what he gets for being so fucking giant.

I give him my back and walk up to the whiteboard. I find a dry-erase marker and uncap it. “Today, we’re going to learn something important. It’s something all people need to know, something stupid people often get wrong.” As I say that, I write something on the whiteboard in big, bold letters.

Once it’s done, I step aside and let him view it, and I point at it with my marker as I say, “How to tell if something is none of your business. Number one.” I draw a one on the board and write it as I say it: “Does it involve you?” Once I finish writing the question mark, I move away from the whiteboard like I’m a professor teaching an actual lesson.

“This is an easy one,” I tell him. “If something doesn’t involve you in any way, it’s none of your business. If you’re not around when something is happening and it affects you in no way whatsoever, it’s none of your business.”

I go back to the board and write a two. “Does it involve someone you hate?” Turning away from the board, I point the marker at Invictis. “Trick question. Even if it’s someone you hate, if it doesn’t involve you, it’s still none of your business.”

Invictis’s expression is one of boredom, although that boredom is laced with the slightest hints of irritation. Still, he doesn’t say anything. All he does is watch me and grind his jaw.

“Three,” I continue my lesson, hurriedly scribbling on the board, “does the outcome of the action affect you in any way? If it doesn’t, then it’s none of your business.” I underline the heading of the numbers, How to tell if something is none of your business, for emphasis.

I cap the marker as I turn away from the board, and then I toss the marker absentmindedly behind me, done with the lesson. “Any questions?” I pretend like I’m surveying the entire auditorium as I step closer to my audience of one.

Invictis doesn't have a question. Not a question, but the asshole does have something to say: "You're wrong."

His words make me stop pretending I'm an actual professor, and I glare at him. "Care to elaborate how I'm wrong?" When he doesn't say another word, I move to stand before his chosen seat with my arms folded over my chest. "Oh, come on. Share your thoughts with the class."

"First, let me say I don't hate the mortal. I find him as irritating as I do every other mortal. Second, it did involve me."

"How did the kiss involve you? Pretty sure there were only two participants, and neither of them was you."

"Anything that involves you therefore involves me," he speaks so plainly, like it should be obvious. "We are bound together, you and I, whether you can use your magic or not. I was simply stopping you from making a mistake."

Okay, I know I shouldn't let anything he says get under my skin, but that last part pisses me the fuck off.

My arms drop to my sides and I step closer to him. Even though he's sitting, he's still fucking tall; I can barely lean over him, but I manage to as I whisper, "A mistake?"

Even though, for once, I'm in the superior position, Invictis doesn't act like it bothers him. "Yes, a mistake. Assuming you miraculously keep your sanity, as the years go by, you will remain as you are, while Frederick will age as all mortals do. Why do you think it was so... out of the ordinary for an empress to have children of their own? Sooner or later, Rey, you will see him die."

Out of everything he could've said, that's the last thing I expect to hear, and it's why

it takes me a few moments to ask, “And why does that matter to you? If I want to be with him as he grows old and eventually dies, isn’t that my decision?”

He tilts his head up and locks gazes with me. “It will hurt you.”

Neither of us say anything after that. His thoughts are his own, but I can tell you that I’m shocked once again. Assuming what he did and how he acted wasn’t about jealousy... could it be he was only trying to protect me, in his own weird way?

No, that doesn’t make any sense.

“Come on,” I say. “You’re telling me you did all that to protect me? I’m not stupid. You and me, we may not be at each other’s throats right now, but we’re enemies. You hate me and I hate you. We want to destroy each other, not protect each other from possible future pain.”

The corners of his mouth curl into a devilish smirk, and he scoots forward on his seat, stopping only when his face is inches from mine. His gaze travels along my face, taking in my mouth first before sluggishly rising to lock gazes with me. I’m in the superior position still, but it feels like he’s pinning me in place somehow, drawing all of the air out of my lungs with the intensity rolling off him in waves.

“Perhaps,” he whispers out the word as he lifts a single hand. “I was also a bit...” That hand brushes against my cheek, lightly running down my jaw in a way that’s more teasing than tender. “Envious.”

I don’t say a word. It takes all of my willpower to remain standing where I am, so close to him, and not to either take a few steps back or crawl on the motherfucker’s lap. God, I hate him. I hate him so much—and at the same time I don’t, and I hate myself for feeling that way.

It's a lot of confused hatred, let's just say.

The hand that danced along my jaw falls to my neck, where it curls around my throat even though it has no business being there or doing that. "Perhaps I had you to myself for so long, your attention solely on me, that seeing you give some of that attention to that fool made me a little..." He lets out a long breath. "...murderous."

Invictis stands, and just like that I'm reminded of how tall this form is, how much he dwarfs me in every capacity. "Perhaps I have been stuck in this blasted form for too long that I am being tainted by senseless mortal emotions."

His voice lowers to a bare whisper when he finishes, "Perhaps I want you."

My breath catches, and suddenly it's so hard for me to breathe. Not because of the hand around my neck—it's not tight. It doesn't choke me. It's merely a reminder of who stands before me, practically baring his soul... if he has a soul to speak of—but because I can't believe this. I can't believe any of this.

"You're a manipulator," I whisper. "You'll say anything to get what you want, and I know the only thing you want is to be set free and unbound. You'll say and do anything to weaken my resolve against you." I pull his hand from my neck and take a step back. "Everything you say is a lie."

Invictis stares at me, and I stare right back.

Holding my head high, I command him, "Tell me the truth."

The smirk that grows on his face is answer enough, and I can feel my anger rising, the hatred for this asshole returning tenfold. The hatred inside me is almost loud enough it nearly drowns out what he says.

And what does he say?

“For once, Rey, I spoke only the truth.”

The wind is knocked out of me, and I turn away and give him my back so I can work on calming down. “No fucking way. You’re... you’re lying. I don’t know how, but you are.”

“For someone so quick to rub jealousy in my face, you are obstinate when faced with the entire truth. Tell me, why is it you’re willing to believe I’m jealous but you are so unwilling to believe me when I say I want you in ways I’ve never wanted anything before?”

I whirl around. “Because you’re a liar! Frederick’s a liar! You’re both liars.” My shoulders go up and down once in a pathetic shrug. “Why? Why would anyone... the only thing special about me was my magic, and now that’s gone. I’m back to being stupid Rey who can’t handle her life. I’m back to fucking drowning.”

How can I believe anyone when they say they want me, when they say they care about me? Everyone’s out for themselves and nothing more; it’s a lesson I learned a long time ago and it has stuck with me throughout the years. It’s not like I can fall in love and everything will change.

Nothing changes, because people don’t change.

Invictis speaks with an authority he shouldn’t have, especially when it comes to me, “You were broken by the death of your father and the events that followed. You don’t believe you’re whole. You don’t believe you’re worth anything.”

I let out an ugly laugh. “So what? What does it matter if that’s what I believe? Isn’t that what you said to me before, back when you were trying to kill me every chance

you had? I'm worthless. I'm pathetic. I'm nothing."

He takes a single step toward me, but he can't take any more because I say, "Stop."

So he does, because he has to. "Order me to tell you the truth."

I don't want to. I don't want to hear a single word he says. It isn't like I value his opinion or anything—he's the whole reason we're in this mess to begin with, a mass-murdering psycho who's nothing more than an apocalypse on two legs.

And yet I whisper again, way shakier this time, "Tell me the truth."

Invictus does not hesitate. Though he cannot take any more steps closer to me, he launches into a mini-speech all the same, "You are not pathetic. You are not nothing. You are worthy. You are strong. Stronger than every empress that came before you. Stronger than the sum of everyone in Laconia. You are—" He pauses as he looks away for a split second. "—everything. If I must lose, then there is no one else I would rather lose to."

"I thought you were Mr. Inevitable?" Making a joke is the only thing I can do, given how his words make me feel: like I want to go to him, bury my face against him and feel his arms surround me. Like I want to kiss him like I kissed Frederick earlier. Like I want so much more than that.

"Perhaps the only inevitable thing was not my eternal victory, but that you would come."

It's a moment before I whisper, "Where do we go from here?"

"For the first time, I do not know, but I think it's time to wake up."

His words are the last thing I hear before the dream ends and I'm forced to reckon with that conversation while I'm awake.

I don't think I've ever been more confused in my life than I am right now.

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We don't really talk about it as we travel to Magnysia. Not the kiss between me and Frederick, or the way Invictis interrupted us. I don't bring up that dream or the conversation I had with Invictis inside that dream, and thankfully the asshole himself doesn't bust into any more dreams the following nights.

There are things we all need to think about. I can say, though, it makes for long days when nobody wants to chat.

We make it out of Pylos relatively quickly. The closest labyrinth from where we are is the one in Magnysia, which means Frederick and I are going home, so to speak. We aren't going to the castle, but we'll be close enough.

The landscape turns from mountainous and craggy to flat, intense woodlands that drown out the sun's rays. It's eerie and creepy, not to mention dark even when the sun is out in full-force. The ground is covered in a thick moss instead of grass, whatever survives and thrives with hardly any light. The trees that dot the land are massive, bigger than any tree I've seen in my life back on earth. If one fell, an earthquake would follow.

