



Rapunzel Unchained (Curse of the Fairy Tales #3)

Author: *Erin Bedford*

Category: Fantasy

Description: Your past is not your future even when your past comes back to get you.

Things have gotten even more complicated and dangerous for Eva since she left her tower.

Unlikely enemies have become allies and those Eva thought were closest to her have turned their back on her. Eva must figure out how to navigate this new world with her past trying to take over not only her life but her very being.

Will the mages who saved her and stole her heart be by her side when it is all over or will she be left standing on the rubble alone?

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I was getting tired of waking up in places I didn't know.

First the tower, then the mages' house, not to forget about my little stint in their 'servant's' corridors and the jail cell which made even the worst stockade look comfortable.

Now, while the bed beneath me was softer than a cloud, it still wasn't mine. The only place that had been close to being mine was the tower, which I'd blown to pieces. Or, rather, the evil queen did.

I didn't want to think about her or what she had done. But, at night, it was hard to keep the sounds of screams from filling my head as she threw fireballs at them. The look of horror on Master Tuck's face before he disintegrated into a million pieces.

Worst of all was the rage. The hot boiling rage that swirled in my stomach just waiting for the moment I gave in. To let her come out and play.

Rolling over on the bed, I puffed out a breath before forcing myself to push up out of the bed. My feet sank into the plush carpet beneath me, my toes wiggling in place as I envisioned it was the grass outside.

One thing I missed about the past was the amount of time I was able to spend outside, just living in the fresh air. Everything here was hard and cold, and it was as if nature was not even a second or third thought. The few times I'd been outside since waking in my tower were to go to places.

I just wanted a moment to breathe, to feel the sun on my face, and the grass between

my toes. I wanted peace.

The evil queen inside me wanted chaos. Death. Destruction. Revenge. Something I couldn't control and wasn't sure I wanted to.

The door to the bedroom opened. "You're awake."

My eyes bounced to the tall voluptuous woman who stepped into the room. Her curly red hair bobbed behind her, framing the dark purple dress that clung to her curves.

Rebecca.

I remembered, she was the one who got me out of that prison. The question was why? She called me 'my queen.'

Pushing myself to my feet, my fingers curling into the sides of my ruined dress as I stared her down. "Why?"

Rebecca broke the stare first, sashaying over to the wardrobe pushed up against one wall. She opened it and flicked her fingers through a few of the clothes hanging there before glancing at me over her shoulder. "Come now. Eva, is it? You know why."

My brows furrowed. "No, actually, I don't. You've been nothing but disdainful of me since the moment you saw me and then you show up at the prison calling me queen and saving me." I cocked my head to the side. "You can see how that doesn't really make sense."

"I'm not sure what kind of clothes you wore before, but this," Rebecca ignored my questions and pulled out a long violet dress that's fabric looked like the petals of a flower, "seems like your current style at least." She splayed it out on the bed, fluffing it out so it laid flat. "It'll get you out of that..." Her nose crinkled in disgust at the

dirty leftover of my ball gown.

I huffed, realizing I wasn't going to get anything out of her until I did what she wanted. Fine. I'd play along for now.

My fingers fought with the ties on the back of my dress for a few minutes before letting out a groan of frustration when they ended up into a tangled knot.

"Here, let me, my queen."

My eyes lifted to meet hers, before I blew out a breath and turned around, pulling my hair over my shoulder so she could get to the ties. There was a steel rod down my back as her hands pulled on the ties, her presence so close to me making my insides squirm. What was her game? Rebecca was the enemy, wasn't she?

"You know," she began, her voice close to the back of my head, "when I found the diaries of the last Queen of Phrygia, I thought I'd fallen on the delusions of some fairy tale fantasy. The ramblings of a crazy paranoid woman who thought her step mother was some evil witch set to destroy everything she loved. Her father," she jerked at the ties until they loosened, "her lover, and then her kingdom."

I clasped the dress to my front as I turned around.

Rebecca's eyes twinkled. "She was sure she was next."

Clutching the dress to me, I swallowed thickly. "Is that so?"

Rebecca moved away from me to the vanity, opening and shutting drawers and jewelry boxes. With her back turned to me, I dropped my dress and picked up the one laid out for me. If I had the luxury of time, I would have gushed over the feel of the material. I slipped it over my head, my hands smoothing over how soft and silky it

felt against my skin.

“Here,” Rebecca held out a box. Inside sat a necklace, earrings, and a small tiara all made of silver and set with amethyst stones. “It’s not exactly queen worthy, but it’ll work for now.”

I took the box from her, and something in my chest blossomed at the sight of the jewelry. I didn’t think I was the type to care about such frivolous things but the thing inside of me? She liked it. She liked it very much.

Hoping not to bring her to the surface, I pulled the jewelry out of the box, clipping the necklace on, before sliding the earrings into place. I held the crown in between my hands, shifting it from side to side watching it catch light.

“When Master Tuck, the blowhard, found out about the diaries, he thought he’d found the motherlode,” Rebecca began again, lounging on the chair at the vanity, one long leg crossed over the other. “Thought he’d found something that would get him the Arch Mage position without having to lift a finger.”

I shook my head. “I don’t understand. How did he even know I was there? How did you?”

Rebecca picked up a gold necklace and fiddled it between her fingers. “Your stepdaughter hated your guts. She raved and ranted about you for pages and pages. Had a real ball of rage in her, but she also wanted revenge. She wanted you to suffer. Suffer the way she suffered. By taking it all away from you.”

My lips ticked at the edges. “The tower.”

“Yep,” she popped the word out. “See, she somehow got it into her mind that what you wanted was power. The riches, the attention, the crown.” Her eyes darted down

to the crown in my hands.

I sat down heavily on the edge of the bed, my hand falling over my face. “So the tower was supposed to take that away from me. Make everyone forget me, leaving me with nothing.”

“Exactly.”

I shook my head, my hair shifting back and forth. “What does that have to do with Master Tuck?” I could barely get his name out, the image of him falling apart in front of me rushing through my head.

Rebecca smirked. “Tuck thought you were some all-powerful mage. Someone that would feel like they owed him something for saving their life. Someone who would help him rise above Adam.” She threw her head back and laughed. “The way that idiot ranted and cursed when Adam and his friends got to you first.”

The image of Adam crawling through my window that fateful day floated into my head. “And who might you be, sweetheart? Or maybe I should just call you Rapunzel?” My heart warmed at the memory.

“Then,” Rebecca continued with a maniacal giggle, “after he found out, not only had he not been the one to officially save you, but you were human to boot. Oh, that really pissed him off.”

“I can imagine,” I murmured.

Master Tuck hadn’t been happy to see me at the hospital. Finding out I was human had messed up his little plan. Even so, he’d been desperate to get me to come with him. To get me away from Adam and the others. Now, I know why.

“Of course, Adam getting to you tweaked my own plan.” She pushed up off the chair and stepped toward me. “I’m sorry for the theatrics. I couldn’t let them know that I knew who you are, what you are.”

“And you do?” My pulse raced in my veins. The prospects of getting all the answers so close I could taste it.

She stopped before me. “If that bastard Tuck had just taken the time to read further, searched a little more, he would have found out the truth. Tuck and that fake queen—”

“Snow,” I provided.

Rebecca inclined her head. “Snow, right. They had you all wrong. You didn’t want fame and fortune. If anything it was a bother, a necessary evil to get what you truly wanted.”

Something inside of me purred at her words, the crown in my hands feeling heavy, an itchy feeling to place it on my head forced me to curl my hands tightly around it.

“And what is it that I truly want?”

Kneeling before me, Rebecca peered up at me with fire in her eyes. “Revenge. Against all the mages.”

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Revenge. Did I want revenge? The ball of rage inside of me surged with the very thought of it. The queen wanted revenge. She wanted it so much that she had charmed her way into the highest position in the kingdom. All, from what I could discern, for her mother.

I tried to remember her. Her mother. My mother. But it was all fuzzy. The only memory I had of her was back when I was a child, she was brushing my hair, telling me everything would be alright.

The mages had something to do with it. They killed her. And the evil queen hated them for it. I hated them for it.

Except those mages are long gone and dead. Did the current mages deserve her wrath? Mine?

“You’re confused.” Rebecca placed her hand on mine. “Understandably so. I can’t imagine how you must feel with two halves of yourself warring for purchase. Adam and the others... have been kind to you. This you. But if they knew what you were, who you truly are, do not think for a second that they wouldn’t turn on you.”

Tears burned my eyes, I blinked them back and sniffed. “You don’t know that. They care for me... they wouldn’t.”

“They would,” Rebecca interrupted, her hand tightening on mine. “And they will. It might be hard to hear this, but the mages haven’t gotten any better over the centuries. If anything, they’ve gotten worse. They can be open with their magic and power, and they have no issue using that power to subdue the humans. Which they do regularly.”

I couldn't argue with her. I'd seen the results of mages being out in the open. The oppression they had pressed down upon the humans. If anything, they were better off when the mages were in the shadows, then at least, they could live normal lives, not culled and collared by the mages as nothing more than pets.

That rage inside of me flared, and my hand burned where it touched the bed, the scent of burnt fabric filling the air. I glanced down at my hand and gasped, jerking my hand back. Scorch marks sat where my hand had been in a perfect imprint.

"You can't control your powers because you won't come to peace with who you are. Who you are meant to be," Rebecca coaxed, reaching up to brush my hair away from my face.

"But I don't want to be her." I jerked away and stood from the bed. "There's nothing happy or pleasant in my memories. There's only hate and anger. A burning need for destruction, for someone to pay for what happened to her mother, my mother. And, while I want her to have justice, I can't kill them. I can't take justice on someone who doesn't deserve it."

"Then what about the ones who do?" Rebecca flipped the television on the far wall on. A woman with a stern expression and slicked back rose-colored hair talked about what happened at the party.

"The council has not confirmed who was behind the attack on the council of mages' ball on Friday night which left a dozen injured and one casualty, Master Tuck." They showed a picture of the old mage to one side of the screen. "While the identity of the ones responsible for this attack is unknown, there is speculation that it was caused by the notorious activist group, Humans First."

"An unknown source has submitted a video from inside the party, depicting a young woman blasting the council with what could only be seen as fireballs before barreling

out of the party.” A clip of the party appeared in a small box off to the side of the woman’s face.

My insides churned and rolled at the sight of me or rather the queen in my body launching magic attacks at Rebecca and Adam before turning on the other party goers. The images were shaky and at an awkward angle, so they couldn’t quite get my face in the picture but anyone who knew me would know that it was me.

“Along with the attack on that evening, we have also been made aware that the tower which had mysteriously appeared in Old Central Park has been destroyed.”

My heart stuttered in my chest at the rubble of my tower. The place I’d once called home for over a thousand years now nothing more than a pile of stones and dust. The queen in me preened with pride at having destroyed our prison, but I couldn’t help but feel sad.

It was my prison, of course, but it was mine. The only constant in my life for the last thousand years and now it was gone. The only connection to my past, completely obliterated.

“Suspensions have circulated that the same person who attacked the council of mages ball was also responsible for the destruction of the tower. We are asking for anyone who has any information pertaining to this attacker to come forth.”

The image changed over to a man with a hooked nose and a large mole on the left side of his face. “In other news, Arch Mage Heizer has passed the torch to his grandson, Adam Spellman. He will begin his work as Arch Mage as of today. We are going to Sima now to get a comment from the new Arch Mage.”

The screen changed to a video of reporters crowding around Adam. His ash blonde hair fell over his forehead, dark bruises beneath his eyes and the tight pinch of his lips

the only thing showing that he was distressed. Behind him stood the others.

Gage with his brown black eyes peered over the mask covering half his face as he surveyed the area for threats. Zane pushed up his glasses before clutching his arms across his chest. The tension in his shoulders showed how uncomfortable being in the crowd of people was for him. Luke and Blake stared into the crowd acting very much at ease with the situation.

Except Blake's hair was a mess, his clothes wrinkled and the usual restrained irritation on his face had turned into a full on glare. Luke wasn't much better. It was as if he hadn't slept for a week and his eyes fluttered multiple times as he wiped a hand over his eyes.

My breath caught at the sight of them. I wanted to be there for them. To tell them I was okay. That I was sorry. I was so sorry.

"Arch Mage Adam, Arch Mage Adam!" The reporters shoved their little black wands in his face trying to get his attention. "Can you tell us about the attack? Who's responsible? What will you first act as Arch Mage be?"

Adam pushed his shoulders back and stared into the image. "We do not have any information to share with you at this time. But I want to reassure you that we are doing everything we can to make sure that our people are safe." He stared hard as if he were looking straight at me. "All of our people. We won't rest until the person behind this is brought in and taken care of."

To some, the way he said taken care of might have been a threat. But to me, it was a plea. A plea to let them help me. To let me know they didn't blame me for what happened.

But it didn't matter. I blamed myself. I blamed my inability to control the thing inside

of me and I couldn't come back to them, if ever, until she was taken care of.

Rebecca turned the television off and stood, stopping before me. "As you can see, there is quite a mess out there right now. There are some out there calling for your head. They want to see you burn for what you did. And yet there are others who cheer you on in the shadows. You are not the only one who has lost someone because of those power-hungry bastards."

I flinched, staring at her.

Rebecca gave a wry smile. "You're right about not all the mages being human-hating vermin. Some of us can see the beauty of humans. The fragility. The..." She trailed off, her expression going soft before clearing her throat. "Well, anyway, not all of us are bad."

My brows furrowed as I scrutinized her words. "You love a human."

"Loved," Rebecca clipped, flipping her long hair over her shoulder. "Past tense."

"What happened?"

Rebecca cleared her throat and locked eyes with me. "They killed her. My darling Mara was an activist. She'd go to the council building with the others, protesting the mistreatment of humans, and then she would come home to me." Rebecca swished her skirt around her. "Of course, the council couldn't have the little humans getting stupid ideas like you know freedom. So they killed them all."

She let out a bitter laugh. "Thankfully, no one knew she belonged to my household, or I would have been punished for letting her get out of line."

I licked my lips, taking in what she told me. "I'm sorry."

She waved me off with a tight lift of her lips. “Yes, well. There’s no use crying over spilled milk or all that nonsense. What I’m trying to say is that you are not alone in this. You have allies. Plenty of mages who would love nothing more than to see the council out on their asses, but we need someone with the power to do it. We need you, Eva. We need the queen.”

My mouth opened and closed. The right words unable to exit my lips. “But I can’t. I can’t control her. I can’t control my powers. How do I know, how do you know, that if I let her take over, she won’t just kill you all?”

Getting rid of the council was one thing, but I couldn’t take the chance that, if I let that rage loose, she won’t kill everyone. The good mages and the bad.

The very thought of her killing Luke or Zane, even Gage, the way she’d taken out Tuck made my throat clench. To see their pretty faces ripped apart by her magic, my magic. It was unbearable.

Rebecca leveled me a look. “That’s why you are here, are you not?”

I couldn’t help the choking sound that came out of my mouth. “Huh? What? I am?”

“I took you from your cell before they could take you and do what they do: dissection, interrogation, torture, the whole nine yards. So you could come here away from any distractions,” she gave me a pointed look, “and figure out how to control that ticking time bomb inside of you.”

My lips tipped down in a frown. “And how exactly do I do that?”

Shrugging an elegant shoulder, Rebecca strolled to the bedroom door. “How should I know? Maybe stop fighting it. Have a chat with your other self. See if you can come to some kind of agreement. Something you both can come to terms with. But I know

you can't go out there and do what needs to be done the way you are now."

She opened the door. "I'll leave you to it. You're free to wander the house as you like, the kitchen is downstairs. Just don't blow anything up, alright?"

I didn't respond to her, my mind still reeling with the prospect that I could control this thing inside of me. The door clicked closed and then there was just me. Or rather both of mes.

I could feel her there inside of me. Waiting, watching, for her moment to get her revenge.

Closing my eyes, I blew out a long breath before looking toward the window. "So I guess it's time we have a talk."

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Rebecca said I needed to talk to myself. To figure out how to come to terms with my dark side so that I could control my powers. Which was all well and good if I knew how to even go about it.

My fingers twisted in the folds of my dress. How did one have a chat with their inner self?

“Hello?” I murmured and then cleared my throat and tried again this time firmer. “Hello? If you’re there, I’m guessing you’ve been watching everything that’s been going on and well...” I trailed off, feeling a bit ridiculous. “Can you just talk to me?”

I waited for a moment, listening for any kind of answer. When it was clear I wasn’t going to get one, I blew out a long breath and sank down on the bed. How the hell was I supposed to communicate with my other self if she refused to respond?

Closing my eyes, I let my mind drift, falling back onto the bed.

The evil queen. Or rather the queen. I supposed it was all about perspective. To others, the mages, to Snow, she was evil. To herself? What was she doing and why? I could understand. I did understand.

Sometimes good people end up doing bad things to save others, whether they liked it or not.

What if villains were really heroes, but they were just willing to do the things the heroes weren’t brave enough to do? They let their morals dictate how far they could go, and the queen said no. To beat a villain, she became something else, something

worse.

It was hard to think of myself as that kind of person. It was like I was the queen before she had all the rage and trauma, fighting a battle inside of her. The question was... did I want to be like her, or did I want to stay the way I was?

If I embraced the queen, would that change me? Would I be angry and full of hate for the mages? For the men that had saved me and had grown dear to my heart? Or would I still be me, just with a bit more of a villainous side? How would the others handle that side of me?

Thinking about how they would respond to the possible new version of me, caused something to swirl inside of me. Magic. My face scrunched as it shifted in me.

Normally, when the magic woke it was because of something that made the queen mad. This time, I wasn't thinking anything bad, if anything it was more sadness because whatever Rebecca and the rest of the world thought, I missed them.

Then go see them.

My body jerked at the thought that wasn't my own. Go see them? Rebecca said I shouldn't leave. But... I'd seen them once before without being there, right? At least, my mind was there. Though the queen was the one who had done that. I wouldn't begin to know how to do it.

Thinking about them made the queen speak up, so maybe that was all I needed to do? Focus on the mages, and see if I could get the magic to take me there.

They were on the television a moment ago. Would they be home by now? Probably all gathered together in Adam's office, talking about what had happened and what they were going to do.

I wanted to be there. To tell them everything was going to be okay, even if I didn't believe it completely myself. Filled with so much confusion and worry that I just wanted them to be the ones to tell me it was going to be okay. To make me believe. I wanted to see them. I wanted —

Power shifted inside of me, and I felt lighter, detached from my body as my mind flew from Rebecca's home and across the city. I was moving so quickly I couldn't keep up with my surroundings until I found myself before the familiar house.

In my mind, I held my hand out to the door, reaching for the panel that would open it.

The panel on the wall lit up green, disabling the magical security they had in place. I tried to look down at my hands, but there was nothing. I wasn't there. Not physically at least.

With that thought in mind, I sent myself forward through the door and down the hallway until I stood outside of Adam's office.

Voices came from inside. Some muffled and others shouting. I hesitated. Were they angry with me?

"We can't just do that," Luke's raised voice broke through the others and suddenly I was inside the room.

All five of them stood before me, laid out across the room. Adam sat behind his desk, his jacket discarded and his sleeves rolled up to his elbows, I forced my eyes away from the way they flexed before he shoved his hand through his hair. The fact that he didn't have one of his dirty books in his hands right now showed how serious he was taking the discussion.

"I don't see how we have any choice," Adam sighed, sitting back in his chair. "We

don't know where Eva is, or if she's even still our Eva or the queen now."

A fist clenched around my heart at his words. I understood what he meant, but it still hurt to hear. Not to mention the way my pulse fluttered at being called theirs.

"But to send the mage force after her? That's going too far, Adam, and you know it." Luke fisted his hands and slammed them on his desk. "They won't care that she's innocent in all this. They won't care that it's complicated. They will just kill her. Or do you not care, now that you're Arch Mage? Did your new position destroy your heart as well?"

Adam shoved his chair back, knocking it to the ground, his own hands pounding on the desk so hard that the wood fractured. "Don't act like you're the only one who cares about Eva. I'm trying to do the right thing, and —"

"And that includes saving your political ass, right?" Luke shot back, his magic crackling around him.

Blake shoved away from his position by the window and placed a hand on Luke's arm. "Luke, come on. You know that's not what he means."

"Isn't it though?" Luke shrugged his brother's hand off, glaring at Adam. "He only took the mission to investigate the tower so it would look good on paper. Let's not forget the fact that he's fucking engaged to Medusa herself."

"So this is what this is about, huh?" Adam huffed a laugh out. "You think I betrayed you all by tying myself to Rebecca."

"Well, if the shoe fits," Luke snapped and then his eyes softened. "How could you do that to us? To Eva? That woman hates humans. Hates them. And you promised to marry her just so you could get what you wanted. Well there ya go. You're Arch

Mage. Drop the bitch, and let's go find Eva. Together."

"You don't understand..." Adam began until Gage moved from his place by the wall.

"I understand. More than you would probably like. She's a means to an end. I know. However, she's now an obstacle that's going to have to be dealt with."

Luke huffed and pointed at Gage.

"Later though," Gage responded with a hard look. "Right now, Eva is more important. But I do think we should only use the mage force as a last ditch effort."

I cocked my head or at least thought I did, since I wasn't completely there. Who knew Gage would be someone on my side? I hadn't given the big lout enough credit.

Blake snorted. "Of course you'd think that, since you're part of their secret force."

Gage shot him a glare.

Zane fiddled with his glasses in his hands before pulling out a cloth to wipe them off. "Whether we use them or not doesn't change the fact that Eva has completely disappeared. No one saw who took her from her cell, and no one has seen her since."

The worry in his voice made my chest ache, and I found myself closer to him, wanting to stroke the worry lines off his face.

The cleric jerked, his eyes widening, and it was as if he was staring right at me. His lips formed my name but didn't say a word.

Could he see me? Or maybe he felt me? Either way, he knew I was here.

“Zane. Zane!” Luke chucked a pen at the cleric. “What are you doing?”

His hazel eyes blinked and then focused on the younger mage. “I thought I felt...” He shook his head. “Never mind. What?”

“Can we do a spell to find her?”

Zane glanced back to where I was before clearing his throat. “No. Not unless we have something personal of hers to trace. Even then, if she’s working with another mage or if she’s figured out her powers,” he stared hard at me. “it won’t work. They’ll have cloaked her.”

I didn’t know why Zane was hiding that I was there, but I was grateful.

“Well, it’s worth a try,” Adam conceded, putting his chair right and sinking back into it. “I won’t call in the mage force until we have exhausted all other options, alright? Will that make you happy?”

Luke grunted. “And the she-bitch?”

Adam pulled out his book from some magical pocket and threw his feet up on his desk. “Don’t worry about Rebecca, she won’t be a problem.”

I almost laughed. No. She won’t be a problem. At least, not in the way they thought.

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Something shoved my shoulder, throwing me back into my body with a violent force. It pushed me again. I grunted and blinked my eyes open with a frown.

Rebecca leaned over me. She cocked her head to the side and blew out a breath. “I thought for a second you’d fallen into some kind of magical slumber but, no offense, I don’t particularly want to kiss you awake.”

My eyes widened. I jerked out of the bed, waving my hands in front of me. “No. No need. And besides, that doesn’t even work if you aren’t in love with the person.”

“I suppose you’re right. Though I heard sleeping spells were all the rage back in your day.” She shifted back from the bed and picked up a tray off to the side. “Here, I brought you some lunch. Did you have any luck tapping into your powers?”

Drawing the tray closer, I poked at the brown blob in the middle of the plate. What in the world is this stuff? Better not take the risk. I grabbed a few grapes and popped them into my mouth, musing over what Rebecca asked.

“I’m not sure I can say I tapped into it. The magic kind of just moved on its own. I wanted to see the others so suddenly I was there.”

“What?” Rebecca screeched. “You left the house?”

I shook my head. “No, not physically at least. It’s like my mind separated from my body and I could see and hear them but I wasn’t there, not really.”

“And did they see you?”

I rolled a ball of melon between my fingers. “I don’t think so. Though I think Zane could feel me there. I’m not sure. He didn’t say anything about it.”

Rebecca sank onto the bed next to me. “And has this happened before?”

I busied myself eating the melon ball, grinding it slowly between my teeth. There was another time this happened. Part of me wasn’t sure if I should tell Rebecca, though.

In fact, while she had saved me I didn’t really know her very well. In fact, until a day ago Rebecca was my sworn enemy. The sight of her throwing herself all over Adam was still ingrained into my mind. Even thinking about it made me boil inside.

Could I really trust her?

Knowing what I knew now about Rebecca, anyone would think she was on my side. However, separating who she was now and who I thought she used to be was hard. How much could I tell her?

Well, she already knew about this magical experience. So it wouldn’t hurt to tell her about it happening before? Right?

I swallowed and nodded. “Yeah, once before. But I was dreaming... I think. It seemed like my magic kind of did what it wanted when I wasn’t thinking about it.”

“So... your magic is responding to what you want.”

“Huh?”

Rebecca picked a grape off my plate and popped it into her mouth. “You wanted to see them right?” I nodded. “So your magic anticipated what you wanted and made it happen. Should make things easier.”

“I don’t know how that makes it any easier. I can’t make my magic do what I want regularly.”

“Normally, when your magic first comes in, it reacts to strong emotions. It's when you learn to channel those emotions that you can control your magic. Maybe try that?”

My nose scrunched up. “And when the queen decides to make an appearance?”

“Well... hopefully, you’ll find some common ground.” Rebecca stared down at her nails as if they were of great interest. “That or someone will die. Either way, you have to break a few eggs to make an omelet.”

I frowned at her words. “Huh?”

She shook her head. “Never mind. Just don’t practice in the house.” Rebecca fingered the scorch mark left on the bedding. “I’d like to keep my home in one piece. Come with me.”

Pushing off the bed, I followed her out of the room. I hadn’t left the room since I’d woken besides my little mind trip to the others’ house. Based on the Rebecca I knew, I thought her house would be extravagant. Overbearingly so.

However, while it was large in size, the furnishes were basic. Something I’d seen in a few shops. Nothing gilded or costing a small fortune.

My eyes locked on to the back of her head. What was her game? She played the role of villainess to everyone outside her home and yet her humble dwelling told another story. Did she really hate the mages or just the council?

She had implored me that not all mages were bad, herself included in that, I would

assume. Nevertheless, I couldn't help but hold a grudge against this woman who had treated me like garbage from the get-go.

I blew out a breath and shook myself off. I had to learn to let things go. It wasn't as if she hurt me. Words were easy to say and that much easier to forget if you let yourself. Besides, her story about her lover was true enough to show me she wasn't what she pretended to be.

"Here." Rebecca led me out of the house and through a garden, passing by peonies and dandelions until we reached a fountain in the middle. Rebecca stopped before it, trailing her fingers through the water before muttering a spell to freeze it. "Most mages need a spell, words of some kind, to cast a spell."

"I don't know any spells."

Rebecca snorted and released her spell. "I don't suppose you would. Though, those fireballs you threw at the party... you didn't seem to need a spell then, did you?"

I cocked my head to the side, thinking back on it. The queen had taken over, but I still remembered what happened. The queen hadn't said any words, she'd just made it happen. If I could grasp what she had done, maybe I could replicate it.

"Alright." Rebecca turned from the fountain. "I'll leave you to it. You can wander the ground if you want, but I wouldn't leave them. We never know who's watching. Those vultures probably sent out their spy drones to search for you. I have a barrier up, but you never know."

I inclined my head, staring up at the fountain. A lovely woman depicted holding a bundle of flowers, her mouth open wide and it was almost as if I could hear her singing now. Her eyes were sad though, peering up into the heavens. I wondered if this was Rebecca's lover.

Sitting on the edge of the fountain, I let my fingers play in the pool of water. Cool to the touch. The remnants of Rebecca's magic lingered. I blew out a breath and closed my eyes, imagining the water getting colder, thicker, harder.

Magic trickled from me and I gasped, my eyes opening. A thin layer of ice lined the top of the water. It wasn't like Rebecca's, which had hardened the water completely into solid ice.

Weak.

My magic might be abundant, but I was too weak to use it properly. I smashed my hand into the surface, breaking the ice with ease. I had to get better, stronger.

How did I reach that part of me that's closed off by the queen? This power inside of me was an uncontrollable force. Something that needed to be controlled if I planned to do anything to help the humans, and I did want to help them.

I didn't have the anger and hate the queen had or even Rebecca, but I didn't like what I'd seen. Humans with their heads down, trailing after the mages as if they were dogs. The few interactions I'd had with shopkeepers told me all I needed to know about how the humans were treated even on their own. Ridiculous.

I wished Zane was here. He'd know what to do. If anyone knew what it was like to have something inside them they couldn't control, it would be him.

While I wasn't sure how Zane uses the demon that was inside him for power, I was sure he would be able to help me.

Chewing on my thumbnail, my eyes darted toward the house. Rebecca told me not to leave the grounds. They were looking for me. Who knew what the council would do if they found me? If I wasn't immediately executed, they might torture me to get

information or worse.

I needed to see Zane. I had to know more, and he was the only one who could help me.

Abruptly standing, I paced back and forth, thinking on how I would get to him. I couldn't take one of their moving carriages, cars, that was what they'd called them. I didn't have any money to pay one and who knew if the driver was discreet.

Walking there was out of the question. I didn't even know where we were, let alone how to get to Zane's house.

Hopelessness and desperation gripped at me. A need to see Zane filled my body completely. I couldn't sit here and do nothing. I had to see him. Zane. It was the only way to find out more about myself and my powers.

Where? Where? a voice echoed in my head.

My magic gathered with my panic, wrapping around me in a sparkling purple smoke, jerking me off my feet and leaving nothing behind but the trickling water of the fountain.

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This time was different from the others. I could feel it. It wasn't just my mind that moved, but my whole body. One moment, I was standing in the garden and the next, purple wispy smoke wrapped around me, engulfing me one second and then dissipating in the next.

Breathing heavily, I blinked rapidly as I took in my surroundings. The library. I was in Zane's library.

I gathered my skirts in my hands, not giving myself time to think about how I'd gotten there. If my magic had finally done what I wanted, who was I to question it?

Besides, if I questioned it too closely, the queen might get other ideas and send me back before I got what I came for.

My feet moved on their own, dragging me down the stacks of books, looking for that blood red head of hair. By the time I'd rounded the entire library, my hope had waned.

Where was he?

The magic couldn't have been wrong. It brought me directly to them the last time. Why would it bring me here this time if he wasn't here?

When I felt as if I might scream in frustration, my eyes caught on a door almost hidden behind a pillar. My footsteps were slow and steady as I made my way to it, not sure what I would find on the other side.

I turned the handle and pushed the door open. Piles and piles of books filled the room, some reaching so high that they almost touched the ceiling. A few other books were strewn about haphazardly, forgotten or left to come back to later. My eyes traced the room until I found the desk, a blood red head bent over a pile of papers.

Zane.

The mage lifted his head briefly, pulling his glasses off long enough to rub the bridge of his nose before returning to whatever it was he was reading. The bags under his eyes had gotten worse. The hair in his braid had begun to fall out as if he couldn't be bothered to even brush his hair.

A fist clenched around my heart at the sight of him.

When I stepped into the room, his head didn't even move from his papers. He waved a hand lazily toward the door. "I'll come eat when I'm done."

Closing the door behind me, I wandered over to the desk and pulled the book out from beneath a pile of papers. "The Histories of Phrygia and Their Rulers ? Quite an interest in history now."

Zane's head snapped up at my voice. His eyes widened, his mouth stuttering as he stared at me. "Eva. Wh...what are you doing here?"

I arched a brow, the expression on his face comical. "That's what you want to know? What am I doing here? Not how I got here or where I've been?" I smiled gently, setting the book back on the desk. "Really, Zane. I would think you'd already have a line of questions waiting for me."

"I did... I mean, I do." Zane pushed his chair back and stood, making his way around the desk to stand in front of me. His fingers curled and uncurled at his sides as if

stopping himself from touching me. “Are you alright?”

I walked my fingers along the edge of his desk, peering up at him beneath my lashes. “Physically, yes. Confused and worried about what’s going to happen to me.”

Zane stepped closer, his robe brushed against my skirts. “Of course, you would be. I can’t imagine how you must feel right now. There’s plenty who are calling for your death.”

“But... not you?” I lifted my chin slightly, reaching a hand out to stroke the length of his braid.

“No, Eva.” His warm hand engulfed mine, holding my hand gently in his own. “No. None of us want to see harm come to you.”

“That’s good to know.” A step closer and I could feel his body heat against mine. “I don’t want us to be enemies, Zane. I couldn’t bear it.” Bringing my other hand up, I cupped the side of his face, drawing my thumb along the bruising under his eyes. “You’re not getting enough sleep.”

He leaned into my touch, closing his eyes briefly. “I don’t want to be enemies either. I will be honest with you, Eva. I’m not sure what to do. None of us do. We are caught between the council and our love for you.”

My brows rose sharply.

“I just mean...” Zane blushed and lowered his gaze. “We all care for you. But the council wants the person responsible for what happened at the party.”

I huffed and dropped my hands. “They want the queen then. I’m not her. You know better than anyone what it’s like to have something inside of you that can’t be

controlled.”

Zane grabbed my hands, holding them tightly. “You know I do.” He pressed one of my hands to the sigil on his chest. “This thing inside of us is very different. I cannot control the demon inside of me, but you, you can find a way to find peace with the queen, I know it.”

“A person can wish for a melon to fit inside of a teacup but push it too hard and it will shatter.”

His lips ticked up at the sides. “Too true. Now then, it seems as if you have a story to tell, some reason to be here?”