We're still a week or so away from Magnysia's labyrinth, but now that we're officially in a new region, I have to ask Frederick as we hike along: "Excited to be back in Magnysia?" I wouldn't say things are weird between us, but things definitely haven't been the same since the kiss.

And Invictis... there are entire days where he says not a single word.

"Honestly, I don't have many memories from my time in the castle," Frederick tells

me, glancing at me as we continue along. “I was but a child when we were forced to leave. I vaguely remember a playroom with a mountain of toys, but that could just be a reoccurring dream.”

When I look at him strangely, he adds, “When I was young, of course. A reoccurring dream from when I was young.”

“Right,” I say.

He clears his throat. “I know we don’t have time now, but... in the future, I would very much like to take a trip to the castle and see it again.”

Memories of the day when I wandered through the castle while bleeding all over fill my mind. Half the castle is just gone, blasted away like a bomb went off when my mom lost it. I don’t know that there’s much Frederick can see, but who am I to tell him it isn’t worth it?

“We can,” I eventually say.

Remembering that day also brings back other memories, such as the blade of light Invictis used to stab me. A much cleaner, thinner wound than what I got from that magical guardian in Pylos’s labyrinth, which was the only reason I was able to go on for as long as I did. I guess it’s kind of a miracle I didn’t die that day.

I don’t know if the asshole can sense my thoughts, but I can feel Invictis staring at me. I dutifully ignore him.

Maybe my control on him is weakening or something. I mean, everything he said to me in that dream had to have been a lie, right? I don’t know what I’d do if it’s true and he... he wants more.

He wants me.

As it seems Frederick does, too.

I don't get it. I don't get it at all. I'm really nothing special, and right now, I don't even deserve the title of a high empress. I'm just Rey, the girl I've always been. If these two have real feelings for me, it's only because of a lack of other options or the fact that one is bound to me. That's it. If there were a million other fish in the sea, would Frederick even look at me twice?

Not a good thought to have.

Time wears on. We keep traveling. We come across some small rodents that seem to be blight-free, and it gives me hope that when I bound Invictis to me, any animal that wasn't too badly infected already reverted back to their natural state. Days pass, and the days turn into a week and a half.

I lead us through the forests of Magnysia with a weird sense of direction. It's not something I could explain. I just know where to go, and that's the only reason why I'm able to lead us directly to the labyrinth hidden in the region.

I'm the first to spot the stone door to the labyrinth. This time, it's nestled in the trunk of one of the largest trees around, built beneath its roots, underground, days away from any main paths.

As we approach, Frederick speaks, "I am having a difficult time understanding how foreign agents—spies, I suppose—were able to land on Laconia's shore and find each of these labyrinths on their own." We stop five feet before the door.

It's the same as the other, exactly so. Nothing carved in its face, nothing that would lead you to believe something incredible dwells behind it. As nondescript as a stone

door can be, even if it is nestled inside a monster of a tree.

“Even if there were spies inside our kingdom for years, only the empresses knew about these labyrinths and the pieces of Invictis hiding within,” Frederick goes on, tapping his chin in a thoughtful gesture. “Even before the woes, it was dangerous for folk to wander too far off the main roads, so I doubt they were found by accident.”

I glance at Invictis. He stands ten feet away from us, staring off into the distance, zoning out. “Do you remember anything about the people who let you out twenty years ago? You know, before you killed them?”

With a shrug of his wide shoulders, he answers me, “They wanted revenge for a war they believed they lost centuries ago, and they wanted all life wiped out—which was not so different from my original purpose.”

Frederick frowns. “A war Laconia won centuries ago... one of the Contact Wars, perhaps? I admit I know little of the wars, they happened so long ago. I don’t even know what land they came from.”

“History is told by the victor,” Invictis mutters. “Laconia must have won, so decisively that they decided the war wasn’t worth remembering. Regardless, it matters not. Those men are dead, and you will find nothing of them but dust.”

To me, Frederick says, “Perhaps it doesn’t matter, but if they somehow knew of these labyrinths and what lied within, it makes me wonder what else they know that we don’t. Where did these people come from? How fanatical are they? Laconia has never been more vulnerable than it is now, especially with you—” He stops himself before he says it aloud: magicless .

“Laconia’s not completely defenseless,” I say. “If anyone attacked, I’d make Invictis do it.” As I say it, a loud groan is heard from the bastard himself, as if it’s the worst

thing in the world to be forced to protect Laconia instead of wiping it out. “Speaking of which, open the doors for us and light the way, buddy.”

If Invictis could kill, he’d kill me right then. Or, you know, he’d try to. The look he gives me as he stalks toward the door, his wide shoulders slumped, is downright deadly. He easily heaves the stone doors open, and for the quickest of seconds, all we see is blackness inside. Magical orbs appear in the depths of the tree trunk, a yellowish-white, and we see it isn’t a straight hall like Pylos’s.

It’s a staircase that goes down, into the depths of the land.

“Mass-murdering, ancient evils first,” I say with a grin, and I grin even harder when Invictis groans and marches inside. Frederick is busy giving me a strange look, but I don’t pay much attention to it; instead, I follow Invictis inside.

The three of us head down a spiral stone staircase, our path lit by Invictis’s magic. I don’t know how far down we go, but it’s quite a while before the stairs let out into a long hall. My legs are going to kill me on the way back up.

We move through the straight hallway, stopping before another stone door. This one isn’t blank, much like the inner door in Pylos’s labyrinth. It contains an etching of something with wings: my guess the magical guardian lying within.

“It says the same as the other door,” Frederick says. “It seems each labyrinth is guarded, and to get to each inner chamber, we will have to prove ourselves.”

“Well, it’s a good thing we have Invictis,” I mutter. Although, if we didn’t have Invictis, maybe I’d still have my magic and I’d be able to handle these magical creatures on my own. Or maybe we’d all be dead. Who can say for sure? “He’s our attack dog.”

Invictis prickles. “I do not appreciate being called a dog. I am—”

I wave his words off. “Inevitable, incomprehensible, blah, blah, blah. Yeah, I know. You’ve said the spiel a million times already, dude. Let’s just get in there and have you kick some ass.”

After letting out an explosive huff of a breath, Invictis pushes past the doors and struts into the underground arena with a swagger that no one could hope to match. Frederick and I are right behind him, although we stop just inside the large, circular, dome-like chamber and let him continue to the center.

Invictis’s magic lights up the large space, balls of light hovering in midair around the arena. It’s just as large as the first, the air just as stale, only with an earthier taste. The door to the innermost chamber, where a piece of Invictis was trapped for millennia, sits on the opposite side of the arena, magically sealed until we defeat whatever magical beast is here.

“The carving on the door looked almost like...” I trail off, the word refusing to come out.

And just like that, an unearthly roar splits the air. Invictis stands smackdab in the center of the arena, ready for whatever defense gets thrown at him. What we all expect is for the creature to pop out of the ground like the one in Pylos did; however, this one materializes in the air, mid-flight. Its path swoops down to Invictis as it tries to snap at him, but he avoids the red shimmery teeth easily.

Large, with two strong wings on its back, and a thick, spiked tail. An angular snout that houses teeth larger than my fingers. Although it glimmers due to being made of magic, it still throws me back in time and forces me to remember the woman I did not get to know nearly well enough before she died.

Before Invictis killed her.

My mom.

“It’s a dragon,” Frederick whispers, clearly in awe. “My word. She’s beautiful.” We watch the dragon fly in circles over the arena, and when it unleashes a breath of orange fire at Invictis, he actually chuckles in glee. “She’s inspiring. I wish we didn’t have to fight her so I could draw her.”

“The dragon’s not real,” I whisper.

“Oh, yes, I know that. It’s just... true dragons went extinct a long time ago. All anyone has seen are old pictures in books.” Frederick quiets as he tears his gaze away from the battle, off the dragon, and onto me. “Other than you, I suppose. Your mother... I’m sorry, Rey. This must be difficult for you.”

Shrugging once, I mutter, “It’s not harder than anything else.” Even though looking at the magical dragon makes me remember my mom, I have to watch.

The tattoos on Invictis’s arm glow, and he uses his magic to counter the dragon’s attacks. He moves faster than a human could, his reaction time worlds better. Watching him, it’s clear he was born to fight, made to be in the thick of battle. He never hesitates, and I swear, even though he’s far away, I see a smile on his face as he fights the labyrinth’s guardian. He summons a great ball of light above the dragon the moment it lands before him and brings it down like a comet crashing to the earth. The snarl of the dragon is all I can hear after that, the magical creature pissed the fuck off.

Frederick folds his arms over his chest as he watches beside me. “I must admit, he is impressive.”

It takes me a few seconds to realize what he said, and I have to tear my eyes off the

fight and look at the man beside me, as if looking at him will make him repeat what he said. He doesn't, though, which makes me say, "You called Invictis a he."

"I don't do it lightly. During our journey, I've spent a lot of time watching him, studying him. At the start, I wholeheartedly agreed with my father in thinking Invictis is only a weapon. But after watching him, after listening to him... after how furious he was when we—" Frederick coughs, a slight blush creeping up his cheeks. "—kissed, I'm unfortunately forced to reckon with the fact that you were right all along."

Don't get me wrong. Just like anyone else, I love hearing I'm right. It strokes my ego in all the right ways. But at the same time, the reason behind Frederick's changed opinion is not something I want to think about right now.

"A weapon doesn't have emotions. I didn't see it before. When you argued with my father over what he is, that you believed Invictis was a he and not an it, I didn't want to believe you," Frederick goes on. "But it's clear to me now you were correct."

My eyes return to the fight just in time to witness Invictis slam a dozen or more swords made of sparkling light into the dragon's chest. The dragon is slowing down, but it's not defeated yet. Unless I'm mistaken, he's taking his time in the fight, relishing it, making it last because it's the only fight he'll get until we reach the last labyrinth.

"Be that as it may, I cannot forgive him for the things he's done. He is the reason so much of Laconia is lost, why so many are now dead. He is behind my father's imprisonment. He is ultimately the reason Prim is dead."

"And my mom," I whisper. "Trust me, Frederick, I can't forgive him, either." With my peripherals, I'm pretty sure Frederick is now staring at me and not the fight, but I'm kind of afraid to look at him.

“We’ve all lost something because of him. We can never forget that. If you were to unbind him now, he would annihilate us all.”

“I know,” I whisper. “I’ll never unbind him.”

“And that makes me worry about you even more. It hasn’t been that long, Rey, and he’s already acting as if he owns you, not the other way around. How long until you start to accept it? Until you don’t stop him from, say, tossing me off a cliff?”

That makes me turn toward him and promise him, “That would never happen. I would never let him hurt you or anyone else. I will never let him own me.” I’m a person. No one, not Invictis, not Frederick, not any dick that comes around, can ever own me.

Frederick sighs. “It’s not only Invictis I’ve been watching. I’ve watched you as well. In spite of all that he’s done, you let your guard down around him.”

I want to argue with him, tell him he’s wrong, but I can’t. As much as I hate Invictis, as much as I tell Frederick I’ll never let the bastard own me, I’m not blind. I know I feel things I shouldn’t—but the same can be said about Frederick, too. He might not be a killer, but we started off with him lying to me. And if, say, something did ever happen between me and Frederick, what Invictis said in my dream back in Pylos was right.

Frederick would get old and die and I wouldn’t age a day. Is that something I can handle?

“I only want what’s best for you,” Frederick whispers. “Nothing good can come from Invictis. You know that.”

As my gaze returns to the fight, I see Invictis launching himself in the air, above the

dragon's head. A sharp, spear-like weapon forms in his hands, and he brings it down upon the dragon, piercing its skull. The dragon freezes up, and then it collapses, slowly disintegrating into nothing, the magical guardian beaten.

Invictis's feet land on the dirt the moment the dragon dissipates, and he wears a genuine smile. Not a smirk, a full-blown smile—but that smile is replaced by a frown the moment he glances at Frederick and me, as if he doesn't want anyone else to see him smiling.

Frederick says not a word more as he makes a beeline toward the door on the opposite side of the arena. I wait a moment before hurrying to catch up to him. Invictis doesn't wait for us; by the time we reach the center of the arena, he's already waiting for us near it.

It sounded as though Frederick is worried I'll forget Invictis is a monster, that I'll someday be okay with him grabbing people by the neck and choking them when they try to show me any sort of physical affection. That won't happen. I won't let Invictis off the rails. He's bound to me, and by God, he's not going to drive me insane.

That's the only reason why, once we reach the door and Invictis, I don't make fun of Invictis for having such a good time battling that dragon. After a conversation like that, now isn't the time for jokes.

I push past both men and open the innermost chamber, the first to step inside it. It's a mirror image of the one in Pylos: a smaller circular room with a stone altar right in the center, where a perfectly-shaped box sits.

Frederick sets his bag down and pulls out a journal and a small piece of charcoal to take an etching of the markings on the altar. I stand a good ten or so feet from the altar, knowing I need to get closer to that box, but also remembering what happened the last time I touched a box like that.

I passed out.

Granted, I also had just lost a lot of blood, which I didn't do this time, so the end result might not be the same. Still, it's enough to give me pause.

I don't need to look to know that Invictis stands beside me, and even though I shouldn't say a word to him, I do: "It's hard to imagine a piece of you was inside that box for centuries." Longer than that, in all honesty. I don't know how old Laconia is, but old enough that any trace of the great evil its first high empress fought is gone. "Do you know how long you were trapped?"

"No." His answer comes quickly, and I can tell he doesn't really want to talk about it.

Doesn't matter. It's something we should've discussed before, but it can wait until we're out of this stale air and topside.

I move toward the altar, making sure to give enough space to Frederick so he can continue what he's doing while I touch the box.

Frederick glances at me, noting my outstretched hand. "Rey, are you certain that's—" The rest of what he says I don't hear, mostly because my fingertips brush against the edge of the box and everything goes black.

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The aether. I was not supposed to find the aether. The aether is what connects all life, what gives us magic. The lifeblood of Laconia, the lifeblood of the demon itself. Pure and undiluted, it remained that way since the beginning of time—and that's why it had to change.

The aether was never meant to be mine. Its power was never meant to be split and shared between three empresses, but that's precisely what the land needed: dilution. The taint would come slowly, but someday in the distant future, it would be enough to change everything.

I was the beginning of that change. You are the culmination.

I don't know where the voice comes from, or if I hear all that in my head, like a strange, distant memory that suddenly surfaced in my brain even though it doesn't belong to me, but I find myself standing in an undercroft. I don't know which one; they all kind of look the same. Aether surrounds me on either side, thick, viscous liquid that apparently is magic in solid form.

The only reason the first high empress became what she was is the aether. The lifeblood of Laconia, it was pure until she found it, until she took some of its power as her own. If it's connected to all magic, it's connected to Invictis, too.

It's his lifeblood. But what the hell does that mean?

"Aurelia," a familiar voice speaks my name, so calm and gentle I freeze.

It's not a voice I heard that much, but in my heart of hearts, I know exactly who it

belongs to. I turn away from the aether and see a woman standing on the far side of the platform, wearing the clothes she wore in the visions I saw of her: red robes with a few metal pieces here and there. Her long, brown hair is split evenly, half draping over each shoulder. Her hands are folded over her stomach, a soft smile on her face.

“Mom?” The word escapes me, so soft I can hardly hear it, and yet it echoes in the space between us.

She says nothing else, but her dark eyes meet mine across the space. A single hand lifts as she offers it to me, wordlessly beckoning me to come closer.

So I do.

I go to her, and the moment I reach her, I set my hand in hers. Behind her a stone door opens, a bright white light shining through. She turns and leads me through it, but the moment I cross the threshold she disappears.

I stand in a world of twilight, standing atop water, the horizon caught in a perpetual sunset any which way you look. Above my head the sky is black, like an eclipse is blocking out the sun. But it's not my surroundings that I'm drawn to, not my surroundings that made that bright light shine through the door—a door that is now gone. I don't have to look behind me to know it; I just do.

The thing that shined so much blinding light was Invictis. A statue of him. He stands in his ascended form, an impressive eight feet tall, his six wings outstretched behind his back, floating and unattached. His golden, metallic body shimmers with an unnatural glow, as if his form is moving even though it's not.

His feet, more like armored boots than actual feet, are flat on a small platform above the water I stand on, spread just as his hands are, like he's welcoming you, taking you in. From inside his golden, faceless head shines a light that makes his whole head

appear like a halo.

My breath catches, my lungs condense. It hurts to breathe, looking at him like this. Never has there been a more beautiful ruin, so bright and blinding it's all you can see. If he's not a god, I don't know what he could be.

I step toward him and lift a hand. I don't know what I'm doing, but I feel... I don't know. I feel like I need to be closer to him, even though it's just a statue of him, frozen in time. I climb onto the foot-high platform and slip my hand into his.

The moment my fingertips brush against the metal of his hand, the warmth emanating from Invictis's inhuman form vanishes, and when I blink, his golden hue rusts and flakes away. Before my very eyes he changes, morphing into something else.

Not bright. Not warm. Not the epitome of light.

The opposite.

I wake with a startled gasp, jerking awake as I feverishly look all around to make sure I'm not hand in hand with some anti-Invictis. We're no longer in the inner chamber; if I have to guess, I'd say Invictis carried me up all those steps.

Frederick sits nearby, scribbling in a journal. Invictis is beside me, gazing into the campfire with a far-off look. When I wake, however, both men drop what they're doing to pay attention to me.

"Rey," Frederick says, shutting his journal and setting it on the grass. "You passed out again. Did you see something?"

I draw my legs in to my chest, not saying anything for a while. Invictis watches me with a tight expression, the blueness in his eyes reflecting the orange fire.

“I did, I think.” I close my eyes. The dream, the vision, whatever you want to call it, is still so vivid in my mind. “I felt something in Pylos, too, but this one was... different. I think it’s a memory from the first high empress, something she left for me.”

“For you?” Frederick repeats. “That’s impossible. How would she know you would come along?”

“Well, not me specifically, but me as in the person who’s going to change everything. She set this in motion, and I’m... I’m what she hoped for.” Saying it aloud sounds wrong, like I’m blowing smoke up my own ass. I glance to Invictis. “Do you remember the first high empress at all?”