I push him away with a grin. “I’ll make you a deal.” Walking across the room, I moved several piles of books off a couch and sat down, patting the seat next to me. “You rest and I’ll talk.”

“Only for a moment.” Zane sighed and pulled his glasses off, rubbing his eyes, the wariness in his face stark.

I hummed in agreement.

Zane settled down on the couch beside me. I pressed a hand to his shoulder, drawing him down until his head laid in my lap. Taking his glasses from him, I stroked my hand down his hair, indulging in the silky strands.

“How did you get out of the prison?” Zane asked, letting out a sigh with each stroke of my fingers.

“Eyes closed,” I murmured. Once his eyes were closed, I continued, “I didn’t break out of the prison, if that is what you are all thinking.”

“Did someone help you?” Zane's voice grew low on the edges of sleep.

I hummed. “Yes, but I won’t tell you who.”

“What?” Zane tried to push up out of my lap. I shoved him back down with a stern look before resuming my stroking.

“I won’t tell you, yet. Because I don’t know who might be listening and then where would I be? Back in that prison, likely, or worse.”

“We wouldn’t let anything happen to you,” Zane promised, then let out a long yawn, his eyes dipping closed again.

“I know,” I murmured, letting the back of my fingers slide down the side of his face. “I know you won’t...” A short snore came from Zane and I smiled down at him before looking away. “But you can’t protect me forever.”

The sounds of Zane sleeping filled my ears. My fingers busied themselves untangling his hair from his messy braid while my thoughts wandered. I needed to talk to Zane about how to control the queen and yet, with him here in my lap, so peaceful, I couldn’t bring myself to care enough to wake him.

I hadn’t sat there for more than twenty minutes or so before the door opened. Adam’s head poked in, searching for Zane at his desk.

"Zane, we need to talk about the wards..." His brow furrowed at Zane’s empty seat. For a moment, I thought he might leave without ever seeing me until Zane took that moment to snort and mumble in his sleep.

Mahogany colored eyes darted to the couch and widened as he took me and Zane in. I raised a finger to my lips, quieting him.

“He shouldn’t go so long without sleep. None of you should.” I looked pointedly at Adam. “Most of all Zane. It’s harder to control the thing inside of him when he’s exhausted.”

“And you would know?” Adam stepped further into the room, leaning against the edge of Zane’s desk.

I huffed a laugh, smiling slightly. “I wouldn’t begin to know what to do to control the queen. I’m being jerked around like a puppet on a string, and all I want to do is live.”

“Is that why you’re here?” Adam crossed his arms over his chest, peering down at me not with the judgement of someone interrogating me but concern of a friend.

My gaze returned to Zane, my fingers resuming their path. “I hoped Zane would give me some insight into what I could do to find... peace in myself. I don’t want to be this, Adam. Afraid of what she might do next. Who she might hurt.”

My eyes watered, meeting his gaze. “How can I protect you from myself?”

“Let us help you.” Adam stepped away from the desk, moving toward me like I was some skittish fowl seconds away from bolting. “We can talk to the council and put this all behind us.”

I snorted. “And are you saying this as Adam or as the Arch Mage? I trust the council members less than I trust the raging torrent inside of me to turn into a mewling kitten. They didn’t like or trust me when they thought I was nothing more than a dirty human. What do you think they will do now, knowing what I can do? What she can do?”

Adam opened his mouth, but I stopped him.

“She hates mages, Adam. All of them. She wants them to die screaming.”

He jolted to a stop in front of me. “Do you know why?”

“Does it matter why?” I scoffed, lifting my face to the ceiling. “She feels wronged by them and, from what I’ve seen, I don’t blame her. What the mages do to the humans is wrong, Adam. Don’t you see that?”

Adam knelt before me. “Yes, I know. Change is a treacherous mistress to introduce and even harder when those in power would rather court the whores they are used to. But I want to know, Eva.” His hand sat on top of the one stroking Zane’s hair. “Do you hate us?”

The fire inside of me burned at the sight of Adam. The Arch Mage knelt before me within touching distance, killing distance. The hand under Adam’s curled into a fist.

Panic gripped me. I didn’t want to hurt Adam, but the queen did. She didn’t like that he was the face of the mages. The king, as one would say. If she killed him, then she could take his place.

“No.” I pulled my hand away from his talking to the queen, not Adam’s question.

“Eva?” He reached for me again.

“No.” I shook my head, my breath coming in rapid pants. I had to get out of here. Now. Before the queen could get her hands on Adam. Once more my magic swelled around me, wrapping me in purple smoke.

Adam’s shocked face was the last thing I saw as I managed to get out, “I don’t want to hurt you.”

I found myself back in Rebecca's garden a moment later. Sinking down on the cobblestone by the fountain, I leaned against the rim, my chest heaving as tears burned my eyes.

I had to get a handle on the queen, or everything I care about would be destroyed.

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Say what you wanted about a man's house, but no one knew how to take baths like women.

I sank into the large tub. The scented oils Rebecca had in the bathroom filled the air with a subtle flowery scent. The hot water soothed my aching muscles.

Magic might not take a lot of lifting, but it still took a toll on my body. Spiriting away from one place to the other felt like I had been throwing barrels of wine all day. A thousand years ago, the toll might not have been as high.

Rubbing a hand over my face, I leaned my elbow against the side of the tub, my face pressed into it. I had to get a hold of my magic. I wasn't any use to anyone if I didn't.

The queen had been quiet, too quiet, since my exchange with Adam. For some reason, the queen did not like him. She didn't have such a visceral reaction to the others. Why him?

The queen hated the mages, of that I was certain. However, she hadn't made a move the entire time I was with Zane. It was only when Adam was coming toward me, asking me if I wanted to hurt them, that she had deemed to rear her rage.

Was it because he was threatening her? Or something else?

I was still mad at Adam for his engagement to Rebecca even if I knew the logic behind it. He wanted to be Arch Mage, to stop Master Tuck from getting it, and that required certain sacrifices. Even if I didn't like it or agree with it, I understood.

Still, something in my heart ached.

The mages who rescued me were not bound to me. I did not own them. Yet, there was a part of me that saw them as mine. My heart claimed them and, while I had not asked them, I felt as if they might say the same.

I sank beneath the surface of the water, letting the liquid surround me until I could only hear the pounding of my heart in my ears. It did not quiet my thoughts but, for a moment, it gave me peace.

Deep beneath the surface, I laid there, the bubbles slipping to the surface as I stared up through the watery hazy to the ceiling. There I called to the woman inside.

What do you want? How can we make peace so we can save those we care for?

I'd asked these questions before. Every time, I only received silence in return. I suspected this time would be no different.

It felt like hours as I waited for a response, and none came. Only when my lungs burned did I finally give up and lifted to rise above the surface.

My eyes widened. I couldn't move. I pushed and fought against the pressure keeping me down, my lungs screaming at me for air. It was only when my sight started to darken that I heard a voice.

Kill the mages.

No. I won't. I struggled against the hold on me, knowing it was the queen inside pushing us down.

Kill the mages or die.

My jaw tightened and my eyes narrowed, glaring at the voice inside of me. Then I will die.

The laughter inside of me had a haughty quality to it that rankled my whole body. I didn't know why it made me angry. That the queen would laugh at my desire to save them.

She did what she did to avenge her mother, but her mother was dead. Everyone who had hurt her was dead. There was only the here and now.

You would rather die than get justice?

There is no justice in punishing innocent people just because they were born mages. They couldn't help that they were born into this world.

And yet they do nothing to stop the mistreatment of the humans. A thousand years, and they still treat us like vermin.

There are some who do not agree with the way humans are treated. There are those who fight. Who would fight.

The mage whore?

She lost someone, too. A human. The same people you want to protect she wants that too. That's why she saved us, why she and Adam—

Arch Mage. Her voice was like a hiss in my ear.

Yes, he's the Arch Mage now, but he wants to help the humans too. He wants—

Us.

I paused. He's my friend. He's our friend. He saved us from that tower. That prison. We can trust him, he'll help us.

I paused again waiting for her snarky response. When none came, I implored her. We can't do anything if I can't use our powers.

And you would die for them? For him?

I didn't even have to think about it. I knew the answer. I knew it in my heart.

Yes.

Very well.

I jerked up out of the tub, water dripping down my face as I gasped for breath. The water sloshed over the sides of the tub, spilling onto the bathroom floor where I scrambled out of it. I collapsed on the floor, not bothering to grab a towel or cover up.

The queen and I had come to an agreement, but I didn't know exactly how that would go. Did that mean she would stop fighting me? Was I going to have to learn everything again from scratch?

I didn't know the answers to those questions. Nor did the queen provide them. I could only sit on the bathroom floor, gasping for air and hoping that my time of fighting with myself was done.

When it finally felt like my lungs weren't being ripped out of my chest, I pushed myself off the floor and grabbed a towel. I quickly rubbed myself down and wrapped myself in the robe Rebecca had provided. It was long and thick, the color of violets just coming into bloom.

In a different place and time, I would have gushed about it for at least ten minutes. Except now the only thing I cared about was if I could use my magic.

I knelt before the bath and reached my hand over the surface. I reached into the well of magic inside of me, commanding it to turn the water to ice.

Once it felt like dipping my hand into a hot fire, trying to grasp at the power there. Now, the fire still raged, but it didn't burn me. It wrapped around me like an old friend, crooning and cooing at my touch.

Magic filled me, sliding down my arm and into my fingertips. The water rippled and then froze. Slowly at first, inching out from my fingertips and then spreading faster and faster until all the water had become hard as iron.

A crack sounded, and I jumped back. The tub exploded, unable to hold the ice inside of it any longer.

My eyes widened in awe at the large block of ice before me unbroken, even with the fragments of the tub around it. I blinked rapidly and stared down at my hands.

I knew the queen was powerful, but this was so much more. It was powerful, deadly, and exhilarating. This feeling that pounded inside of me was dangerous.

Was this the way the queen felt? This massive amount of power poured into her with what seemed like an unlimited supply. I didn't even feel the backlash of using it, like I had when I teleported to see Zane earlier.

In fact, I felt better, stronger. Like I could spend all day using my magic and never feel the strain of it.

I felt as if I knew the queen a bit better now. How the use of her powers made her feel

invincible. Unstoppable. It was a dangerous and tempting slope, for sure. One I wasn't sure I had the strength to resist.

A knock at the door jerked my attention away from the mess I made. "Come in."

Rebecca stepped into the bathroom, her eyes widening, taking in the scene before her. "Well, it seems like you finally found your powers, my queen."

"Yes," I glanced from her back to the ice, "it seems that I have. Unfortunately, that doesn't do me or anyone else any good if I don't know how to control them."

Rebecca hummed in agreement.

I turned to her. "Will you help me?"

Her lips lifted into a proud smile. "It would be my pleasure, my queen."

"Good." I swept out of the bathroom. "Then let's get started."

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Trees sprouted out around us as far as the eye could see. The busy noises of the city were far enough away that only the birds and squirrels filled the air. It reminded me of home. Or rather the queen's home.

A sense of peace swelled within me, and yet unease crept in.

“Are you sure we won't get caught? What about those floating eyes?”

“Cameras,” Rebecca corrected me, stopping in the middle of a clearing near a small pond. A gaggle of ducks with their ducklings quaked and ruffled their feathers. “The floating eyes are cameras. And yes, in a fashion. I have placed a barrier around us so they can't see us from below. It will protect us from prying eyes, but if someone walks through it...”

I rolled my lips and shook my head. “I'm not sure this is wise.”

“Unfortunately, it will have to do. I like my garden and my house, and your powers, while great, are uncontrollable as they are now.” Rebecca leveled a look at me. “Here, you will bother no one, and I will get to keep my home.”

I crossed my arms. “Tell that to the squirrels,” I muttered.

“Okay, enough talk.” Rebecca clapped once and rubbed her hands together. “Show me what you can do.”

Cocking my head to the side, I chewed on my lower lip. “I don't know how. I mean, I don't know what to show you.”

Rebecca hummed and looked off to the side before she gave me a wicked grin. “Fire.”

My brows shot up. “Fire? You want me to start a fire. Here?”

“Yes, like you did at the party.” She turned toward the wall of trees and muttered a few words under her breath. The shield she had placed around us shimmered and hardened. “There. Your magic will be contained. You won’t burn down the trees with the little birdies and squirrels down in them.”

I puffed out a breath, still not happy with the idea. I’d seen what the fire balls could do. I felt... icky about using them like the queen did.

But if I was going to control my powers, I had to know what I could do, and one thing I knew the queen could do was fire.

Quietly apologizing to the animals if this went wrong, I placed my hands in front of me, palms out, and focused on the magic inside of me. Like in the bathroom, it swelled and caressed me before pooling into my palms.

A burst of fire appeared in my hands, a tiny flame at first before it began to grow, an orange, a fist, a watermelon, it kept growing, and I couldn’t stop it.

“Control it, my queen. Control it.”

“I can’t.” The fire was so hot, so powerful. Just like in the bathroom, once the magic started, I couldn’t stop it. I couldn’t make it stay in the ball of flame the way the queen had at the party. It wanted to eat everything around us and burn it to ash.

“If you can’t stop it, then throw it.” Rebecca stepped forward. “Throw it away before it gets any bigger.”

Gritting my teeth, I lifted one hand, pulling the fire with me and threw with all my might. The fire shot across the clearing and smashed against her barrier, sending a tremor through it before it shattered altogether.

I gaped at what I'd done and then locked eyes with Rebecca. "You were saying?"

Rebecca grinned. "Well, I'll just have to make the barrier stronger. Now, let's try again."

We continued on like this for an hour, her making a barrier, me shattering it within moments, and then on and on again. Even though I'd been using my magic for an hour, I didn't feel tired. At least, not physically.

Mentally, I was exhausted. Not because the magic was draining but from the lack of control.

I bet the queen was laughing inside of me. True, she had given me the full extent of our powers but, without control, I was little more than a disaster waiting to happen.

"Let's take a break." Rebecca breathed heavily, the strain of using her magic for so long showed on her face. A sweat had broken out on her brow, and her eyes were weary.

I nodded, swallowing.

Rebecca collapsed next to the pond, gathering handfuls of water to splash on her face. Guilt riddled through me. Here I was, completely fine, while Rebecca was exhausted.

"I'm not getting any better." I sat on the ground next to her, not caring about my dress getting dirty. "We should stop for the day."

“No.” Rebecca tried to push herself up, her arms shook and collapsed under her.

“Rebecca!”

I rushed to her side, rolling her over onto her back. Eyes closed, Rebecca’s chest moved up and down in a rhythmic pattern.

Passed out. She was only passed out.

Sighing my relief, I brushed her hair away from her face and sat back on my heels.

Glancing around the woods, I contemplated what to do. We could stay here while I waited for Rebecca to wake up, but that could take hours. I could use my powers to teleport us back to the house, but I’d never taken more than one person. Gods, I’d barely done one person.

I didn’t doubt I could do it. Unfortunately, the risk of messing up and dropping us off a cliff was too high.

So I waited.

My head lifted and closed my eyes soaking in the sun, the breeze blowing through the leaves. All things considered, this place was beautiful.

It had everything I had wanted back in my tower. The grass beneath my feet. The wind blowing in my hair. The chittering of the forest animals was the only sound in the air.

For the first time in a long time, I felt safe, at peace.

A growling yipping breaks that peace and, before I had a chance to open my eyes I

was barreled over, a wet sloppy tongue attacked my face. The heavy body of the creature pressed down on my chest, its tail smacking my legs as its nails bit into me.

I peeked my eyes open and laughed at the hellhound on top of me. “Izzy, what are you doing here?” I scratched her behind her ears and down her flank. She yipped and licked at me some more. The happiness in my chest turned to panic at the sight of her. “Izzy, where is your master?”

Pushing her off me, I searched the tree line for the dark haired mage who claimed the beast.

There. Movement in the trees. Two figures, one stood stark white against the trees while the other almost blended in with his black garbs. They were moving toward me now, their voices growing louder with each moment.

Rebecca.

I shot a look at her and then back to the trees. They couldn’t find me here with her. If they knew I was with her they’d know who helped me and where I’ve been staying and I wasn’t ready for them to know that yet. There was still much to be done, much to learn.

“Move, Izzy.” I pushed the hellhound to the side and turned to Rebecca. I couldn’t take her back to her house, but maybe I could hide her? I had watched her put the barrier up so many times in the last hour, surely I could create one on my own.

It didn’t need to be large. Only big enough to hide Rebecca. I wouldn’t bother hiding myself, Izzy would give me away in an instant.

Izzy growled at my side, sniffing Rebecca’s blood red hair.

“Leave her alone,” I instructed, putting my hands out above her. What were those words Rebecca had said to make the barrier? They weren’t in a language I knew. At least not this version of me.

The longer I struggled to find the words, the louder Luke and Blake’s voices became.