He lets out a slow breath as he thinks back. “I... it was a long time ago. I was trapped in those labyrinths for so long. I only remember that she could not defeat me, so she imprisoned me.”

“And what about before that?”

Invictis’s brows crease. “When you live an eternity, you tend to forget some things.”

“It’s happened before. You. You wiped out all the humans living here before Laconia became Laconia.” As I say it, Frederick’s mouth drops open, but Invictis appears unbothered, as if he’s mentally telling himself, Good for me .

I continue, “When she was exiled from her home, she was brought to Laconia. She found an empty city. She also found the aether in the undercroft. By bathing in it, she became the first high empress. She stopped aging, gained magical powers, and as more people found the land, she helped them prosper and they worshiped her.”

Invictis acts bored, plucking at the moss on the ground near him. Frederick, on the

other hand, is enrapt.

“And when Laconia became Laconia, with people spread out into other cities and villages, you came and started to wipe them out,” I say, shooting a glare Invictis’s way. “She knew she couldn’t defeat you, not permanently. She knew something had to give. She tore you apart and locked you away, in three pieces, and then she did the same to herself. One high empress became three, one for each of the labyrinths. She did so hoping one day something would change.”

I move my gaze to my knees as I hug them closer to my chest. “She knew the aether was connected to Invictis, the lifeblood of the land, of magic itself. For it to change, she would become the first drop to taint it. She was never supposed to find the aether. It wasn’t supposed to happen like that... but it did, and then one day Invictis was set free and the three empresses tried to trap him again—only this time there wasn’t three pieces, there was four.”

Frederick’s mouth thins, like he’s remembering what I told him before.

“The fourth piece, a tiny piece—but enough to make a difference—went inside the belly of the pregnant empress, Krotas.” I pause, feeling a pang of sorrow in my heart. “My mom. That piece went inside me. It’s why I can do what I can do, why I can ignore the madness that made the other empresses lose their minds.”

I chuckle even though nothing is funny. “I’m the change the first high empress wanted, but I couldn’t kill Invictis either. All I could do was bind him to me.”

Frederick moves to sit beside me, earning himself a hard glare from Invictis. “Perhaps that’s enough for now,” he whispers. “No other empress could’ve bound him as you did. They went mad with a single piece of him. You can control him in a way no other empress ever could. It may feel as though things are strained now, but I, myself, believe you did what you were always meant to do. You saved us all, whether

you believe it or not.”

Invictis seethes at hearing that. “Yes, yes, how miraculous it is for you to make me your personal prisoner, Rey. It’s what your predecessor always wanted.” His tone is snide and snippy, and his accent makes it sound worse.

Worse and sexy at the same time.

Frederick sighs as he studies me harder. “It is remarkable. That piece must have melded with you in a way that, instead of him controlling you, the opposite took place. That part of him became a part of you.”

“It makes it even more pathetic that my magic is gone,” I mutter with a frown.

“Your magic will return. I know it. Binding Invictis to you must have taken extraordinary amounts of it. You could simply need time, that’s all. Don’t lose faith just yet.” He grabs one of my hands off my knees and squeezes it in support. The action instantly rustles Invictis’s feathers, and the asshole glares at Frederick like he’s never glared before.

“You don’t... hate me because a part of him is inside me?” I don’t know why I care so much. I just do.

His answer comes swiftly: “Of course not. Who could ever hate you?”

Invictis mutters to the fire, “I could. I could be wiping this land clean of all mortal-kind if it weren’t for Rey.” When he realizes he said it aloud, he glances at Frederick and me, and then at the way Frederick still is holding onto my hand. “What? Did I say something wrong? Forgive me. Perhaps I should leave and give you two some privacy—” He looks at me after that, his expression saying it all.

This time, it's Frederick who interrupts the semi-awkward silence by saying, "Why do I have the feeling that, if she makes you leave, you'll find some way to return regardless? You're a murderer, yes, but right now you're nothing more irritating than a thorn in our sides."

A muscle in Invictis's face twitches. "What do you mean by that, mortal?"

"It means that, regardless of how much you say you hate Rey, it's a lie. You look down on us, but you have the same emotions we do." Frederick releases my hand and stands—and Invictis stands with him. He steps around me and whispers, "You would be glad to have her all to yourself, wouldn't you?"

I roll my eyes at their testosterone pissing contest. How did the conversation get here? God, these two. I want to smack them both upside the head to get some sense knocked into them. Alas, all I do is get to my feet in case I have to butt in and interrupt whatever they got going on.

"As would you," Invictis hisses.

"At least she'd be safe with me. If you could, you'd kill her!"

"If I truly wanted her dead, she'd be dead a long time ago. I could have crushed her the moment she set me free in Acadia and countless times after that."

Okay, at that I feel like I have to interject, "Um, maybe we should just move on?" But both men ignore me, too engrossed with trying to one-up the other.

"Oh, so you want acclamation for not killing her? Let me be the first to tell you: not killing someone is the literal bare minimum you can do for them. It's not something to be proud of." Frederick shakes his head once in disgust, his mouth tugging into a slight frown. "You would gladly kill me if it meant you got her all to yourself."

“You forget: I don’t have to lift a finger. Time will do it for me. Eventually, you will age and wither and rot, and while that happens Rey and I will be eternal, together, side by side—”

Frederick takes a single step toward Invictis, like he wants to get in a fist-fight or something, but I dart between them and lift my hands, setting my left on Frederick and my right on Invictis.

“Boys, please,” I start, glancing between them. “As much as it’s kind of hot to watch you two fight over me, at this point, it’s getting stupid. I want us to get along while we’re roaming the countryside together, so let’s fucking get along, mmkay?”

I can tell neither one wants to back down, which surprises me. Honestly, before this trip with the two of them, I never pictured Frederick as the kind of guy who would get into a jealous fight over me. He doesn’t seem like the type, but I guess my past experience with guys doesn’t lend to guys like Frederick and Invictis.

But since I’m standing between them, they simmer down.

Just as well. We still have one more labyrinth to reach, and the last thing we all need is to make the final leg of this journey as awkward as possible.

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What sucks the most about having Acadia's labyrinth as the final one is that Acadia is Laconia's largest region. If you're looking at a map, it takes up the entire southern half of the continent, in addition to most of the land east of the central capital. All of this to say: it takes a fucking long time to get there.

Longer than it did Pylos and Magnysia put together, but at least Acadia is rife with water, meaning we can bathe and eat whenever we want.

Yeah, I'm not proud of it, but I'm getting used to eating fish and other creatures that live their entire lives underwater. Past me would be shocked and stupefied, but then again past me never went as hungry as I did on my journeys around Laconia.

During the traveling, I try my best to keep everyone's minds off of the little fight Frederick and Invictis had in Magnysia. I talk about random shit, like college and my classes. I talk about how my dad used to take me to the zoo for every birthday—and then I have to explain what a zoo is, and then Frederick asks a thousand and one questions about all of the animals we have back home.

It works, mostly... that is, until night falls and we set up camp and everyone has nothing to do but sit and stare at each other.

Weeks go by, and we find a watchtower—Catarin Tower, the same tower I hunkered down in when I was in search of Frederick's dad's stuff. Even though it's not dusk yet, we call it a day so Frederick can look around at the books and see if there's anything important he wants to bring with us.

As Frederick searches the tower, I stand on the balcony that's on the highest floor, the

one just off the sleeping level of the watchtower. I lean against the stone wall, staring at the sunset on the horizon. Acadia is so flat, you can see for miles all around. It really is something beautiful.

Only a few clouds in the sky, the falling sun has painted them in different hues. Some in pretty pinks while others in bright oranges while the actual sky slowly darkens.

I'm only alone out there for a moment, though. Within the minute, I hear footsteps as someone comes out onto the balcony with me, moving to stand beside me. I don't need to turn my head to look; I can smell who it is.

Invictis.

What's he smell like? It's difficult to describe. He smells like warmth, like when you've been out in the sun long enough to get a tan but not long enough to burn, with a faint cinder-y background. It's not the worst smell in the world.

"Do you remember when we first stopped here?" I ask him without looking at him.

"I do."

"You were so good at lying. I never imagined you were... that you weren't some wizard the empresses got jealous of and decided to imprison." A bitter smile graces my face. "How stupid was I?"

Invictis leans his tall frame down, setting his forearms on the chest-high stone wall before us. Well, chest-high for me, not for him. "To be fair, you were as clueless as a person could be. Very easy to manipulate, in hindsight."

His bluntness makes me laugh even though it's the opposite of funny. "I believed you. I ate up every word you said, which when I think about it, doesn't make sense.

I'm not the kind of person who falls for shit like that."

I kick at the stone balcony with the tip of my foot absentmindedly. Being gullible, wanting to believe the best in people; that wasn't me. I'm as skeptical as someone can be. Falling for Invictis's lies... what does that say about me?

Or, I guess, what does that say about him?

"Don't feel too bad," Invictis muses. "If it were anyone else I was bound to, they would have lost their minds immediately. So, yes, you did fall for it, as you said, but you held out—more than what could be said for anyone else."

Again, I laugh, only this laugh is more like a chuckle, and I'm slow to turn away from the sunset in the distance and angle my body toward Invictis. I stare at the side of his face, take in his profile, before I say, "You're not very good at making people feel better, are you?"