Forget it. I hadn’t needed words so far, I could only hope that I didn’t need them now. I envisioned a bubble of protection from touch and sight around her, grabbing at my well of magic inside of me.

Nothing happened at first. Blake’s voice called out for Izzy, and panic grew in my chest. I could do this. I had to do this.

Finally, something began to happen. The air rippled, and a shimmer in the air grew around Rebecca’s form. Excitement manifested inside of me, and I pushed back onto my feet the barrier growing with each step back.

Luke and Blake broke the tree line.

I dropped my hands, cutting off the magic. It would have to be enough.

Spinning to face the twins, I placed a hand on Izzy’s back and drew my shoulders back. There was nothing else I could do. I could only hope they would listen to reason and not try to force me to go back with them.

Though, based on the looks on their faces as they grew closer, I knew they weren’t going to let me go without a fight.

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If I had met the twins somewhere else with someone else, I would have been able to run into their arms and cry out with joy at seeing their faces. That's what the beating in my heart wanted me to do.

Instead, I stood my ground, forcing my feet to stay in place and my expression to give nothing away.

My gaze focused on their faces as they approached. They looked as weary as Zane and Adam had. It hurt me to know my disappearance had affected them so, and yet another part of me was happy.

Happy to know that I meant as much to them as they did to me.

Luke had always been the more expressive of the two of them. The moment he realized who was standing before him, his face broke out into a wide smile as relief filled his eyes. His footsteps quickened as he raced toward me, his white and gold lined jacket flapping in the wind behind him.

Blake approached me slower. His face to others would have been indifferent, but I could see the change. The slight widening of his exposed eye. The tick of his lip before it smashed back into a flat line. He did not run to me, and yet his pace was faster than it had been before.

"Izzy," Luke cried out with glee. "Look who you found! Such a good hellhound, you are." He scratched the back of Izzy's horns before looking at me. His body tensed before he reached out a hand for me. "Eva."

“Luke.” I nodded, not taking his hand. He dropped it with a frown. I met the one visible golden eye of his brother. “Blake.”

“What are you doing out here?” Surprisingly, this came from Blake and not Luke, the one usually so quick to make his thoughts known.

I shot a look between the two of them and then down to Izzy, who panted and wagged his tail with unbound happiness. Did I tell them the truth? Or did I lie? What could I trust them with?

Luke had given me no reason not to trust him, while Blake was a grumpy man who had more secrets than most. He also seemed very good at keeping them. Would he keep mine?

“Training.” It was the truth and a simple answer that gave away nothing they could use against me.

Luke cocked his head to the side. “Training? For what? Why?”

I grinned. “Why do you think?”

Letting out a long breath, Luke shook his head, dragging a hand through his pale hair. “What happened at the party wasn’t your fault.”

My fingers curled into fists at my sides. “It was. If I had control over the queen, it wouldn’t have happened, and Master Tuck would still be here.”

Blake snorted. “No one weeps for that vicious idiot. You did the world a favor.”

I shot him a glare. “He might have been a vicious idiot, but that didn’t give me the right to kill him.”

“Eva,” Luke said my name low like a lover would in bed his hands reach for mine. This time, I let him take them. “Both of us know what it's like to have a power you cannot control. You’re not alone in this. Please let us help you.”

His fingers stroked mine and, when I didn’t pull away, he drew me to him, wrapping me in his embrace.

For just a moment, I let myself sink into his warmth, breathing in the scent of him, all medicinal herbs and sweet citrus. I wanted to accept his offer. With everything that was in me, I wanted to go back with them and let them help me, but I couldn’t.

They weren’t safe until I could keep my powers and the queen under control.

I drew back from Luke, my mouth open to tell him so when a warmth pressed to my side. I blinked up at Blake as he cupped my chin in his hand.

“Please.” His words were so quiet I almost didn’t hear them. The usual bite in his voice had softened until it was almost a plea. “Please don’t go.”

My eyes locked with his gaze, the wind blowing his dark hair away from his face giving me a full view of his one gold eye and one purple one, the scar slashed across that eye prominent in the sun’s gaze.

The emotion there in those eyes was so strong that it made my knees weak. Had Luke not been holding me, I would have crumbled to the ground.

“Please,” Luke echoed his brother. His fingers tracing my lower lip, his lashes lowering until his golden eyes were almost gone. Luke’s head dipped down, brushing his lips against mine.

When I didn’t push him away, he deepened the kiss, his tongue slipping into mine

stroking and intertwining with mine.

Blake's other hand stroked through my hair, trailing down my back and to my waist. The hand on my chin tugged my mouth away from Luke's, and his mouth replaced it.

I jerked away from him in surprise, licking my lips before taking his lips with my own. One of my arms released Luke and wrapped around Blake's neck, tangling my fingers into his hair as I kissed him, a hungry need swelling inside of me.

Hot kisses rained down the side of my neck, Luke's mouth nipping and biting at my flesh while I kissed his brother. The hand on my waist slid up my stomach and cupped my breast, palming and squeezing it until I moaned.

I pressed myself against them, wanting and wanting until my body burned with need.

Izzy whined at my feet.

Blake broke the kiss. "Go hunt, Izzy."

I barely heard the hellhound's yip of delight before Luke captured my mouth once more, grinding his hips against me so I could feel how much he wanted me against my side.

The fingers stroking my hair slid down my back, hesitant fingers brushed against the swell of my backside before grasping it fully with his hand.

"Do you want us to stop?" Blake murmured against the side of my neck, the hand gripping my back side pressing him against me. The hard and long length of him burned into my side, making my body quake with desire.

"No," I breathed against Luke's mouth. "No, don't stop."

My finger found their way underneath the neck of Luke's and Blake's jacket and shirt. The heat of their muscles beneath my fingertips emboldened me. I pulled my mouth from Luke's and crashed them against Blake, my hands tugging and pulling at their clothing.

Someone found the ties of my dress and loosened it until it hung on my shoulders.

Pulling back from Blake's mouth, I let them take the straps of my gown and drag it down my shoulders until my dress fell and pooled at my feet. Blake shrugged out of his jacket and laid it down on the ground, spreading it out.

I shoved the jacket off of Luke's shoulders, my fingers fumbling over the buttons in my hurry to disrobe him.

Luke chuckled darkly. "Here let me."

Blake took my hand and led me over to his jacket, lowering me to the ground.

I laid on the jacket, propped up on my elbows, my eyes devouring the sight of them. With each inch of skin exposed, I ached, pressing my thighs together.

Briefly, I remembered Rebecca passed out cold a few feet away. A part of me knew we should stop, that this wasn't the time or the place, and yet the thought of her catching us emboldened me.

"What is it?" Luke asked, his hands stopping at the waist of his pants as his eyes followed my gaze.

"Nothing." I shook my head, my lips lifting slightly. "Take it off."

Luke smirked and kept eye contact with me as he tugged on the last few buttons of

his pants, shoving them and his boots off in one go.

Blake followed, leaving them both completely exposed to my greedy gaze.

They knelt on the ground and crawled across the ground until they laid on either side of me. I didn't know if I'd ever had a man crawl to me let alone two but I knew it now it was my favorite sight in the entire world.

Their builds were both slender yet different, their muscles bulging with each move they took toward me. My eyes dipped between low, my face heating at their lengths hard and long, standing proud and ready for me.

I wanted them. Both of them. Except I wasn't sure if I could handle both of them at once.

Still, I was more than willing to try.

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I didn't have enough hands to touch every part of them both at the same time. Thankfully, they knew exactly what they were doing.

Luke and Blake traced a finger each down my neck, across my shoulders, skimming the side of my breast. My back arched into their touch, aching for them to take more, to touch more.

A low growl came from Blake, his finger circling my nipple before his mouth engulfed it. Luke's mouth followed each movement, gripping, sucking, and nipping at my breasts.

I gasped and grabbed at their hair, pulling them tighter against me. My legs pressed tighter together, needing them there but not wanting them to leave my breasts.

Luke grinned against my breast, his free hand moving down my stomach before dipping between my thighs, gently pulling them apart.

Head lifting from my breast, Luke teased my inner thigh getting closer and closer to where I ached for him most and yet denying me in delicious torturous teasing strokes.

"Did you know, though my brother is the quieter of the two of us, he is a master with his tongue?"

My inside tightened and slickened at his words, the promise in them.

"Would you like Blake to taste you?" Luke's fingertips traced along my lower lips, barely touching me. My hips pressed up trying to find the pressure that I need. Luke

chuckled so low and deep, it rumbled against my side. “I think she does, brother.”

Blake released my nipple with a pop, his golden eye dark with desire.

I reached out and brushed his hair from his face, so I could see both eyes. It pleased me greatly when he didn’t flinch away. I touched his lower lip, imagining that mouth on me.

His lips curled up, and he nipped at my fingers.

I grinned and then moaned as Luke's cool breath blew on me where he’d spread my lips. My eyes closed, mouth opening wide in a breathy moan.

“Open your eyes,” Blake commanded, taking my nipple between his fingers and giving it a pinch.

My lashes fluttered open, locking eyes with him. The desire that swirled in there not only churned my own, but it made me feel beautiful, wanted. Not some half-human freak with powers she shouldn’t have.

I wanted more of that look. I wanted him to feel the way that I felt when he looked at me.

Reaching out, I cupped his face, tracing the line of his jaw. He had let his facial hair grow, so the scruff there prickled against my palm. My hand made a path down his neck and paused at his chest, indulging at the feel of his muscles beneath my hand. The slow beat of his heart quickened as my hand moved down.

My hand wrapped around his length at the same time that Luke’s tongue flicked out and tasted me. Blake hissed as I tightened my grip on him.

I forced myself to loosen it, sliding it up and down as I memorized the feel of him against my palm.

Trying to pay attention to what I was doing at the same time as Luke drove me wild with his slow and teasing strokes of his tongue was harder than getting my fireball to stay in my control.

Blake must have seen my struggle. He pulled himself away from me and knelt between my thighs. He nudged Luke away and descended on me.

A choking gasp released from my throat. Where Luke had teased me to the brink of sanity, Blake devoured me. He sucked my bundle of nerves between his lips so hard that my hips arched off the ground.

Luke captured my cries with his mouth as he cupped my breast. Between the two of them, they overloaded my body with more pleasure than I could imagine.

My fingers curled into Luke's hair so I could keep him close. I twitched and writhed with each suck and nip of Blake's mouth until he built me up so high that I felt as if I might explode into a million pieces.

Blake did not give a moment to rest, his tongue circled me before sliding down between my folds and dipping into me. I clenched around the muscle, needing more.

Blake gave it to me.

Thrusting his tongue as deep as he could go, he moved it in and out matching Luke's rhythm in my mouth. How they knew exactly what the other was doing must be a twin secret, and I couldn't say I could complain.

When Blake's tongue pulled out of me, I whined, and my inside protested, clenching

around nothing.

“So greedy,” Blake murmured against my thigh, he kissed my knee and lifted his gaze to mine. “I want to be inside of you, Eva.”

Releasing my mouth from Luke’s, I blinked down at Blake and then back to Luke. “Both. I want both of you inside of me.”

Luke chuckled. “We are at your pleasure, Eva. But where would you have me?” His gaze darkened as he traced my lips. “Here?” His hand reached between my legs and tapped at my back entrance. “Or here?”

His finger traced that entrance, a teasing look in his eyes. “Have you ever had a man here before, Eva?”

I wiggled against his touch, intrigued by the prospect. “Not that I know of.”

“Would you like to?” Luke pressed his forefinger against it, just enough to apply pressure but not slip inside.

“I want to,” I breathed, more interested than I thought I would be. I wrapped my fingers around his wrist and pulled him away. “But not today.” I licked my lips, my eyes dipping down to his length. “I want to taste you as you have tasted me.”

Luke exchanged a grin with his brother before looking back at me. “Then get on your knees.”

I expected the queen to protest at this command—except the queen had been quiet all this time. She did not seem to see the twins as the enemy. If anything, she preened at the attention I was getting from these two gorgeous men.

Blake helped flip me over and pulled my hips back until I was up on my knees. He slid his hands up and down the sides of my backside, holding me firm but gently.

Luke's fingers danced up my spine until his hands found the back of my head. He stopped on his knees before me, his thick length bobbing in front of my face. Luke didn't shove it into my mouth, taking what he wanted.

The tip teased in front of my mouth, every once in a while touching against my lips before he pulled away. My mouth opened and tried to catch the tip in my mouth.

"Not yet, gorgeous," Luke groaned, pulling it away from me. "Patience."

I growled in frustration.

"Trust us to take the lead, and you will not regret it." Luke held my face between his hands, but he wasn't looking at me. He was looking at Blake behind me.

While Luke loved to tease me, Blake waited as if he had all the time in the world. He didn't even rub himself against my wetness.

I licked my lips and nodded, giving myself over to them.

Then, without any warning I could see, Luke pressed into my mouth at the same time that Blake thrust forward inside me.

I gasped around Luke, my eyes closing at the overwhelming sensations going through my body.

They set a slow grueling pace, giving me time to adjust.

I hollowed out my cheeks and sucked, enjoying the sound of Luke's curses and moan

with each suck and lick of my tongue. All the while, Blake thrust into me, rubbing me from the inside. His movements were shallow, as were Luke's and then they weren't.

Together, their pace quickened, Blake hit something deep inside of me that made me cry out at the same time Luke touched the back of my throat.

I gagged, my eyes burning with tears.

"You're alright," Luke cooed, wiping my tears away. "You're taking us so well. Breath through your nose and relax. That's a good girl. Just like that."

I swallowed around him, forcing myself to ignore the gag and focus on the sounds I was pulling out of him.

"Do you think she can take more, brother?" Luke asked over me, his gaze shifting from where he moved in and out of my briefly and then back.

Blake grunted behind me.

"Oh, no. I think she needs to hear you say it Blake." Luke's jaw tightened his hands on my face, holding me perfect still so I couldn't move an inch. "Don't you, Eva? You want him to tell you how good you're doing. How much you enjoy us thrusting inside of you until you can't breathe or think."

Since I couldn't nod my head, I moaned around him.

"See? She wants you to use your words, brother."

Blake grunted and his movements slowed for just a moment before a deep growl filled his voice. "Our queen can take more."

Before I could even process his words, their pace picked up until they were thrusting into me with such force from both sides. I couldn't move in either direction, all I could do was take and give and feel.

One hand on my hip dipped between us and cool air blew from his fingertips, pounding against me until I screamed around Luke, my entire body quaking as my release charged through me.

"Swallow for me, beautiful," Luke begged with a stroke of his thumb against my cheek. It was the only warning I had before his length thickened inside of my mouth. and his release filled my mouth and throat at the same time as Blake's.

Filled completely to the brim at both ends, I could only focus on breathing and swallowing, the last of my shudders rolling through me.

When they were done, they lowered me gently to the ground. They brushed my hair from my face, hands stroking over my thighs as they murmured their praises. How well I did. How beautiful I looked during and after.

They could have made me feel like a whore in that moment, having taken two men at once out in the open, but I didn't feel like a whore. They didn't make me feel like a whore.

I was a queen.

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“Come back with us,” Luke implored again once we had put our clothing back on. Together, we stood by the little pond, watching the ducks paddle back and forth across its surface.

I held his hand, giving it a small squeeze. “I can’t.”

“Why?”

I turned to Blake, the furrow of his brow the most emotion he showed on his face, even after we’d been intimate. My hand reached out, grasping his hand in my free one. “There are still things I need to do.”

“Like training?” Luke glanced around the clearing. “You can do that with us. We can help you.”

“No.”

“Eva, it doesn’t have to be this way.” Luke pulled my hand to his chest, cupping it with his own. “Why be out here all alone when you could be home with us with people who love you?”

My face threatened to break open into a large smile at his declaration. Just like with Zane, my heart swelled with emotion. Then I remembered how that conversation had ended with Adam almost getting attacked by the queen, and my smile died.

“You never told me why you were out here.” I shifted the subject away from what I really wanted to say.

Rebecca could wake up at any moment and, while I enjoyed my time with them, immensely, I needed them to move along so I could get back to my training.

Izzy took that moment to bust out of the woods, yipping and growling happily as she padded up to Blake's side.

Blake bent to pet her on the head. She licked his palm and gave another growling yip, blinking her eyes adoringly up at her master.

"We told you about our trials?" Luke released my hand from his chest but not completely, seeming reluctant to let me go all together.

I supposed that was the nature of our relationship. Him not wanting to let me go and me unable to stay.

"Did you pass them?" I let myself enjoy these last few moments I had with them. I didn't know when I would have a moment alone with them again.

Luke scrubbed a hand through his hair and chuckled. "In a manner of speaking. We passed, but only barely. We—"

"Looked like idiots," Blake interjected, his eyes down turned.

"I'm sure it wasn't all that bad." I let my lips curl up in a small smile. "You should have seen me trying to create... well, anything really."

"We did, and I couldn't imagine you could look like an idiot doing anything." Luke peered down at me with such adoration that my breath caught in my chest.

I wanted to stay with them, I truly did. If I could be sure the queen wouldn't rear her ugly head, I would have. While she didn't do anything now with the twins, that didn't

mean that she might not later. She was mercurial in nature. Who knew what would set her off next?

“She can’t stay. She won’t.”

My head jerked toward Blake. His single goldeneye leveled on me and understanding in his gaze.

“She doesn’t trust—”

“She doesn’t trust us?” Luke exclaimed, dropping my hand, his eyes wounded. “After everything how could you not trust us? We would keep you safe. We would—”

“Lucas.” The single word from Blake made Luke clip his mouth shut. “She doesn’t trust the queen not to try and kill us.”

Luke blinked at his brother and then turned his gaze to me, confusion and sadness filling his eyes. “Does she want to hurt us, Eva?”

“I...” I dropped Blake’s hand and stepped back putting some space between us. “I don’t know. I don’t know what she will do or when she will do it. Sometimes she’s fine. She didn’t care when I visited Zane.”

“You visited Zane?”

I locked eyes with Luke. “Yes. I thought maybe he could help me understand the queen, since he has the demon inside of him. I thought he could teach me to control her or at the very least keep her from controlling me.”

Luke cocked his head to the side. “And did he?”

“Unfortunately, we never got the chance.”

Blake made a sound in his throat that made me blush.

Luke’s brows lifted. “Did you and he...? Like with us?”

My blush deepened. “No. Nothing like what we did. Zane needs to sleep more.”

Blake snorted. “Understatement.”

“Anyway, the queen didn’t care about him. But then Adam—”

“Adam saw you, too?” Luke blew out a breath and laughed. “It seems our friends have been keeping secrets from us.”

“Why he didn’t tell you, I don’t know, but the queen didn’t like him.”

“Why? Because he’s the Arch Mage now?”

The mention of the Arch Mage caused the anger inside of me to swirl. I closed my eyes and focused on my breathing, trying to calm it.

“Eva? Are you alright?” Luke placed a hand on my arm.

I pulled it away, stumbling back a few more steps. “Please don’t.” Once I knew the queen wasn’t going to lash out, I looked at them both. “Like I said, the smallest thing sets her off, and I don’t want to put any of you in the line of fire. The only way I know how to do that is to stay away until I can find some kind of semblance of control, balance.”

“Understandable.” Blake faced me but didn’t try to touch me. He seemed to know

that he needed to be cautious with me right now. “Can we do anything to help?”

I shook my head. “No, I don’t think so. I will say that there are many who don’t like how humans have been treated and will want to see change from Adam... the new Arch Mage. The queen demands it, and if she doesn’t see it happen...”

Luke and Blake tensed, taking a step forward. They must have seen something on my face because they stopped their brows furrowed and jaws clenched.

“You have to understand. The queen doesn’t discriminate. She hates the mages. They killed her mother, so she wants to see them all burn. The good, the bad. Everyone. All of them. It’s taking everything in me to keep her from going on a rampage. So please, let me go. Let me find my own way. Let me keep you safe.”

The twins exchanged a look and then nodded together.

“Very well.” Luke cleared his throat. “It pains me to leave you after we... Well, either way, I hate to leave you alone to deal with this. But I understand. We understand.”

“Thank you.”

When they didn’t immediately move to leave, I blinked up at them.

Luke took a hesitant step toward me. “Can we at least say goodbye?”

My lips curled up at the edges as I dipped my head. “Yes, I think that would be alright.”

Blake held back and let Luke come to me first as it always seemed to be with them.

I focused on the twin in front of me, accepting his arm around me, his hand on my

face. I peered up at him, mesmerizing his face so that I would have it for safekeeping when we were separated. He traced my lower lip with his thumb as if he too were committing me to memory.

When his lips descended on mine, it was as if the world had stopped around us. The trees, the wind, the birds and ducks all went away and all I knew was the feel of him, the taste of his lips, the feel of his breath mixed with my own.

It took everything within me to only keep it at just a kiss. It was goodbye after all. It was over far sooner than I would have liked, but I knew it was for the best.

Luke withdrew from me, his gaze soft as he made way for his brother to take his place.

Blake did not gently embrace me the way his brother did. He crushed me to his chest, his mouth ravaging mine with so much passion that it nearly knocked me off my feet.

I clung to him, holding on for dear life as he overtook all my senses. His tongue melded with mine, his teeth nipping at my lips trying to get as much of me inside of him as fast as possible.

Then it was over and Blake was walking away, Izzy yipping at his heels.

Luke lingered behind. "Please be careful, Eva. It kills me to know you are out there all on your own. It would destroy us if something were to happen to you."

"I will, Luke. I promise."

Luke nodded and followed after Blake, his steps slower than his brothers.

Watching them walk away from me again hurt my heart. I wanted to call after them.

To tell them to come back. That I'd changed my mind. My fingers curled into fists to keep myself from chasing after them.

However, I couldn't help but call out. "And Luke?"

He paused in his trek, glancing back at me with such hope in my eyes that it almost made me regret calling out to him.

Instead, I let a small smile lift on my lips. "I'm not alone."

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I waited until they were gone through the trees and then a few moments longer before I rushed to Rebecca's side, pushing through the barrier with ease.

There she was exactly where I left her. Blood red hair spilled out on the ground around her, her chest moving up and down showing she still slept on.

Now I was back to where I was before. Sit and wait, or try to move us back to the house with my powers?

I didn't know where this new confidence came from. I didn't have it before. Maybe it was because of Luke and Blake. The way they made me feel safe, like the queen that was inside of me. Or the fact that I had kept her at bay when she wanted to come forth earlier.

But I felt it down to my toes that I could control my magic and I would, starting with getting Rebecca home safely.

Ignoring the quacking of the ducks, I lifted Rebecca's sleeping form into my arms, holding her as close to me as possible. Then I drew on my magic, letting it wrap around me and Rebecca in the sparkling purple mist.

It resisted at first and then, with a bit more coaxing, I pulled Rebecca with me, whipping us away from the clearing and across the sky and clouds until we were once again in the home of my unlikely friend.

Rebecca didn't have servants in her home. At the beginning, I was happy about it. She actually practiced what she claimed to be, a human supporter. However, with her

weight pressing me down, I wished for those servants to help me get her to her bed.

Since I didn't have that, no matter how much I wished for it, I lifted her off my lap and stood. I opened the first door near us, finding a bathroom, then the next until I found a bedroom.

I wasn't sure if it was hers, but it would work either way.

Looping my arms beneath hers, I dragged Rebecca down the hallway. I grunted and groaned and was covered in sweat by the time I got her into the bedroom. Getting onto the bed was another matter, but I finally did it.

Out of breath, I sank beside the bed and put my head in my hands.

This day did not turn out like I had hoped. Getting some practice in, finding some semblance of control, that was what I had hoped for today.

Now, while I had accomplished what I wanted for the day, not as much as I planned but some of it, I had also gotten closer to Luke and Blake.

My fingers traced my lips, still sore and swollen from their kisses. My body ached and still yearned for their touch. Every part of me wanted to rush back to their arms. To lose myself in them.

A small voice reminded me that it wasn't safe. I wasn't safe for them, and I hated it.

I needed to find a way to come to some kind of agreement with the queen. Except the last time I'd tried to get the queen to listen, she'd tried to drown me, us. Would she really prefer death over working with the mages? I didn't know.

Since it didn't seem like Rebecca was waking up any time soon, I shoved up to my

feet and brushed my hands down my dress, grimacing at the grass stains on the silky material. My legs shifted, reminding me of the sticky mess still coating the inside of my thighs.

My body heated at the reminder of what the twins and I had done. Shaking my head to get the images that were barreling through it out, I found my way back to my bedroom after a few wrong turns.

Tripping my dress off, I stalked to the bathroom and turned on the shower. Thankfully, I'd become used to the plumbing in this time, so I wasn't immediately sprayed with icy water as I stepped into the shower.

The more I tried not to think about what it had been like with Blake and Luke, the more my mind pulled me there. Each swipe of the scrubber down my body found a new spot that they had left their imprint on.

My eyes closed in sweet bliss, wishing I was back there in the clearing with their hands and mouths on me. I didn't know if the queen spent a lot of time being worshipped by two gorgeous men, but I knew it was now my new favorite thing.

After I finished showering and dressing in a new dress, this one a deep purple with a large slit up the front, showing off my legs with each step.

The gowns Rebecca dressed me in were much different than the sweet summery type dresses the men gave me. Theirs made me look like the damsel they had rescued from the tower, while hers made me feel powerful, like the queen she thought I was.

I found my way back to the bedroom I'd placed Rebecca in. One look at the bed and I could see Rebecca was still out cold. I sighed and walked over to the window, staring out into the garden.

Part of me wondered if I should just go back to the others. They kept telling me that they wanted to help me. That they wanted to keep me safe.

I wanted to be safe. I felt safe with them. It hurt to be so far away from them. To keep them at a distance so my little evil queen didn't blow them up.

A groan pulled me from my thoughts.

"Rebecca?" I turned and moved to sit on the bed beside her.

Her eyes fluttered open. Her gaze shifted back and forth taking in her surroundings and then found me. "My queen. What happened?"

I leaned closer to her, patting her hand. "You passed out. Exhaustion I think. I brought you back home."

"This was my sister's room." Rebecca grimaced as she tried to sit up.

"You have a sister?"

"Did." Rebecca shifted until she could sit up against the head of the bed. "She died."

My lips pursed together. "I'm sorry."

"It doesn't matter now." Rebecca blew out a breath and rubbed a hand over her face.

"Did I miss anything?"

"Not much," I evaded, not willing to tell her about what transpired mere feet away from her with the twins. "Unfortunately, I didn't get control over my fireballs. I suppose it will have to be for another day."

“Yes, I suppose so.” Rebecca shifted and I moved out of her way so she could get out of bed. She walked over to where the television sat and clicked it on.

A reporter came on the news standing alongside Adam and Rebecca.

My brows furrowed at the sight. I didn’t completely understand their new inventions. How Rebecca could be here and also on the screen? Luke tried to explain it to me once, but it was all over my head.

What I was interested in was the words they were saying.

“You must be overjoyed with the news of your engagement to the new Arch Mage,” the reporter asked Rebecca with a grin on their face.

Rebecca clung to Adam’s side, her breasts pushed up against his arm while she peered up at him as if she would devour him right then and there. “Oh, you have no idea. I’ve been chasing after Arch Mage Adam for years, and I finally caught him.”

Adam kept a pleasant smile on his face until Rebecca grabbed his face and captured his lips with her own.

Rage boiled inside of me so quickly that I couldn’t catch my breath. A combination of the queen’s rage at seeing the Arch Mage and my own at seeing another person kissing someone that was mine. I shoved up to my feet and strode across the room toward the mage who claimed to be my ally.

“Fucking leeches, always looking for some new gossip,” Rebecca spat, turning from the television toward me.

My hand wrapped around her throat and shoved her against the wall.

“My queen,” Rebecca gasped out, her eyes widening. “Please.”

“You touch what is mine?” I snarled, my hand tightening around her throat with strength I didn’t know I had. “You put your lips on him? You say you want the mages to pay, but what you really want is to be the pretty little arm candy to the new Arch Mage. Admit it.”

I slammed her up against the wall once then twice when she did not answer immediately.

She grabbed at my hands but didn’t use her magic against me, like she should have. Why? I hadn’t trusted her from the moment I saw her, and now she pawed Adam like he was nothing more than something she can fuck, like she has claim to him.

“I’m sorry, my queen. It’s—” She gasped and struggled to get her words out. “It’s all a trick. I promise you. An agreement. Adam knows. I have no interest in him at all. He’s yours.”

“Break it off,” I growled, leaning in close to her face. “Now.”

“I can’t.” Rebecca made a strangled sound as my hand tightened on her throat. “Please, my queen.”

I drew in a breath and my rage, releasing her abruptly. “Speak carefully. I cannot promise what will happen if you don’t.”

Rebecca sagged against the wall, rubbing her throat. “I didn’t mean to offend you, my queen. The plan was already in place before I knew of your...” I glared at her. “Affection for Adam. I can’t end it without discussing it with Adam.”

“Fine,” I snapped, my hands clenching and unclenching at my sides. “If you cannot

end it, then I will.” Later, I would ponder on how I could do it but, at that moment, without barely an inkling of a thought, my magic wrapped around me and pulled me from Rebecca’s home.

I reappeared in Adam’s empty study.

Our rage still bubbled beneath the surface. I swallowed it down, knowing that if I saw Adam with it so close to bursting forth, I couldn’t be sure that the queen wouldn’t kill him.

With more calm than I knew I had, I stepped around his desk and went behind his desk, sinking into his chair. Papers and books were spread out around the surface, one of those screens the size of a book sat to one side.

I ignored the screen and flipped through one of the books.

Reports of all the humans and their masters in the city. Even longer reports of those humans who had been abused by their masters. Those that had reported the abuse, in any case.

It did seem like he was doing something that was good, at least.

The door to the study twisted open. I threw my feet up onto the edge of his desk and leaned back in his seat waiting for him.

Adam appeared, his face haggard. He shut the door behind him and leaned against it, his eyes closed as he sighed.

I didn’t wait for him to find me this time. This wasn’t a friendly meeting. There was no Zane sleeping to keep me quiet. The rage inside of me rolled with the need to cause destruction. I flexed my fingers and breathed out, jerking his gaze to me.

My lips curled up at his wary expression. “Hello, Adam.”

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Once Adam clipped his mouth shut with a snap, he cleared his throat and straightened, shoving his hands into the pockets of his pants. “Eva, what an unexpected surprise. You could have used the front door.”

My smile sharpened. “And give you the chance to arrest me? Now, why would I do that?”

“I wouldn’t dream of having you arrested, Eva.” Adam strolled from the door to the front of his desk, the hitch of his shoulders the only sign that he was bothered by my presence. That would change soon. “You’re part of this family. We just want to help you.”

“Family.” My nose scrunched up into a snarl. “Is that what we are, Adam? Or do I call you Arch Mage now?” I swiped my skirt to the side, so the split of my dress split open.

Adam’s eyes immediately went to my exposed thighs. He licked his lips and lifted his gaze back to mine. He leaned his hip against the side of his desk, and that little book he was always reading popped out of nowhere.

I realized then that it was his shield. He used the book to keep people at a distance or to end a conversation he didn’t want to participate in.

I hated it.

With the queen so close to the surface, it was easier than it should have been to reach out and light the book on fire in his hands. I couldn’t help the smirk that crept up as

he gave a startled yelp and dropped the book on the ground, stomping on it with growl before glaring at me.

“What was that for?”

“I want your attention on me, not on your smutty little book.” I lowered my lashes coyly and trailed my hand over my knee, his gaze followed the path of my hand, Adam’s apple bobbing in his throat.

“Alright, Eva.” Adam took his place on the edge of the desk once more, his hands laced over his lap. “You have my undivided attention.”

I wanted to come out right then and there asking him why he was still with Rebecca, but the papers on his desk pulled my attention. “Tell me about this.”

Adam’s lips ticked up in a smirk. “You came all this way to talk to me about humans?”

“Yes, the humans,” I snapped, grinding my teeth together. “I’ve only been in your time for a short while, and even I can tell that the way they are treated isn’t right. What are you going to do about it?”

Adam stared down at me with an amused grin. “You realize I’ve only been the Arch Mage for a few days now, correct? It does take time to make changes.”

“What’s the point of being the highest ranking mage if you can’t make the changes you want to implement? You have the power to create change and, so far, all I’ve seen you do is interviews. Are you even trying?”

“Eva, you don’t understand how this works. Yes, I’m the Arch Mage, and that does give me a certain amount of power, but there are council members, as well. They are

there so I don't go mad with power. So, if I want to implement changes to give the humans more rights, to fix the way they are treated, then I have to play the game."

"Then you're not playing the game well enough," I snapped, getting irritated by the condescending tone in his voice.

"You met the council, Eva. You know how they feel about humans. A few of them sure, I could get them to play ball if I offer the right incentives, but the others are so set in their ways that trying to make change will take years if not decades. We are talking about ending a practice that has been going on since the early two thousands."

He sighed. "It's not as simple as signing an order and changing everything overnight. If I did that, they could call for a vote of no confidence and then all the hard work I'd done to get to a place of power so I could change things would have been for nothing."

"Change is like a noose around your neck, the more you struggle the tighter they hold on for control. You have to caress it like a lover, easing into it so they don't even know they've been fucked until you're already in there, rearranging organs."

All his talk of doing things the polite and political way made the anger inside of me boil. The queen didn't want to wait. She didn't want to woo over the council. Her days of kissing ass to get what she wanted was over. And what did that get her anyway? Locked in a tower for a thousand years.

Adam seemed to think he knew what he was doing. How to get what all of us wanted, and yet I couldn't help but feel like he was taking the safe easy way out.