"Comfort is not familiar to me. Death is."

"If death is your gift, why can't you remember what happened before the first high empress? Why can't you remember what this kingdom was like before it was Laconia?"

That gets Invictis to turn away from the sunset and look at me. I'm suddenly aware of how close he stands to me; just a small sidestep and he'd box me in against the balcony's stone wall. With Frederick inside, on a lower floor, it's too easy for me to imagine we're alone here.

And being alone with Invictis... it was something I was used to, but now? Now things feel different, and if there's one thing I learned in life, it's that change is very rarely good. Just look at everything that happened to me before I came to Laconia.

Hell, look at me now: a high empress with no magic, bound to an ancient evil. A high empress who has a part of that ancient evil nestled away inside of her, a part so small even Invictis did not recognize it.

It must be the reason. That tiny piece inside must be why I feel so connected to this asshole. It's the only explanation that makes sense; anything else... any other reason just sounds stupid.

“When you live forever, time ceases to matter. Your short-lived mind cannot comprehend how long I was trapped inside those labyrinths, waiting for someone foolish enough to unleash me. Memories fade, even for me. The only thing that endured was my fury,” he tells me, acting as though it should be obvious.

“What are the odds that a group of people from another kingdom found the labyrinths, put you back together, and set you free with one order—and that order was basically the same thing you would've done anyway? It seems weird to me, like it's too much of a coincidence.”

Invictis's head tilts as he studies me, his blue gaze lazy. “If it is not a coincidence, what would it be, then?”

I'm slow in saying, “I don't know.” What I want to do is ask Invictis if he can feel anything out there—another him—but I don't. A part of me still stupidly hopes it's just paranoia on my part and that all of my heavy lifting—AKA heavy fighting—is done.

I mean, if there's another Invictis out there, somewhere, how the hell am I supposed to beat him if I can't use my magic? Sure, I have the golden asshole next to me, but his heart won't be in it. He won't want to fight himself. Plus, if there's another Invictis, that Invictis 2.0 will be whole. What if he's too strong for me?

What if he somehow unbinds Invictis from me? Then I'm fucked every which way, and not in the fun way.

I'm too lost in my own head, and I don't know how long my thoughts take all of my attention, but eventually I realize Invictis is still staring down at me, his golden brows slightly furrowed in concentration, like he's deep in thought, too. He wears an intense look on his face, the corners of his mouth curved in a stiff frown.

I thought it the first time I saw him sitting on the throne in Acadia's castle: a frown should not be that hot. No one should frown and instantly get sexier. It just doesn't make sense.

"What?" I ask even though I'll probably regret it.

"You." Invictis pauses. "You are unlike everyone else. I... I find it strange. I cannot explain why you are unlike them."

I look down, my gaze falling to his chest—what's eye-level for me, basically. "Maybe I'm unlike everyone else because of that tiny piece of you inside me." It's not out of the question. It's very possible he can feel the connection between us the same way I can, and that tiny piece has to be the reason.

"Perhaps. It would not surprise me to learn that you are only great because of me."

Okay, that's too smug. Angling my head back, I glare up at him, ready to say something smart, but the moment we lock eyes, any witty retort that might've been ready on my tongue disappears.

He's not frowning anymore. His frown has been replaced by an even more attractive smirk—God, I hate myself for thinking anything about him is attractive. I hate myself even more for wanting him to take a step to the side and box me in against the

balcony, place those strong arms on either side of me and...

No. Bad, Rey.

“Or,” he whispers, “perhaps you truly are one of a kind. Perhaps it was only a matter of time until fate brought us together.” Invictis moves, almost like he read my mind or something, and places himself in front of me so that my lower back now leans against the stone wall on the balcony’s edge.

My breath catches. Gazing up at a man so beautiful, how could it not? Ancient evil or not, he’s the hottest man I’ve ever seen in my life.

This is usually when I remind myself the face he’s wearing isn’t his, that, technically, it belongs to Empress Morimento’s son, but this time I can’t remind myself of that. This time all logical thoughts vanish in my head.

“I was... enraged, hateful, all the time. All I could think about was getting free and killing everyone. It’s what I was made for. My purpose. I am that which never dies: death itself. You were meant to be a stepping stone, a tool to unite me. I am still filled with fury. I am still death made flesh, but you make it—”

There are a million ways he could finish that statement, and yet the word he says isn’t one I anticipate and it makes my heart do something weird in my chest.

“Less,” he offers up the word simply, as if it should be obvious. “You make it all lessen. I do not understand why, nor do I understand why I want more. It is a human trait to crave more. Your limited time makes you gluttonous. I should not feel this way.” He sounds almost angry when he adds, “I should not feel this way about you.”

Everything he said to me in that dream comes tumbling back, and though I’ve done my best to ignore it and forget about it, standing there with nowhere to go, with his

intense expression bearing down on me and his body blocking out my escape route, I'm forced to.

He said he wasn't lying. I didn't believe him.

I didn't want to believe him then, and I still don't want to. What does that say about me if I do? If I believe him, if I accept it, if I say I want him, too? How many lives were lost in Laconia because of him? How many people has he killed? My mom, Prim... the list goes on and on.

What kind of person will I be if I want this, if I want him?

"It's as if whatever invisible force has been guiding me since the dawn of time itself now pulls me in another direction entirely," he says, his voice dropping to a bare whisper. "It's pulling me to you."

I want to say something, but I'm damn near speechless. This isn't a dream that'll end right before things go too far; this is real life. I know I can always command him to shut up and take a step back, but am I strong enough to?

Maybe I'm too weak. Maybe I want this after all.

How wrong is that?

"Seeing you injured in the first labyrinth... it brought back the same feelings I had when I—" He abruptly stops and lifts a hand, placing it above my shirt, on my side, near my abdomen, where he impaled me with a blade of light.

Of course, my shirt is once again fucked up and covered in blood thanks to the first magical guardian. It really is like *déjà vu*.

Invictis sounds conflicted when he whispers, “I thought I would feel nothing but triumph when that blade pierced your skin. I believed it was your destiny, that you would fall as everyone else had. I was wrong.”

Thankfully he’s only touching my shirt and not, you know, actual skin. If those fingertips brush against my skin beneath my shirt? It’ll be game over.

“You make me weak,” he whispers, and his accented voice makes it sound as though he’s disgusted with himself over it, like he doesn’t understand why. Like weakness is the worst possible thing that could happen to him.

It takes me a while to gather my thoughts, mostly because this conversation changed so quickly I have whiplash from it, but also due to how serious he is, how heavy his blue gaze is as he stares down at me, not to mention the way his hand firmly presses against my side, where I have nothing but a scar to remind me of the day he stabbed me and nearly killed me.

And then he brought me to Laconia and healed me.

“It’s not weakness to have emotions besides anger and hate,” I say.

“A single girl who knew nothing of magic a year ago was able to defeat me and bind me to herself. If that’s not weakness—”

“Maybe I’m just stronger than you,” I say with a grin.

His jaw grinds, and yet he wears a slight smile. “Stronger than me? Rey, be serious, for once.”

“I am serious. Completely, one hundred percent—” I plan on saying more, but the hand resting above my scar moves to my arm, and the moment his hand brushes

along my bare skin, I shiver and freeze, unable to say anything else.

His fingertips dance across my tattoo, the one we share, and it's like the magic between us comes to life. The tattoo on my arm and wrist starts to glow, and the one he has that mirrors mine does the same. I hear him inhale a sudden breath, like he wasn't expecting it, and it takes every ounce of willpower in me to not close my eyes.

And it's a good thing I don't, because if my eyes close, I would miss the fact that his blue irises flash with a molten, shimmery gold. A part of the true Invictis shining through a human's face.

The breath that comes from him after that is ragged, almost pained, and the lower half of his body leans against mine as he whispers with an urgency I can practically taste, "What are you doing to me?"

"I'm not—" I realize then he might've meant it as a rhetorical question, so I shut up. Also, his tattoo-less hand rose to my face and is now touching my cheek while his other hand still touches the glowing mark on my other arm.

We're connected, some deep part of us. I can feel him, parts of him I shouldn't, his emotions, his desires, his hunger, and it's overwhelming. Enough to drown me and keep me submerged in his depths. He is still everything I should hate and nothing I should want, and yet...

The hand on my cheek nears my mouth, and the back of his thumb brushes against the corner of my lips, and just like that, any sane thought in me leaves. Any part of me that might've stopped him dies.

It's wrong, but I don't care.

I hate him, but I don't care.

He's the bad guy in this story, and I just don't care.

How can it be so wrong when it feels like destiny? How can I hate him for everything he's done when I want him so badly it hurts? How the hell can he be the bad guy when I can't imagine destroying him for good?

I don't know exactly when it happens, but something changes. We both come to the realization that neither of us is going to pull away. Invictis bends his top half down the same moment I stand on my tiptoes and reach for his neck to anchor myself to him. It happens so fast, but at the same time it happens slowly.

I'm the one who presses my lips against his first. Just a quick peck before I pull myself away and crack open my eyes.