"You want to play the hero too much, make sure that everyone is happy with every decision you make. When what humans need is someone willing to be the villain."

“There’s nothing wrong with being the hero,” Adam shot back, leaning toward me across the desk. “You didn’t seem to mind when I was rescuing you from your tower.”

“And I am forever grateful to you all but,” I shot back at him with a withering smile, “sometimes you have to be the villain before they will realize you’ve been doing it all for them all along.”

“Then they’ll lock you up in a tower and throw away the key,” Adam pointed out with a knowing look.

“That was the mages, not the humans.”

“And it’s mages who I have to convince to give up their ways, not humans. If I only needed the humans, I could go in changing what I wanted without a worry, but that’s not how this world works.”

Tired of going around and round with him on this discussion, I walked my fingers across his desk and asked what I really wanted to know. “Why are you still engaged to Rebecca?”

Adam’s brows furrowed as if he wasn’t expecting me to ask that question. “What? Rebecca? She’s just—”

“Oh,” I interrupted him, sliding my feet from his desk to the floor as I stood up and rounded the desk to stand in front of him. “I know quite well who and what Rebecca is to you.”

“You do?” He arched a brow, his lips lifting on one side. “Then you know... As I said before... It was just for show. I needed to have someone of merit at my side to become Arch Mage.”

My teeth ground together. “Because nothing else matters but getting what you want. That’s what you said, isn’t it?”

“Oh, I see what this is.” Adam leaned toward me with a teasing smile. “You’re jealous.”

I placed my hand down next to his leg on the desk and leaned forward until our faces were inches apart, trying to reel back the queen’s desire to rip a favorite part of him off.

“No, what I am is confused. When someone kisses you and then breaks it off saying they can’t let anything get in the way of their goals, but then he turns around and gets engaged to the she-bitch without a word... Well, you can see how that could cause some confusion.”

“It’s not real, Eva. What Rebecca and I have is completely for show.”

Adam placed his hand on top of mine, the heat of his hand sinking into mine. I forced myself not to revel in the feel of it, reminding myself I was mad at him. It was easy to do since the queen was always angry.

The image of Rebecca kissing Adam on the television blared in my head, rallying the rage that had consumed me when I’d seen it. My hand jerked out from beneath his and grabbed him by the face, squeezing until he winced.

“Then why was she kissing you?”

“Are you jealous?” His eyes lit with something that could only be called glee.

“I don’t like others touching what’s mine.”

“Is that what I am? Yours?”

When I didn't answer, he wrapped his hand around my wrist, not pulling my hand away from his face but stroking the pulse that thunder beneath my skin. “We had to make it look real, Eva.”

My voice came in an angry hiss. “Stop it.”

“It could be you, you know?” Adam drew my hand away from his face. I didn't even realize I'd stopped gripping him so hard. “Is that what you want? For it to be you at my side while I talk to the reporters? For them to all know that I'm yours?”

His mouth stopped inches from mine, his breath mingling with mine. I swallowed, tempting to close the distance but remembering what he'd told me before.

I jerked back from him, pulling his hands from me. “You won't let anything keep you from getting what you want, remember? Not even me.”

“Eva, please don't do that.” Adam grabbed for me.

I swatted him away. The righteous anger I'd felt before rearing back in full force. “I will give you a week.”

“A week?” Adam frowned. “To break up with Rebecca?”

“To convince your little council to come to heel.”

Adam shook his head with a scowl. “That's impossible. I can't do that in a week.”

“You can and you will.” I pointed a finger at him, shoving it into his chest.

He grabbed my hand and jerked me forward until I was crushed against his chest. “You can’t go around making demands like this of me. I’m not some lowly servant you can push around.”

“You’re the Arch Mage, I know.” I shoved against him, but he held me firmly.

The queen inside me seethed against my restraint at his weak words of compromise. She didn’t want to compromise. She didn’t want to yield and neither did I.

I was tired of being the damsel. Tired of being pushed around by this mage or that. The queen had the right idea all along. The only way to get them to listen, to do what we wanted, was to force them.

The queen rolled and struggled against me for control and, for the first time, I didn’t fight her. I wanted to be her. I wanted to be confident and strong in this fight. I wanted Adam and the rest of them to stop looking down on me like I was someone that they had to protect and save.

I was the fucking Evil Queen, and now it was time to act like it.

My magic purred and coalesced inside me. The blank spots in my mind filled in as if something was melting away the walls blocking them. The part that was Eva and the part that was the Evil Queen merged together until there was nothing left but me.

Magic shot out of me, shoving Adam back against the desk, the contents scattering around as a magical wind whipped up around me.

Adam stared at me in confusion and a twinge of fear.

Rolling my shoulders back, my gaze set firm, I held up a single finger. “One week, Arch Mage. That is how long you have to right the wrongs that have been done

against my people, or I will fix it myself.”

Before Adam could answer, purple smoke wrapped around me, pulling me away from his home and back to Rebecca’s sitting room.

Rebecca jerked to her feet, her tea cup shattering on the floor. “My queen. I’m so sorry, I didn’t know you wanted him. I would have never—”

I cut her off with a lifted hand. “Never mind that. We have work to do.”

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“My queen, I don’t understand.” Rebecca chased after me as I stalked through the house. “I thought you were going to talk to Adam about our engagement.”

“That doesn’t matter anymore,” I threw over my shoulder. I walked into the bedroom Rebecca had assigned to me and threw open the wardrobe. I flipped through the garments trying to find something that made me feel more like myself.

It was strange. I felt like myself, Eva, but I was also the queen. We were one and the same now, and to think of us as separate entities was almost laughable.

There was no separation. There was no difference. I just was. And what I was, was pissed.

I’d done everything right. I’d wormed my way through the ranks of the mages, showing them that a little human was just as good as them.

I’d even married that horrid Midas and his greedy grabby hands. He’d gotten the wealth and prestige he wanted over the other kingdoms with me by his side and what did I get? Locked in a tower by his vindictive bitch of a daughter.

Where did she have the right to punish me? Me! I’d done everything for that kingdom, and that was the thanks I got?

Snow was the one who wronged me. Ferdinand was mine, and she stole him away from me. It wasn’t like her father didn’t have his mistresses. Ferdinand was the only thing I’d ever had that was mine, just for me, and not part of my revenge for my mother.

So, of course, I was a little upset when I found out he was also sleeping with Snow. She had everything, and she had to also take him.

“My queen,” Rebecca’s voice was quiet over my raging thoughts as I tore through the wardrobe. “Eva. Please. You’re going to start a fire.”

I blinked at her, then turned my gaze back to the wardrobe. The clothing I was grabbing had scorch marks all over them. My rage had eked out into my hands. I dropped the dress in my hands and stepped back, huffing.

Like a child, I was letting my anger rule over my powers. There was nothing I could do about Snow or Ferdinand now. They were long gone, nothing but dust. I had to focus on the present.

I turned abruptly to Rebecca. “What do you know about the Mage Council members?”

“The council?” Tilting her head a bit at my question, Rebecca went about collecting the dresses I’d thrown on the floor, moving them into a pile by the door. “Only what is public knowledge. You can view their profiles on the net.”

“Profiles?”

“Yes, their background, like where they are from, what they studied, their family life, that sort of thing.”

“And this is all public knowledge? Anyone can look at it?”

Rebecca stopped her arms full of clothes. “Yes, I can pull it up for you if you like.” I nodded. “Can I ask what you are looking for?”

I crossed my arms over my chest and tried my best to reign in my anger. “Adam said he had to woo them to give the humans the rights they deserved. He made some case about not being able to just change everything overnight.”

Rebecca hummed her understanding. “He’s right. In his position, it would be hard to just say do this because I said so. Arch Mage isn’t like a King or Queen. He can’t make demands and expects everyone to just go with them. The council has to be convinced, as well. It keeps him from becoming a tyrant.”

I clucked my tongue and cursed under my breath. Stupid modern world. This was going to be more complicated than I expected. If I had been queen here, like back in my time, I could have snapped my fingers, and they would have to do what I asked. Back then, the mages worked in the shadows, so it wasn’t so easy for them to voice out against royalty.

Maybe that was it.

If I couldn’t make them do what I wanted by just putting it in front of them, perhaps I would have to be like the mages of old. Use my abilities in secret to sway things in the way that I wanted. To do that though, I needed information and more than just what was publicly available.

“And, if one wanted to find out all the council’s dirty little secrets, who would one go about that?”

Rebecca's mouth curled up into a wicked grin. “Well, then, that would require a different sort of net.”

“Can you do it?” I rubbed my hands together, partly to ease my anxiety and partly for the excitement that was bubbling up inside of me.

“Oh, yes. I can do that, but it will take a bit of time. It would help to have someone close to the mages council to do so, too.”

“You mean, like Adam? The Arch Mage?” I didn’t want to go back to him and ask for things. The urge to set him on fire was too close to the surface and, while I was mad at him, I didn’t want to hurt him.

However, there was someone else that might be willing to do the dirty work for me. That was if I could convince the little devil to play along.

“What if there was someone else, close to him, that could get the information you needed? Not Adam himself, but someone else?”

Rebecca’s sly side look told me she had an inkling on what I wanted to do.

“Someone else would work as well.” She plopped the rest of the dresses on the ground and then snapped her fingers. The pile disappeared. “I will do what I can on my side and look forward to hearing from your... source.”

Hope swelled in me. I turned back to the wardrobe and searched for something among the unscorched dresses that were left.

I found one of a pale purple and pink with slits up both sides. It shimmered with each shift of the light on it. The neckline scooped down held up only by the tight bodice and would leave my shoulders bare.

Treacherous water I was about to swim into. I had to be careful. The last time I’d faced Zane’s demon hadn’t ended well for either of us. Though, this time, I had control of my magic, and I was confident in my ability to sway him to my side.

The demon hated being trapped in Zane. He’d made a point to let me know that he

wanted to do everything he could to hurt his host. I had a feeling he would like the chance to pull one over Zane.

It didn't make me feel good to use Zane in this way. He'd been nothing but kind and understanding to me since the beginning. He cared for me, that was certain. And I was about to use the feelings he had for me to my advantage.

Did that make me a bad person? Evil?

Snow would certainly think so. She'd painted me the villain in all her journals.

Her journals.

I'd forgotten about that little thing with everything that had happened. I plucked it out of the magical pocket I'd put it in and flipped through it until I found the last entry.

January 5th

The evil queen sits in her tower and no one can save her. I have the mages preparing the spell now to conceal her whereabouts. She will be erased from the histories as if she never existed. If only that would be enough to remove her from my mind.

She tortures me daily, still. The death of my father and Ferdinand remain in mind, as clear as the day that they happened. The tower is the least of what she deserves, and I know I've done everything I can to destroy what she has built.

Her name will mean nothing. She will be nothing.

And yet, something nags on my heart. A deep embedded fear that this wasn't over.

I look down on my child, the only thing I have left of Ferdinand, and wonder each

day, will this be the day that she breaks free? Will she come for me and my child? Will we suffer the way my father and my love suffered?

I wish I'd killed her. Then I would be free of her, and nothing would stand between me and my happily ever after. Except killing her is too quick of a price to pay for what she has done.

I wanted her to suffer. Suffer long and unending, the way I will suffer for the rest of my life. Except I knew there was an end to mine. I had to make peace it would be enough.

There would be no end for her. Not now. Not ever.

I snorted and snapped the book shut.

"It looks like you didn't get what you wanted after all, Snow." I peered down at the journal with all the disdain and hatred I had for my stepdaughter.

So she had a child? I wondered if the line continued. Could I find them here and now? If I did, then I'd make them pay for what their ancestors had done to me.

But first, I had a demon to seduce.

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Sliding into my bed for the night, I blew out a breath. There was nothing else I could do at this moment while Rebecca looked into her contacts. I would reach out to Zane soon, but not yet.

Call me old fashioned, but I didn't want to taint the feel of Blake's and Luke's hands on me. A bath was one thing. Being with someone else so soon after was another. And the things I planned on doing to Zane would definitely mix the experiences.

I wanted to remember every single moment of my time with each of my mages, individually.

In an ideal world, I wouldn't be here hiding away with Rebecca. I'd be curled up laughing with everyone over the latest drama or eating dinner. Or, better yet, curled up between the twins after our love making session.

I knew it was for the best and yet, I felt lonely. Lonely in the way that I felt when my mother died. My father had already been taken from me, so after she was taken, I had felt like nothing and no one in that world cared about me.

Thankfully, my mother had helped me learn what I could from one of the better mages who didn't look down on me for being half human, Katana, the elderly mage who lived down the street from us. She used to watch me while Mother went to work in the market shop stall.

When my powers began to manifest, Katana helped me. I learned potions and spells at a young age that most grown mages couldn't even fathom.

I was sure that Katana was once a great mage. Every time I'd asked her about it, she'd laugh and pat my head. "Oh, little bird, I'm just an old woman now. All my great days are behind me. But I see many great days in your future."

When my mother died, it was Katana that took me in. We moved away from my little village deep into the forest where she continued to teach me every spell and potion she knew until, one day, I was a grown woman and could make my own way in the world.

Katana died about the time that I had gained the king's attention. By then, I'd let my rage at the mages consume me. I closed myself off to Katana's warnings about letting my vengeance consume me.

"The path to revenge is a lonely one. One day, you'll wake up and have gotten exactly what you wanted, only to realize it didn't change anything at all."

My eyes closed as I bathed in the memory of her words. Katana was right. In the end, I'd been alone and nothing had changed. I hadn't gotten justice for my mother and the mages now ruled the world.

My heart sank and briefly I wondered if there really was nothing I could do but put my trust in Adam.

My mind settled at the thought of him, my magic sweeping me up and out of my body. It passed through Rebecca's house and out the window and then I was flying across the woods and town until I found myself inside Adam's office.

My heart swelled at the sight of Zane, leaning back against the window sill. His eyes down on one of those black squares, his fingers moving across the surface.

He pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose and squinted his eyes. There were still

dark circles under his eyes, but he looked better than before.

Curiously, Luke and Blake were missing from this meeting. Only Adam and Gage stood next to the desk, pouring over some paperwork I'd need to be closer to see.

I was hesitant to get closer to Adam right now. He represented everything I hated and, to top it off, he was still engaged to Rebecca. I wanted to yell and throw things at him. Demand he tell me why she was better than me.

Was it because I was part human? Did that hurt his Arch Mage image to be seen with me?

If that had been the case, wouldn't it have hurt him when I'd first shown up with him? Everyone knew I was staying with him. So, it was okay for him to take care of me, but not okay for him to be with me?

I shook my head, clearing my head of the rampage my thoughts had taken. I couldn't answer those questions now, and thinking about them would only make me mad.

My mind took me here for a reason. I should use this time to see what I can find out. Maybe I could learn what Adam planned to do after my ultimatum.

"We need to up our security magic," Adam directed his words toward Zane. "I don't want to get any more surprise visits from Eva."

Zane lifted his head, his brows pinched together. "You want to keep Eva out?"

Adam shifted slightly from the desk to look at Zane. "I want Eva here as much as the rest of you."

Gage snorted.

Though he couldn't see me, I shot him a glare.

Adam continued as if he hadn't heard the Sentinel. "But you have to admit she's unpredictable right now. She showed up in my office today and threatened me."

"She threatened you?" Zane's eyes widened. "Are you sure? She seemed fine when she came by to talk to me."

I wanted to talk to him to tell him my side of things. Unfortunately, incorporeal as I was, I wasn't able to do anything but to listen in.

"She talked to you, too?" Gage shot an accusatory look at Zane that made my insides boil. "Did she visit everyone but me?"

"What do you mean?" Adam frowned. "She's only visited Zane and me."

Gage gestured around the room. "The twins have been holed up in their rooms since they came back from their trails. Even Luke has been suspiciously quiet. That motormouth is usually an unending stream of information we didn't ask for. Isn't that strange to you?"

"That doesn't mean they saw Eva today," Adam pointed out, leaning against his desk.

"Doesn't it?" Gage quirked a brow. Though his lower face was covered, I could still tell he was frowning. "If she visited both of you, the likelihood that she saw the twins isn't implausible. She and Luke were close."

"I wonder why they didn't tell us about it." Adam crossed his arms over his chest and sighed. "I just wish I knew what was going through her head right now."

Zane dragged a hand down his braid. "When she came to me, she wanted to know

how I handle my demon. I really felt like she was trying to get herself and her magic under control. Are you sure she threatened you?"

Adam's foot tapped incessantly against the floor. "Not at first. She was agitated from the beginning. Aggressive. Not like herself."

"What did she want?" Gage's eyes zeroed in on Adam's face.

"Eva wanted to know what I was going to do about the humans' treatment now that I was Arch Mage." He shoved his hands into his pockets and ducked his head. "When I tried to explain to her that it took time to make change, she suddenly started in on me about being engaged to Rebecca."

"I don't blame her," Gage scoffed. "Even we don't understand that shit."

Adam narrowed his eyes on him. "It was a necessary evil. I'll break it off when the time is right. Just not right now."

"So you think..." Zane cocked his head to the side, studying Adam. "She was jealous?"

My lips twisted to the side, my eyes boring into Adam, daring him to say it.

"I should be happy, I guess." Adam pulled at the long bits of hair on his head. "She cares enough to get mad that I'm engaged to Rebecca. It pains me that I hurt her, but I couldn't very well tell her I couldn't be with her because she's human."

"But is she?"

My eyes jerked to Gage with everyone else.

“Is she even human?” Gage continued. “She smells like a human, but you have to admit she doesn’t act like one. She has magic. The books literally say she was the queen to King Midas, the king who had a mysterious mage at his beck and call. How do we know she wasn’t that mage?”

My teeth ground at the mention of my ex-husband. The ass never gave me credit for everything I’d done for him. Anyone with a lick of magic knew that old bastard didn’t have a magical bone in his body. He relied on the mages around him to get him ahead and make him look good. Me included.

“Maybe she’s both?” Zane offered with a shrug. “It’s not unheard of. Even now it’s more taboo. Back then they probably didn’t have every mage written down like we do now. But still, I don’t understand how she threatened you. Are you sure you didn’t misunderstand her jealousy?”

Adam locked eyes with him. “I think I know a threat when I hear one. She told me I had a week to fix the human situation or she would do it for me. This was after she almost blew up the office with some kind of...”

He shook his head. “I don’t know. It seemed like she was having some kind of internal struggle and then, all of a sudden, she was... different. It was almost like I was talking to a completely different person.”

“Do you think the queen took over?” Zane pulled his glasses off his face, cleaning them off with a bit of cloth from his pocket.

Took over? I laughed to myself. No, the queen did not take over. We finally agreed on something, and that was that you all were being too slow to do what was right.

“I don’t know. But still, I’d like to get a heads up the next time she shows up. Just to be on the safe side. We don’t know what we are dealing with when it comes to her

right now. I want to help her as much as you do, but have you stopped to ask yourself, maybe she doesn't want our help?"

"Then we make her," Gage shot back.

If I could throw a fireball at Gage right then, I would have. The nerve of him, thinking he could just make me come back and let them take over everything. I didn't need help. I'd already figured it all out on my own. It was them that needed help. Starting with getting more information on the council members.

"Very well." Zane sighed with displeasure on his face. "As long as it's just to let you know when she's coming and not to hurt her."

I peered over Zane's shoulder watching as he made the lines of magic on his tablet tighter together.

"I would never," Adam claimed, placing a hand on his chest. "There is nothing I want more in this world than to have Eva safe and here with us."

I stared Adam down, his words causing my jaw to clench. Liar.

Adam's head jerked up as if he'd heard me. I didn't wait around to find out, letting my magic sweep me back out of the house and into my body. I rolled over on the bed, curling my legs to my chest as my eyes burned with tears.

He wanted nothing more than to keep me safe? I would believe that the moment he stepped down from being Arch Mage.

Adam had made it clear being Arch Mage was more important than anything else in his life. Including me.

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It was funny. Once I stopped fighting the other Eva, it was so easy to simply close my eyes and search for who I wanted.

Zane.

Out of all the mages who had saved me, he knew more than any of them what it was like to fight with something inside of you, tearing you apart until you feel powerless.

Except what Zane didn't know was that he had another choice. One that would not only help him but me and my plans as well.

If I was going to take down the mages and get justice for my mother and myself, I needed allies. Specifically, someone on the inside, someone close to Arch Mage Adam.

Not surprisingly, Zane was in the chapel, kneeling before the stone cross, a red branch twisted into a matching cross embedded into the center of it. The rage that usually boiled beneath the surface at the sight of the symbol of the mages barely even itched now.

My fingers trailed through the air as my consciousness found the faint lines of magic wrapped around the building. It took just the barest stroke of my own magic against it to inch my way between the lines of their security.

With barely a thought, purple mist enveloped me, and I reappeared on the stone bench just to the left of where Zane knelt.

I tossed the skirt of my violet gown to my sides. The split exposed my legs as I crossed one over the other, one hand settling onto the bench as I leaned to one side.

For a moment, I didn't say anything. I let my gaze slide over Zane's form. His blood red hair half hazard braided over his shoulder; his black shirt wrinkled. He still hadn't been sleeping. The bruises beneath his eyes were faint but they were there.

It made my heart ache to see him so distraught because of me.

"Is anyone listening?" I finally asked, announcing my presence.

Zane jolted, falling over as he spun around to face me. His hazel eyes widened when they locked onto me. Relief filled his eyes but also... fear.

"Eva. What are you doing here?" His eyes shifted from side to side, a slight tremor to his voice. "How did you get in here?"

I cocked my head to the side, my lashes lowering as a sultry smile played on my lips. "My, my, Zane. Are you scared of me? I'm hurt. And here I thought we really had a moment before in your office."

Zane dragged his hand through his bangs, pulling on at the end of his braid. "You killed Master Tuck, Eva. And you did it so..." He wiped his mouth with his hand. "So easily. It didn't take you any effort at all."

My lips curled up higher. "Well, Master Tuck was in the way. Now, Adam is Arch Mage, and his biggest competition is gone."

"That's not how this works," Zane snapped, his face flushed red with anger. "You can't just decide who lives or dies. We would have taken care of Master Tuck the right way."

I slid off the bench onto my knees and crawled across the floor toward him. Zane tensed, not moving as I came toward him. Though the fear was still there, his eyes kept darting down to my ample cleavage and my legs, where my dress had drawn up higher.

If I hadn't accepted who I was, the very idea of crawling to him would have sent me blushing madly as I fled the room. Now, though, the power of having his eyes on me, knowing that he desired me, warmed my body and sent a thrill down my spine.

"Did you know," I murmured, placing my hands on either side of him, drawing in close until our breath mingled, "that it was Master Tuck who found me?"

"What?" Zane breathed, his eyelashes fluttering darting down to my lips before meeting my gaze.

"Oh, yes," I purred, straddling his lap where he knelt, my hands settling his shoulders. "You see, Tuck thought to use me to take out the competition and then the mages council, because he," I trailed my fingers along the side of his face, brushing my thumb beneath his eyes where bags had sunk in his skin, "he thought they were weak. That they were being too kind to the humans." I rotated my hips against Zane's, pulling a grunt from his lips.

"And he thought you would help him." His long fingers grasped my hips, not pulling me closer but not pushing me away either.

He hardened beneath me. I pushed down harder on him, grinding my core against him, his legs spread slightly pressing our cores closer together. I brushed my lips against his, not quite kissing him yet. "All of his research made him think I was some powerful mage who hated humans as much as he did."

"And you know what you are now?" His hands tightened on my hips, not just holding

me, but rocking against me.

My lips ticked up at the edges and then I gasped, a long moan escaping me. “I’m a queen.”

“What happened, Eva?” His hand held my hips, keeping me from moving against him. “You’re... different.”

My eyes lit up. “Am I?” I trailed my fingers down his chest, pushing my breasts up until they were pressed up against him. “Maybe I’m just becoming who I really am. Is that a bad thing?”

Zane’s hands cupped my face, his gaze searching mine. “Only if you’ve become a danger.”

I threw my head back and laughed. “Oh, Zane. I’ve always been a danger. Just not to you.” I leaned in to kiss him, but Zane turned his head from me.

“Do you hate humans, Eva?”

I licked my lips and pulled my lower lip between my teeth, hoping to tempt him back to what I was offering.

When he didn’t comply, I sighed, smoothing my hands over his hair. “My mother was human, and they killed her for it.”

“Eva. I don’t know what to say. And your father?”

I licked my lips again before leaning forward and nipping at his lower lip. “A mage.” My hand dragged down his front, playing at the top of his pants as we locked eyes.

He didn't stop me but leaned his head to the side, staring at me. "You must hate us very much."

I huffed a laugh before dipping my hand beneath his trousers, pulling his length out, hard and hot in my palm.

Zane sucked in a breath as I stroked him.

"Hardly," I murmured as I pressed my lips to his in a chaste kiss.

Lifting myself up, I let him feel how bare and ready I was for him. Desire pulsed through me. The combination of having everything I wanted in my grasp and, in no small part, just being with Zane had me more than ready to take the next step.

To my surprise, Zane stopped me. "Are you sure we should be doing this, Eva? We should tell the others. They'd understand if we just explained this all to them."

"I will," I promised, tightening my fingers in his hair. "But first, I want this." Capturing his lips with mine, I kissed Zane as if it were my last day on earth.

Our tongue tangled, all hesitancy in his movements quickly dissolving with each press of our lips. Zane helped me guide him to my entrance, our mouths breaking to breathe as I sank down onto him.

I sucked in a breath, acclimating to the size of him inside of me. His hands stroked up and down my sides, not rushing me until I was ready and I began moving.

Our eyes bored into each other as I moved on him, gasping and groaning with each movement. Zane's expression held so much awe and adoration that it made my chest tighten just a bit at what I planned to do.

“You’re so beautiful.” Zane kissed me again, his eyes closed briefly as he gave himself over to the moment.

Sliding my hand down his chest to the sigil tattooed over his heart, I waited for the inevitable.

Each time Zane’s demon took over, it was because he’s dropped his guard. While I could have accomplished this without bedding him, the desire to touch him, to have his lips against mine, gave me every excuse I needed to choose this way.

Zane’s eyes tightened and his brows furrowed for a moment before the hands on me became a bruising touch. His lips on mine turned brutal and violent.

Pain slashed through my lower lip, blood filling my mouth at the cut on my lip.

There he was.

Red piercing eyes bore into mine as Zane’s demon took over. His hand gripped the back of my neck, jerking my head back. “Now, what have we here? Who knew that our little pious cleric had it in him?”

“He cares for me.” I traced the lines of the sigil on his chest, moving my hips just a little faster to draw a moan from the demon.

The demon chuckled, his nails scraping against my throat. “Oh, little sinner. I think we both know he more than cares about you. Our little cleric is in love.”

“And you?” I leaned forward and teased his lips with my own. “How do you feel about all this?”

Suddenly, Zane pushed me back until I laid flat on my back. From there, he thrust

into me with a renewed force. “I think our little cleric needs to get laid more often if it lets me come out and play.”

“Good,” I moaned, taking everything he gave to me in earnest. Where Zane was all softness and love, the demon took me with a force that teased the line of pain.

Just what I wanted right now.

The hand on the back of my neck moved to the front of my throat, pushing down until breathing became worrisome. Still, panic didn’t settle in my heart. In fact, the more he tried to hurt me, the more I reveled in it.

After a moment, the demon pulled back, his brow furrowed once more. His hand on my throat loosened, and his thrusts slowed but didn’t stop. He grabbed one of my thighs and hitched it up around his waist.

“You’re different. Where’s that fear I so loved to breathe in from you? It was intoxicating, but this... is new.” He cocked his head to the side, pausing his movements. “Who are you?”

“Let’s play a game.” The vicious grin that covered my face made the demon frown. Pushing up onto my elbows, I stroked my fingers over his chest, playing with the edges of his shirt before pulling him down to my level so I could nip at his lip. “Do you want to cause a bit of.. chaos?”

A low growl came before his mouth descended on mine. Instead of just taking what I gave him, he grabbed at my dress, ripping the bodice until my breasts came free. His mouth moved from mine and dipped down to my chest, sucking and biting at my flesh.

Not one to let someone else have all the control, I grabbed the hand on my hip and

dragged it between us.

Those red eyes lifted from my breast to meet my gaze as I pushed his fingers against my core. I used him to stroke myself in hard movements that had me opening my mouth in a silent scream. My inner muscles spasmed, gripping around his length until his eyes flickered from red to hazel and back.

Before Zane could take over, I brought my lips to his ear, my eyes catching movement over his shoulder. “I need you to find some secrets for me.”

“About who?”

“The council.” I pulled back, now knowing if he heard me before Zane’s eyes finally shifted back to his own.

My gaze locked with Gage’s in the doorway of the chapel. My lips ticked up ever so slightly.

Zane jerked back into himself and looked at me, panic in his eyes. “Oh my god, Eva. I’m so sorry.” His gaze settled on my ripped dress and the bite marks on my breasts. “He hurt you.”

I cupped his face with my hands and drew him close. “No. No. He didn’t. Don’t stop.” I rolled my hips against him, squeezing him until the feeling of me around him overrode what his alter half might have done in his stead.

Kissing him softly, I rode him until his body tensed and he held me closer, groaning against my neck. “God, Eva. I can’t hold it.”

My eyes locked with Gage’s. He hadn’t moved from where he stood.

I bent my lips to Zane's ear and murmured, "You feel so good. Don't stop."

Zane thrust into me in rapid succession, chasing the end so near. My eyes stayed on Gage the whole time, my own release a slow ebb that wouldn't crest before Zane's.

But Zane surprised me. He reached his hand between us and pinched my clit, sending a shock of pleasure through me.

My head fell back, a long cry ripping from my throat. Zane groaned in turn, pulsing inside of me until he filled me with his release. His forehead pressed against my throat before he placed a soft kiss there.

"That was amazing. You were amazing."

I pressed my lips to his brow before locking eyes with Gage once more. "I know."

Gage's hands tightened into fists, and he stepped forward.

I'd gotten what I wanted and didn't see this going well if I stayed any longer. So I drew back from Zane and brushed my nose against his. "I'm not your enemy, Zane. Remember that."

Purple light surrounded me before I disappeared and reappeared back in my bedroom at Rebecca's house.

I collapsed back on the bed, my fingers trailing over the bite marks on my breasts. Only time would tell if my efforts had been wasted or not.

Though, at that moment, I couldn't imagine anything about what had just happened as a waste.

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I sat down at breakfast with Rebecca a few days later. I was itching for new information. For something, anything that would get us moving along.

“What have you learned?” I asked.

Rebecca poured me a cup of tea, already knowing how I liked it. While the men had gotten me turned on to coffee at their house, I was still partial to a good cup of tea. The blending of my old and new tastes made things interesting to say the least.

A black screen came to life as Rebecca tapped the screen. “I found out quite a few things. But I figured we could start with the basics.” She cleared her throat and scrolled the screen until she came to an image of one of the council members.

“I remember her.” I pointed at the older white hair woman. She’d sneered and snapped at me the whole time. She’d been worried whoever put me in the tower would come back. “She didn’t like me.”

“This is Healer Beatriz. She has been on the council the longest and has her fingers in all sorts of pots. Climate control, health care, international trade, the like.”

“And what does she think of humans?” I sipped from my tea cup, peering down at the disgruntled looking woman.

“She’s pretty neutral from what we’ve been able to tell. She doesn’t advocate for humans but also doesn’t always vote in favor against humans either.”

“So she’s unpredictable.” I pondered the woman on the screen. How could I get her

on my side? What was her weakness? “Do we know anything of value about her? Some dirty little secret she wants to keep buried?”

Rebecca’s lips curled up into a wicked grin. “Healer Beatriz has been seen frequenting a clinic an hour outside of the city. She does it under the cover of going to check out the new recruits. But in reality,” she flicked the screen over, showing the mage with bandages wrapped around her face, “she’s getting cell rejuvenation.”

“What’s that?” I tilted my head to the side and reached for a plate of fruit I couldn’t quite reach. Rebecca slid it toward me.

“It’s a procedure that reverses the aging process using human stem cells,” she said as she flicked her hair over her shoulder. As if what she just said was completely normal. “It’s an experimental procedure and completely illegal.”

My lips curved into a smile as I bit into the strawberry in my hand. I hummed. “That seems like something she wouldn’t want to get out to the public, now doesn’t it?”

“Most definitely.” Rebecca nodded before swiping across the screen once more. “Now, Sentinel Nickolai, he’s perfect for us. He’s pro-human and even sponsors a human outreach program that helps disabled and elderly humans who have found themselves without a placement.”

I was surprised to hear there was someone else that didn’t think humans were lesser and even went out of their way to help them. “And do you think he would help us?”

“I think we have a very good chance of getting him to look the other way when we finally make our move by simply telling him our plans for the humans.”

Bobbing my head, I sit my tea cup back on the table in front of me. I crossed my legs, my gown today more of a pale pink than purple, the shimmery fabric more fitting for

a ballroom than at breakfast. Yet, I couldn't find it in myself to put on something so boring and drab as the dresses I'd been offered when I first arrived.

"So we can skip him as far as intimidation or blackmail. What about that red-haired snake woman?"

Her nose scrunched up in disgust. "Oh, Conjurer Marisa. She's more animal than mage at this point and doesn't give two shits about human rights. I don't know much about her outside of her weird creature fetish. Most mages only have one familiar, maybe two if they're lucky, but Marisa has made conjuring and binding creatures to her a creepy crawly art."

Rebecca let out a shudder, her eyes closing briefly. I didn't want to think about what kind of creatures Marisa was into, and Rebecca's reaction told me I didn't want to.