Invictis is watching me, though his face is now so close it's pretty much one big blur. That said, his eyes still glow gold. He studies me, my face, my lips, and then he acts by dropping his hands to my hips and hauling me up. Before I know it, my ass is set on the stone wall of the balcony mere moments before our mouths meet again—and this time, he's the one who goes for it.

Now that he doesn't have to bend down at a God-awful angle, it's easier on the both of us. I'm able to wrap my arms around his neck the moment his mouth crashes down on mine, and I spread my legs so his body can fit between them. His arms circle me, holding onto me with a fierceness that tells me he wouldn't let go for the world.

If he smells like light and warmth, he kisses like fire. His mouth on mine ignites a heat deep within my belly, drawing out all of the emotions I spent so long trying to bury. Hunger and desperation personified, every inch of my skin set aflame.

It's clumsy at first, but whether that's due to the sheer level of desire between us or the fact that, in all probability, he's never kissed anyone before, it doesn't matter. As

the seconds wear on, the embrace gets less clumsy and worlds more eager.

Every part of me is buzzing. It's like Invictis made something explode within me and I've never felt more alive. More wanting. Fireworks popping off in my head and certain parts of my body, my back arches against him as his arms tighten around my back.

He could push me off the balcony. He could let me go and I'd be too dumbstruck to tell him to catch me before I hit the ground. He could do a thousand terrible things to me right now and I'd be too busy flying high to stop him.

But he doesn't. He doesn't do any of those things.

By the time our lips part, we're both panting for breath, and through slit eyes, I can see his still glow gold, matching our still-glowing tattoos.

"That," Invictis murmurs between heavy breaths, "was..."

"Careful," I warn him. "If you want to kiss me again, you better say it was good."

"The world could've crumbled around us and I wouldn't have known."

I grin. I can't help it. I'd say that's a good thing. A hell of a lot better than good, that's for sure, and the silly thing is, I feel the same. There could've been earthquakes, lightning, tornadoes, and anything else nature could throw at us, and I wouldn't have noticed.

Invictis's lips are softer than they look, and the guy's a quick study. He went from inexperienced to panty-wetting real fast. And the way his arms are still wrapped around my back... yeah, a girl can get used to that.

He gives me a wicked smirk before saying, “I wouldn’t mind doing it again.”

What else can I do? I’m in no position to resist. Plus, if I’m honest, I’m still all tingly from the first embrace, so why not kiss him again? And again and again and again... and maybe a dozen more times after that, just to be sure?

Invictis kisses me again, and I respond in kind. This time, we get more familiar with each other’s mouths, and I blow his damned mind by nibbling his lower lip. The man actually groans when I do it. Or maybe he growls. Either way, it’s a low, deep sound that echoes from his wide chest and reverberates straight into mine.

We’re so lost in each other that neither of us hear the third person in the tower coming outside: “You’ll never guess what I found: an account of the first year after the woes appeared by the head researcher who—” Frederick must stop the moment he spots us and realizes what we’re doing.

Invictis doesn’t want to stop. I can tell he wants to make a point, prove to Frederick that he’s the one who should be kissing me, not Frederick. His arms become steel around me, but the moment I hear Frederick’s voice, I’m brought back to reality.

And I realize I’m making out with the asshole who killed my mom.

It’s a repeat of what happened before, only the positions are switched. Frederick can’t grab Invictis by the throat, but he can pull him back as he says, “Get off her, you...” Either he can’t finish his insult, or he’s too flabbergasted at what he walked in on.

Invictis glares as he steps away from me, and I’m slow to hop off the balcony railing. I can tell Invictis wants to fight Frederick—and Frederick, even though he’s holding onto an old book, would probably fight him in return—but I have to try to nip this in the bud, so I say, “Invictis, give Frederick and me some privacy. Go wait on the ground floor for ten minutes.”

The harrumphing sound Invictis lets out before storming away tells me just how ridiculous I'm being and how furious he is over our embrace being interrupted. Frankly, he's only getting a taste of his own medicine.

Frederick watches him as he goes, and once we're alone on the balcony, he comes over to me, a concerned look on his face. The book he's holding onto might snap in half if he's not careful with it. "What was that? Tell me it wasn't what it looked like, because, to me, it certainly looked as though you and Invictis were getting intimate with each other."

I roll my eyes. When he says it like that, it sounds like we were about to fuck, but we were far from that... I think. I hope.

Damn it. I don't know.

In the end, all I say is, "It's complicated."

"How is it complicated? He is—the things he's done, the things he will do if you set him loose... it's not complicated at all, Rey. He's a monster. A demon. A creature we do not understand."

I close my eyes and rub tiny circles on my temples. "Trust me, I know what he's done. I know he's dangerous. I know! I don't need you reminding me every two seconds!" I may raise my voice a bit too much, but Frederick doesn't flinch, which must mean he's really worked up.

Before he can say anything, I work on calming myself down and adding, "Look, I know, okay? I know everything you're going to say. I know I shouldn't have. I know it's stupid. I know he'd gladly kill all of us if he could, but... I don't know. A part of me hates him for everything he's done, but at the same time, it's like I can't hate him."

Frederick inches closer to me, his voice dropping to a whisper, “Do you think this connection you have with him is due to the piece of him that’s inside you?”

“If it is, then how am I supposed to fight it? How can I ignore it? He’s in my dreams, Frederick. He’s always there, and I...” I bite my bottom lip. “I don’t think I mind it anymore. I think I like him being there.”

It’s a long, tense moment before Frederick asks, “And what about me?”

“It’s different with you.”

“Different how? If you feel anything for that thing,” Frederick uses his free hand to point at the tower, “I don’t know how you can feel a thing for me. We are opposites.”

I take a step toward him. The sun has pretty much set, which means there isn’t much light at all for his eyes to reflect. Instead of a warm amber color, they’re a dark brown right now, and it’s through those eyes that I can tell Frederick might be jealous, yes, but he also wants what’s best for me.

I reach for his free hand, and thankfully he doesn’t pull it away from me. “I know,” I whisper. “I know how good you are, just like I know how bad he is. I’m not blind. I know all these things—and it probably doesn’t make any sense to you, but I... I feel so—”

Confused. Torn. Stuck in the middle.

Frederick sighs. “Truly, I only want what’s best for you, and even if you decide it’s not me, if it can never be me, I do know that it can’t be him, either. I care about you, Rey. I’m not going anywhere. If you were to unbind him, though... I doubt he’d stick by your side and be the man you want him to be.” He pulls away from me after that, leaving me in the darkening light to ponder his words.

I watch him disappear into the tower, feeling some kind of way. I've definitely come down from the high of the make out session, and I can guarantee I've hit the ground full-force.

What if it's not Frederick? What if it's not Invictis? What if it's neither of them? Or... what if it's both? With how crazy everything is, I can't imagine doing anything without them. Frederick and Invictis are two sides of a coin; you flip it, you get one or the other. You can't get both.

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The labyrinth in Acadia is not near the castle. To reach it, we need to cut through the southern plains and loop around the center of the kingdom, to where Acadia meets Pylos's southeastern edge. It's the only area of Acadia with sheer cliffs, and because of it, it was never settled.

It's a long journey after that night in the research tower. Awkward, as much as I hate to say it, and, even more so, when you get down to it, it's because of me.

Because, for some ridiculous reason, I'm stuck in a love triangle with the big bad and the bookish guy next door. Or a love arrow with me at the apex, I guess, since I don't think there are any feelings whatsoever building between Frederick and Invictis.

Honestly? That would solve all of my problems—or at least a few of them. If they started having feelings for each other, we could be one, big, happy polycule, assuming Frederick could ever forgive Invictis for what he did.

And I don't know if that's possible, so.

Anyway, needless to say it's a situation I never thought I'd be in, for more than one reason. The big one: never thought I'd come to a new world with a land filled with magic and become its savior by binding the big bad to me. Another big one is I don't do relationships. Not long-term ones, anyway. I learned young you can't count on people, and that includes romantic relationships. Someone's always going to let you down, so why not let them down first?

Or hit it and quit it, as some people say?

Fuck. It's been so long since I've had sex. I can't even remember what it's like.

That's a lie. I remember. I'm just trying not to think too much about it since I'm surrounded by guys who hate each other and picking one of them to do it with would make it even more awkward.

The guys do their best to one-up each other throughout the journey. Both Frederick and Invictis take turns walking beside me, although only the former is good at making conversation. When Invictis does it, he acts like a scowling guardian angel. When I go to sleep, however, Invictis does his best to pop into each and every dream.

I know what he wants. I know what Frederick wants. They both want the same thing: me. That much has been clear for a while.

It's funny sometimes, but other times it's aggravating. I'm not some prize to be won. I'm a human being, and I can decide what I want and when I want it. I just, uh, I don't exactly know what I want.

The day we come upon the labyrinth is a day for celebration. It's the final one, so after we clear it we can return to Laconia and dissect what we learned and Frederick can get his dad to help him translate his etchings of the altar in the innermost chambers. And then, God willing, things can calm down between us.

Pylos's uneven terrain bleeds into Acadia. Cliff after cliff after cliff. Acadia's greenery also bleeds into Pylos; the cliffs are covered in flowers and bright green grass, hanging plants that drape down off the cliffs. One said cliff has a giant waterfall, and it's behind said waterfall that the door to the labyrinth lies.

Thankfully an overhang stops the waterfall from completely blocking it; we can slip around the waterfall from the side and get to the door without getting wet. The door appears the same as the others; nothing on it to give away what it hides from the

world.

By now, we all know the drill. Invictis is the first to walk inside, and he lights up the way. Frederick and I enter after him, following him down a long hall, much longer than any of the other halls. After a ten-minute walk, we come across another stone door, with the same warning as the first two, along with an etching of the creature we'd face within.

And by we, I mean Invictis.

Unlike the other two etchings, however, I can't tell what this one is supposed to be, so as we push inside and walk into the underground arena where this magical monster waits for us, I don't know what Invictis will face.

The dome-like arena we step into is far different than the previous two. This one actually has water in it, as in the entire center of the arena is covered in water. An underground lake, the water so clear you can tell it's been untouched.

Invictis cracks his neck and stretches out his arms before stepping toward the edge of the lake. With a quick glance back at Frederick and me, he says with a smirk, "Leave it to me... unless you want to fight the creature, Frederick? Prove your worth, as little as it must be?"

All Frederick does is scoff and shake his head as he crosses his arms, which makes Invictis smugly say, "That's what I thought."

To me in a bare whisper, Frederick mutters, "I never thought I'd say this, but he has become ten times more unbearable since..." He pauses, probably because he doesn't want to bring it up, but in the end he finishes, "Since that day in the tower."

AKA since we kissed.

And, yeah, I agree with him. I think Invictis has become unbearable, always trying to prove how much better he is than Frederick, but at the same time, Frederick himself has become borderline unbearable, too. They might hate each other, and their morals are completely opposite, but they are more alike than they want to admit.

I don't say a word as I watch Invictis touch the water's edge. The moment he bends over and runs his fingertips along the water, a ripple erupts on the water's surface, like something large is moving beneath it. A giant splash causes water to shoot in the air twenty or so feet high as something large soars out of the water before diving back in.

The guardian of this labyrinth is apparently a water monster of some sort. A long, slithery, snake-like creature with three heads. Should be fun for Invictis, at least.

The tattoo on Invictis's arm glows; I can feel it on my own arm even though I'm not the one doing it. He launches himself at the creature the moment it surfaces a second time, colliding with its middle head and narrowly avoiding foot-long teeth from its other heads as he does so.

Watching him fight is like watching a master do his thing. Every move Invictis makes, every time he uses his magic to attack or deflect, it's deliberate. No hesitation whatsoever. He is one with the battle... and he wears a smile on his face the whole time, enjoying the hell out of it. Even when the magical, three-headed water serpent whips its tail out of the water and sends him crashing down into the water, it's only because he let it. He wants the fight to drag on and not have it be over too soon.

It makes me wonder just how stupid I was for thinking I could beat him. Who was I? A nobody who knew nothing, I now realize. It really isn't that far-fetched that Invictis thought I was nothing more challenging than a bug he could squash underneath his golden foot.

Of course, I now know I'm more than that. After countless empresses, I am the culmination of the original high empress's plan. A part of that asshole is inside me. It does make me wonder if Frederick is right and that's the only reason I feel what I do for the bastard.

The battle between Invictis and the three-headed serpent is over within a few minutes, when he's dragged it out enough. In reality, he could smite the damned magical creature and end it in seconds, but being bound to me means he can't go off killing whoever and whatever he wants. This is the only fight he'll get for a while, assuming nothing terrible happens.

I should know better than to hope for something like that. Ever since that vision after I bound Invictis to me, I can't shake the uneasy feeling I've had. Day in and day out I've tried to bury it deep, ignore it, pretend everything is fine, but it's not.

Somehow, someday, this isn't over yet.

The final blow of the battle involves Invictis swinging a car-sized blade of sizzling light through each serpentine head, one after another, in the same smooth movement. The heads dissipate into nothing before they make contact with the water below, while the body flops into the depths of the lake, disappearing fully before the headless body completely submerges.

Invictis walks on water like it's no big deal to get back to us, and I can tell the asshole's in a good mood thanks to the fight. When he reaches Frederick and I, he muses, "A shame these creatures weren't more challenging."

The creatures were meant to keep regular humans out—which they did, mostly. They succeeded until they failed, but I guess that could explain literally everything in one way or another. You're safe until you're not. You're awake until you sleep. You live until you die. I doubt the first high empress ever imagined people from another

kingdom would come and unleash Invictis upon Laconia.

Frederick doesn't address Invictis. Instead, he says, "Let's get to the final altar." He starts off, and I watch him go for a few seconds, well aware Invictis is watching me while I do it.

I think we've spent a lot of time with each other lately. A lot has happened. It will be good for us to have some time to ourselves... although, I'm never truly alone now, thanks to the bond with Invictis.

I ignore Invictis's heavy stare and hurry after Frederick, slowing only so I can match his pace as we walk around the circular lake to reach the inner chamber.

The door, which was magically sealed before, is open now that the creature in the labyrinth has been defeated. Since I know what to expect inside, I take the initiative and enter the short hall that opens up into the prison first.

It's almost eerie how painstakingly similar it all is to the others. These places had to have been created with magic to be so similar. I can't imagine the power it must have taken for the first high empress to do something like this, let alone do it three times—and for her power to remain, eons after her death.

It puts me to shame, really.

Frederick sets down his bag and heads straight to the altar, where more words are etched on its stone face, words I can't automatically understand. I'm sure if I searched my memories—the empresses' memories—I'd be able to read whatever it says, but honestly that's the last thing on my mind.

I need to touch that box, the metal box sitting atop the altar, the one that housed a piece of Invictis while Laconia grew and its people spread as the centuries went by.

As much as I hate to admit it, Invictis was right. My human mind cannot comprehend eternity. I can't even really imagine what it was like when the first high empress stepped foot in an empty city. I don't know exactly how much time passed between then and now, so it's even harder for me to imagine a time before, to the people who used to call this land home, pre-Laconia.

I stand before the altar. Frederick is busy taking etchings, and Invictis stands close to me, probably waiting for me to pass out, as I've been doing each time I touch one of these things. The hairs on the back of my neck stand straight up, as if knowing what the outcome of this will be.

It's what we came for. Might as well get it over with.

My hand lifts, fingers stretching toward the box. The very second my skin comes in contact with the square box and touches its unearthly, cold metal, the world around me goes black.

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 12:53 am

A gasp escapes me when I open my eyes to find I'm standing in a world of dusk. Beneath my feet, a thick liquid undulates, having no color of its own with no light to reflect, but I know what it is: aether. I stand surrounded by a sea of aether, so vast it's near impossible for my mind to grasp. The sky above me is dark; only the very edge of the sky, a small sliver right where it touches the aether in the distance, holds any traces of light. It's like I'm in the middle of an eclipse, the path of totality.

I turn around and spot a statue of Invictis on an altar eight or so inches above the aether. His six golden wings are outspread, his metal hands palms-up and arms open, as if he's welcoming any and all into his embrace.

Death welcomes all.

Moving to stand before the altar, I angle my head back and gaze up at his head. No face, just a metal outline where his chin and cheeks would be, continuing up and curving where a head would. A light emanates from inside him, making it look like a golden halo. A golden, eight-foot-tall figure, anyone who didn't know what they were seeing would assume he's heavenly, angelic, here to deliver them.

But he's not. His golden form and that light are just facades, lies. He is nothing more than a being of pure destruction—and my heart does funny things when I think about him too long. How pathetic is that? How fucked up am I?

Don't answer that.

With all that he's done, all that he would do if I unbound him from me, I still can't help myself. I step up onto that altar and stand inches away from him. Even though

it's nothing more than a statue, I can close my eyes and smell him.

Sun-kissed skin. Sweat. Warmth. The scent of burning wood with just the slightest hint of ash.

I open my eyes as I reach for him. I place a hand on his lower chest—basically all I can reach since this form is stupidly huge—and I'm immediately met with a flood of heat surging through me. My breath catches, and for the quickest of moments I want nothing more than to surrender to him and all that he is.

But I don't get the chance to, because the moment I touch his golden form, it ripples. The metal sizzles and changes, and I'm frozen in place as I watch him morph into something else. The light inside him dwindles to the point where it dies completely, and the gold that makes his form shine dulls as a result. It rusts to an ugly reddish-brown hue.

I try to take a step back, to push away from the changing figure, but the statue's arms come to life. They creak as they move, and two seconds later they're wrapped around my back, stopping me from leaving.

That's when I notice it's not done changing yet. The rust peels off, bit by bit until a new figure stands before me. The sky above me changes, as does the dark, murky aether below. It's like someone flipped a switch. The sky turns to a bright white, and the aether beneath us glows a silvery hue.

I don't feel warmth anymore. I feel so cold.

A low, deep, monstrous voice enters my head: "You toy with forces beyond your kin, mortal." It reminds me of the voice Invictis used in my dreams, when he was trying to get me to give into him, to let him drive me mad as he drove the other empresses—but it's not the same voice. It's different. Deeper. It makes me want to be sick, like it's a timbre my ears shouldn't hear.

In an attempt to push away from the being, I duck in an effort to untangle myself from it, but it responds by tightening its arms around me and slamming me against its body. I'm held so tightly against it I can hardly breathe, and I can barely angle my head up.

It's Invictis's opposite. Same form, same height, same build of metal... only there is no light. No halo. This being is made of pure blackness, a void so pure it's hard to get my eyes to focus on him.

"Who are you?" I manage to ask, and though I'm not scared, I do sound uneasy.

The head bends, tilting down toward me. Thanks to the switch in the sky, I'm able to see just how black this being is. Where the outline of its face is, I can't even see metal. I see nothing but the outline of him with the white sky in the background.

"Absence." The single word reverberates through me, and I find it hard to swallow after that. "I am unstoppable mayhem, the harsh disorder nature dictates. Tumultuous havoc which demands sacrifice."

With each word I hear, the arms around me stiffen even more. Soon enough I can't breathe, and no amount of struggling breaks me free.

"The opposite of light is not darkness. It is omission. I am that absence, that which you can never grasp." The arms circle me so tightly I feel as if my body might get squished against him, but then one of his hands moves to the back of my head. "I am oblivion."

The same moment he says the final word, he pushes me inside his black, colorless body. I can't fight him, I can't do a thing. All I can do is soundlessly scream as the void itself swallows me whole.

And then everything stops.

Or, it feels like it stops, but the moment a gentle breeze caresses my cheek, my eyelids fly open. A part of me thinks I'm waking up near Frederick and Invictis, but when I open my eyes I see I'm not at a makeshift camp.

I'm in a city. Cobblestones line the street beneath my feet, and houses on either side of me alert me to the fact that I'm someplace I've never been before. The way the houses are built, hanging over the street, the architecture... where am I?

I don't see a single living soul around me, and a weird sense of déjà vu falls upon me. It's the same unnerving thing I felt when I first stepped foot in a village in Magnysia, before I realized damn near everyone is dead.

I'm alone in the street. I don't hear a single thing. I need a better vantage point.

I walk until I find a house that I can easily climb up. I get a boost to the second story of the house thanks to some oddly-placed barrels, and from there I can swing myself around to the front of the house, where a balcony sits, jutting out over the street. After climbing onto the balcony's railing, I jump for the edge of the roof, just barely able to reach. Soon enough I'm hauling myself onto the roof and carefully move to the peak.

The houses around are the same size, so when I do a three-sixty spin, I'm able to have a good view all around. And what I see... my instincts were right.

Rows and rows of houses just like the one I stand on now, countless, as far as the eye can see. In the far distance, miles away, I see a few watchtowers. It's only when I'm nearing the end of my spin that I spot an impressive castle built high above the rest of the city—larger than any castle I've ever seen, bigger than all three empresses' castles put together.

This isn't Laconia. This is someplace else.

Once I get down from the roof, I start walking. I don't know what I'm supposed to

see, but there must be more to it than realizing this is another kingdom in a land far away from Laconia. As I walk, I wonder if this is where the spies came from, the ones who unleashed Invictis twenty years ago.

Hmm. There's still more to this puzzle. Has to be.

I walk for what feels like ages until I reach a market of some kind, with stalls built into the outer edge of the houses. I see not a soul. No people going about their daily business, no one at all, and if there's one thing I learned in Laconia, it's that a people-less city is never a good sign.

The breeze blows by again, and I catch a whiff of something. Something off, something rancid. Though following a smell like that is the last thing I want to do, that's exactly what I end up doing. My nose leads the way, and I eventually find myself in an intersection of two streets, which wouldn't be worthy of note on a normal day, but this definitely ain't a normal day.

Why?

Oh, no reason. It's just that, in the center of this intersection is a pile of charred bodies. No longer burning, but still sizzling and smoking. The clothes have completely burned away, along with the outer layer of skin. It's a horrible sight, and I hold a hand over my mouth to stop myself from retching when I notice a small arm sticking out of the pile.

A child's arm.

What the fuck happened here?

I move around the pile of burnt bodies, and as I do so, a second pile comes into focus, one that was blocked by the initial charred mound of corpses. This second pile wasn't burned, but it's close enough to the first that it makes me think these bodies were

meant to be thrown onto the fire as it burned.

How... how can you toss people into a fire like that? What the fuck kind of reasoning do you use to defend an action like this?

All the bodies in the second pile are facedown. Something tugs at me, an invisible string that forces me to kneel beside the pile and pull at the arm of the corpse on top to roll it over. The body slumps as I move it, and the moment the man's corpse rolls, I stand and take a step back.

The man was sick. The veins in his body turned black and bulging. The blood vessels in his eyes popped, the corners of his eyes leaking some kind of black liquid. His mouth is much the same: dried-up, dark liquid had oozed out of either side.

I glance at the second pile. Now that his body wasn't blocking the rest of the pile, I'm able to see other faces—and what I see tells me whatever this man was sick from, these other poor people were sick with, too.

What the hell is going on here?

I turn away from the piles of bodies, intent on figuring it out, but the moment I turn, a large, cold hand wraps itself around my neck. I'm lifted off the ground easily, as if I weigh nothing, by an eight-foot-tall, six-winged creature with no face. Invictis's opposite, the black being, the absence of light.

His unnerving, creepy voice enters my brain as his large hand squeezes my neck: "You have seen the chaos I bring. Find me, so that I may end you and free my brother from his shackles once and for all. I will be waiting for you. Prepare yourself. Your end is nigh."

His grip around my throat tightens, and my vision grows blurry. Seconds later, everything turns black.

Although it doesn't stay that way for long. I wake up with a sick feeling in my stomach, greeted by a beautiful blue sky and a gentle breeze, telling me we're out of the final labyrinth. I struggle to sit up, a queasy feeling in my gut that just won't go away.

What I saw... the sick feeling in my gut only grows when I remember everything I saw. The burnt bodies, the pile waiting for their turn, the weird sickness they all had, like some kind of plague...

Frederick sits a few feet to my left, working on something in his journal, but when he sees me and the expression on my face, he shuts it and asks, "Rey, are you all right?"

The question causes Invictis, who stands ten or so feet away with his arms crossed, gazing off into the distance like he's deep in thought, to turn around and study me.

Okay. Nope. Can't hold it down.

I turn away from Frederick and heave up whatever's in my stomach. At this point, it's mostly bile—it ain't like we're living in the lap of luxury while traveling—but it's still disgusting, and the feeling of that bile coming up my throat and out of my mouth makes me want to vomit even more.

We're thirty or so feet away from the waterfall that covers the labyrinth's entrance, so once I finish vomiting, I get to my feet and shuffle over to the water. I cup my hands together and stuff them beneath the waterfall, catching some water in them and bringing it straight to my mouth.

Both men are right behind me, though it's Frederick who asks again, "Are you okay? What's wrong? What did you see?"

Once my mouth is rinsed out, I turn toward them, knowing I have to face it. I pushed it away for so long, it's come full center now. The time to ignore the truth has passed,

and when we return to Laconia, the conclave needs to know the truth.

I don't look at either of them. Instead, I stare at the grass between us as I whisper, "I didn't want to come to the labyrinths because of my magic. I thought... I thought they'd have answers." I swallow, my knees suddenly weak. It's like the wind had gotten knocked out of me.

Fuck. When I think about how hard it was to fight Invictis... how the hell can I face another?

"I had a vision, after I bound Invictis to me," I explain. "I saw another one."

"Another one?" Frederick starts, "What do you mean, another..." He must realize it, because the way he trails off, coupled with how his eyes widen in shock, tell me enough.

"He's... not golden. He's black, the absence of light. He called himself chaos, and he said he was your brother." I finally lift my gaze to Invictis, unsure of what I'd see, but all Invictis does is stare back with a stony expression. "I think he's... terrorizing some other kingdom. He wants me to find him so he can kill me and free you."

Frederick shakes his head. "No. No, he's not your responsibility to fight—"

"He's killing people, Frederick. Kids like Prim. I have to try. You know that."

The look he gives me in return tells me he knows and he understands, but at the same time he doesn't want me to do it because it'll put me in harm's way once again—and this time, I have no magic.

But I do have one thing I didn't have before.

I look at Invictis, who's remained oddly silent during the truth bomb. "What do you

say? You up for a family reunion? You might have to kick your brother's ass for me if I don't get my magic back in time."

"A brother," Invictis whispers, strangely thoughtful. It's times like these when I wish I could peek inside his head. His gaze refocuses on me. "I have no brother, but I am up for a challenge. Let's find this chaos-bringer and, as you say, kick his ass." The smirk that spreads across his face after that makes my stomach twist for a whole different reason.

Whether I want to admit it or not, I'm in it with him. Right or wrong, it doesn't matter. Fate brought us together, and it seems fate still has more in store for us.

My gaze shifts to Frederick, and with the way he stares at me, I can tell he's wishing things were different. I can also assume he'll try to go with me, just as he invited himself on this little quest. The sad thing is, I don't know if I have it in my heart to forbid him from coming.

I think... fuck me, I think I'd miss him too much, but it's going to be dangerous and I don't know if I want to put him in harm's way just because I'll miss him otherwise.

A dramatic sigh escapes me. I guess an empress's job is never truly done.

Here we go again.