"So we have nothing we can use against her?" I traced the rim of my tea cup with my finger, thinking on how to handle the conjurer.

"Unfortunately, no. My contacts couldn't find anything that wasn't already common knowledge. And, out of the four, she's going to be the hardest to convince... besides Cleric Jetta"

"Cleric Jetta?"

"He was big on human experimentation, though it's been outlawed for years now. I'm still looking into more information about his side dealings, but I wouldn't be surprised if he was still experimenting on humans in secret. It's just a matter of proving it."

I breathed heavily out through my nose and sank back in my chair. Two out of the three were going to be easy. Convincing someone to come to my side either by choice

or force wasn't something I hadn't had to do before. But, to get what I wanted, I didn't have a problem showing a little muscle.

However, the other two, Jetta and Marisa, were going to be a problem. I needed more intel on one and proof on the other. If Rebecca couldn't find the information, I would have to rely on the demon I had on the inside to get it for me. If he couldn't, I would have to move to extreme measures.

I wanted to let Adam handle it, but that would make me an optimistic fool. I was neither optimistic nor a fool. And, after hearing how Adam didn't trust me, I wasn't about to give him the benefit of the doubt.

"Rebecca?" I began, not sure how to ask this without being awkward. Rebecca has proven her loyalty to me many times now. It was leading me to believe I could trust her over those who I thought were on my side before. Now I was going to rely on that hunch to answer some questions.

"Yes, my queen?" I still couldn't get over the fact that this woman used to sneer at me and now gave me looks of awe and adoration every time she looked my way.

"You were Adam's lover before, right?"

Her face had a cautious yet intrigued look to it as she answered, "Yes, for a time. But not anymore, not for a long time," she quickly added.

I held a hand up to silence her. "I understand. You're not in trouble. I'm just trying to figure something out." I pulled my lower lip between my teeth and worried it, insecurity coming over me. It wasn't a feeling I was used to not since I was a child. "Why do you think Adam chose to pretend to be engaged to you, if he didn't plan on going through with it? I mean... it could have been anyone. Why you?"

Her mouth opened to answer.

“I mean,” I interjected, “no offense meant but, before I even knew you, I already didn’t like you. They don’t like you. So... why you?”

Rebecca’s lips ticked at the edges. “I’m not offended. I know how those guys feel about me.”

“Guys?”

“Men. Adam and the others.” Rebecca leaned against the arm of her chair and tapped her fingers on her lap. “If they hated me, it meant that my ruse worked. When Mara died, I ingratiated myself to Master Tuck and, to do that, I had to pretend to hate humans. To that end, I took on this persona.”

She laughed. “It was quite easy. I just watched the human haters that kept getting interviewed and copied them. They’re simple creatures, really. They see humans as lesser and act superior to everyone around them. When I copied them, you’d be surprised how easy people believed it.”

I hummed. I could understand that. I had to take on my own persona when I worked my way up to the king. Except I didn’t have to pretend to hate humans.

Back then, the mages were still in hiding. They already knew what I was, so hating my own kind wasn’t something I could just throw out there and be believed.

“You like Adam,” she said simply.

My head jerked to her, my lashes blinking rapidly. “Huh?”

Rebecca smiled a genuine smile at me. “It’s alright. I understand. I know what you

see in him. He's funny and kind. Yet he has a kind of domineering personality that you end up getting caught up in. It's the same thing I saw in him. Though, my reasons for dating him were not as pure as wanting to be with him."

The way she described him made it seem as if she actually knew him the way I did. My heart ached at the thought.

I knew it was unfair of me to blame him for being with someone before he met me, and yet, since he was engaged to her now, it only made me think maybe he still wanted to be with her. That the ruse wasn't as fake as he claimed it to be.

"Oh, but," she placed her hand on top of mine, "he doesn't feel anything for me now. Maybe this will help. When Adam approached me about the engagement, he made it very clear that it wasn't real. In fact, he was doing it all for you."

I glanced up at her, my heart pounding in my chest. "For me?"

Red hair bobbed up and down. She squeezed my hand with reassurance. "I had to promise to keep Master Tuck away from you in exchange for giving me my fifteen minutes of fame." She rolled her eyes and giggled. "That Rebecca wanted nothing more than all eyes on her and being engaged to the next Arch Mage? It was her ultimate goal."

"Oh." I cleared my throat, licking my lips. Part of me was thrilled that Adam had been thinking of me and yet, the other part was mad he didn't let me know what he was planning.

"Did something happen between you two?" Rebecca leaned forward. The eagerness in her eyes made me wonder if this was what it was like to have female friends. Something I had in short supply back in my time.

I drew my hand out from hers and wrapped it around my waist. “No. Not really. I mean, we kissed.”

“You kissed! That’s fantastic.”

My head shook fiercely. “No. Not really. He almost immediately rejected it. Said I couldn’t get in the way of what he wanted.”

Her mouth pushed out into a pout. “Well, that was jerky of him.”

I tapped my fingernails on the arm of my chair. “Yeah. It was.”

“Well, don’t worry about Adam. He’ll come around. I can see the way he looks at you. Who else would become fake engaged to someone he hated just to keep you safe?”

I nodded, not knowing what to say. Adam had things he wanted to accomplish, and those things didn’t include me. No matter how much he wanted to protect me, I couldn’t forget about that fact.

Besides, I had goals of my own, and those trumped any feelings I had for him or the others.

Nothing mattered but freeing the humans. Nothing.

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A few days passed before Rebecca came to me in a hurry. I turned my attention from the television where the reporter talked about the new bills Arch Mage Adam had proposed. They would give humans higher pay and more vacation time.

It was something but still not enough. An itch developed from the lack of movement. We had to do something now.

“My queen.”

“Eva,” I interrupted her. “You can just call me Eva. As much as I miss being called queen, it’ll be much easier to keep my identity a secret if you’re not calling me queen in public. Besides,” I offered her my hand from the couch, “I would like to be able to call you my friend.”

Rebecca tilted her head at my hand before taking it in hers, awe decorating her face. “I’m honored, my queen. I mean, Eva. I would be more than happy to call you my friend.”

“Good, that’s settled.” I lowered my hand down to fluff my skirts. “So what did you want to tell me? Hopefully something that will get me off this couch and actually doing something?”

“Yes, it is.” Rebecca moved to the side so I could stand. “We have substantial evidence on Healer Beatriz and are now ready to move on her.”

“When?”

“Today. Now.” Rebecca walked me from the living area to the front door. “My informant told me Beatriz would be home alone, recovering from one of her treatments. If you wanted a time where she was alone and vulnerable, this would be it.”

“Very well. Thank you.” Purple mist wrapped around me but, before I could disappear, Rebecca grabbed my arm.

“Wait.”

My magic settled back in place as I looked at her. “What?”

“Do you even know where you’re going?” Her words came out questioning, and yet there was still a tinge of fear in her. I didn’t want her to be afraid of me. I wanted a friend, but we might still have a way to go on that front.

I smoothed my hands down my skirt. “Actually, no. I don’t. Can you show me? Perhaps a map?”

Rebecca grinned. “Better yet, I’ll drive you.”

Nodding, I allowed myself to be led to Rebecca’s vehicle. A cherry red brick of a creation that would stand out in a sea of colors.

“Won’t this draw too much attention?” I asked as we slid into the seats.

My new friend shook her head, flicking a few buttons and adjusting the music that began to pour out of the cage like spots on the doors. “Not at all. There are a lot of cars out there with this color. If I’d gone with something boring and dull, that would have drawn attention to us.”

I hummed in response.

This new world was still strange to me. There were many hidden rules I didn't understand. Thankfully, I had Rebecca there to guide me, or I'd be completely lost.

We rode down the street with the music blaring. Rebecca swished her head from side to side as she sang along with the music. This was an entertaining side to her I'd never seen before. Maybe she was starting to loosen up now that I wanted to be her friend?

A female friend was still a foreign concept to me. Someone I could confide in and didn't want to bed me. Rebecca wasn't someone I had to manipulate or seduce. I could just relax with her.

I thought I'd had that with the mages who saved me. It had been so easy with them. So peaceful. While none of them had outright tried to bed me right away, it was hard for us not to grow affectionate toward each other.

When Luke kissed me the first time. I'd been surprised and yet not unhappy about it. Being with Luke wouldn't get me ahead in life. Being with any of them really wouldn't have put me further on my goal.

Only Adam would have helped me, and he had blatantly told me that I would be in his way. I wasn't sure there was a way for us to get around that. Our goals were the same, and yet our way of getting there was so different.

"We're here." Rebecca shifted a stick like object in the car, bringing us to a stop before a large building.

The amount of windows on it was indescribable. I didn't think there was ever a building in my time that reached the heavens quite like the way it did. If this was

where Healer Beatriz lived, she must have more power than I thought.

Rebecca placed her hand on top of mine, giving it a squeeze. “Hey, you got this. This will work.” A cream-colored envelope appeared in her other hand, which she offered to me. “Just show her the evidence and explain that she’ll be on your side when you make your move.”

“How am I going to find her in that vast castle?” My mouth dropped open slightly as I stared up at the innumerable stories.

Rebecca laughed. “She doesn’t own the whole building, though she does live in the penthouse.”

“Penthouse?”

“The top floor.” A button clicked, and my door opened. “Now get moving before someone recognizes you.”

I glanced down at myself and frowned. Rebecca had a point. Someone might see me. I closed my eyes and gathered my magic for a moment.

As I wrapped it around myself, Rebecca gasped. “Where did you go?” She reached out and touched my shoulder before letting out a little yelp. “I’ve never seen anyone do a cloaking spell like that. Your magic barely even flared.”

I didn’t know what to say. Being able to use and control my magic in the fashion that I did had always been an anomaly. It was one of the many reasons King Midas had been so anxious to have me as his queen. If he married me, he controlled my magic.

Or so Midas thought.

Mages with their humans in tow walked down the sidewalks, most of them with their noses in the air as if the very ground was too lowly for them to acknowledge. The surrounding buildings were just as large and intimidating as the one before me.

On my way into the building, it was becoming clearer that this part of the city was meant for the rich and prestigious. How far away was my mages' house from here? We'd driven quite a ways, so I knew that Rebecca didn't live in this part of the city.

I kept the cloak around me even as I entered the building. During this time of day, there weren't many people around the main floor. For a moment, I panicked. How did I get to the top floor?

My eyes darted around the room, searching for stairs. Eventually, I found a sign for the stairs and began to move toward them. Then a ding rang in the air. Turning toward the sound, I watched as the wall opened up, and two mages stepped out.

Curiosity getting the best of me, I stepped up to the wall and watched as the sides began to close. I reached out to touch them and then jerked back, but my touch seemed to open the wall back up.

I quickly jumped through the opening before it closed again.

I found myself in a strange chamber. Mirrors covered the top part of each wall, reflecting a shimmery blob of myself, the only visible evidence I was there. My eyes locked on a wall with circles, each with a different number on them. I cocked my head to the side. Were these the floors?

The numbers went from one to fifty and then there were three with letters on them. LL, L, and PH. Didn't Rebecca say something about a penthouse? Could the PH stand for that?

Before I could second guess myself, I touched the one with PH. It lit up, and the floor rumbled beneath my feet. I grabbed the wall, my eyes pinched closed as fear and uncertainty swept through me.

The rumbling was over before it barely had begun, and the walls opened with a resounding ding.

My hand on my racing heart, I pushed off the wall and stepped out. Air dragged into my lungs like painful knives daring me to go on. Why did I think I could do this on my own?

I'd stepped out of the transportation box and into a world of black and white. Everything from the floor to the ceiling was decorated in the monochrome colors. Deep black floors made me worry that the next step would be into a never ending abyss. The walls so white that it hurt to look at them straight on.

For a moment, I wondered if I was in the right place and then I came face to face with a large life size portrait of Healer Beatriz.

For a woman who used illegal means to stay younger, it only made sense she would idolize her own face in her home. It made what was coming both easier and harder. This woman was vain. So vain that she would do anything to keep her secret unknown.

Hopefully, she would be smart enough to take what I offered her. Otherwise, this might get bloody.

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Cloaking wasn't a complicated matter. It would hide you from prying eyes. However, if you wore a heavy perfume and stood close enough to someone, they might not see you, but they can smell you. That would lead to suspicion.

Animals were trickier to fool than humans. Most humans would rationalize away a strange smell or sound when their eyes said nothing was there.

Animals weren't so quick to leave it alone.

When I stepped into the main room, a growl came from my left. I froze, my head slowly moving to the side to take in the large black dog. Its mouth was open, showing off rows of fangs and slobber dripping out and splattering on the floor. Its sharp claws clacked on the ground as it stalked toward me.

The dog couldn't see me, but it knew I was there.

Now, in general, I don't condone hurting animals. They only did what nature intended or what their masters have taught them to do. It was hardly this dog's fault that their mistress was on my list today.

However, if push came to shove and I had to, I would put the creature down.

"Nice puppy," I murmured, pushing my magic into my voice. I'd never tried to use my powers of persuasion on an animal before. Most humans were easily manipulated, but a strong mind could hold out against my magical persuasion.

Here was hoping dogs were the same.

The dog cocked his head, his eyes dilating as he stared me down. The growling lowered slightly, but it didn't cease completely as the dog tried to decide if he wanted to let me into his mind.

I lowered myself down to his level and pushed honey and velvet into my voice. "You don't want to hurt me, gorgeous. I'm a friend."

The dog whined and pawed at the ground before shaking its head. Its lips covered its fangs once more as the dog padded toward me, offering me its head as it sniffed at me.

"That's a good..." I peered between its legs. "Boy. Yes, you are." He pushed into my hand while I scratched behind his ears and under his chin. "Now, where is your master?"

He yipped, which wasn't an answer. I turned to glance around the room, taking in the white furniture and the shiny black side tables. Did Healer Beatriz not know what color was?

A sound came from the back of the home. I released the cloak and kept my hand on my new companion. "Come on, boy. Let's go see your mama."

Now that my magic had sunk into the dog, he was fully under my control and would even take my side against his master. I didn't know if my magic would be able to overcome a creature's sense of self preservation, though.

I'd never tried to make someone kill themselves because I said so. However, there was always a first time.

My skirt swished across the ground, the dog's claws clicking on the floor beside me.

“Jewel, come here, boy,” a wavering voice called out as I drew closer.

To my delight, the dog at my side didn’t even budge to her call. I smiled down at him and patted his head. “Good boy.”

“Jewel?”

I let my fingers stay on the top of Jewel’s head as I stepped into the bedroom. The monochrome coloring had been applied to this room as well. Only a few items on her nightstand and dresser gave the room random splashes of color.

A large bed sat near a bank of wall-to-ceiling windows. The drapes were pulled so the room was steeped in shadows. A small figure laid in the middle of the bed, blankets pulled up to her chest.

“Jewel?” her voice croaked and then she jerked up in bed slightly. “Who’s there? What are you doing with my dog? Jewel, come here.”

When Jewel didn’t move from my side, my lips curled up in a coy grin. “I don’t think that will be happening, Healer Beatriz.”

“You,” she hissed, which turned into a cough. “What are you doing here?”

“I heard you weren’t feeling well and came to check on you.” I flicked my fingers, and the light beside her bed turned on. As I sat on the edge of Beatriz’ bed, Jewel flopped down on the ground beside me, head down on top of my foot.

Beatriz’ beady eyes narrowed on me. Her face was wrapped in bandages with tufts of white hair sticking out all over the place, a far cry from the sophisticated woman who had sneered down at me before.

I drew the envelope Rebecca gave me up and into my lap, pulling pictures out until they were spread out across her lap. “You see, I didn’t know you could use the parts of humans to make yourself younger. Back in my time, maintaining one’s beauty was far more painful and not as easy as a trip to a clinic.”

I pointed to a picture where Beatriz had clearly been trying to hide who she was, but wasn’t doing a very good job of it. The person who took the photo zeroed in on her face so it was clear who was in the photo, even behind the black glasses on her face.

“You don’t know what you’re talking about.” The mage sniffed and turned her face away from the evidence before her. “Get out of here before I sic Jewel on you.”

I giggled darkly, letting my fingers trail over the back of the large dog. “Now, let’s all be civil here. I haven’t offered you violence... yet.”

She gasped and clutched her bed sheets to her. “What have you done to my dog?”

“Oh, do not worry, I wouldn’t harm an animal. He’s perfectly fine and will be back to normal once I leave.”

“Arch Mage Adam is looking for you. Why aren’t you with him instead of terrorizing me?” Her eyes filled with real fear now that she has realized she didn’t have her guard dog to protect her.

“We’re just having a conversation here. You’ll talk to me, won’t you?” I offered her a saccharine grin.

“What do you want?”

“I’m so glad you asked.” I scooped closer to her, a feeling of glee filling me at the prospect of getting what I wanted. “I’ve been... educated about how your little

council works and, well, getting the approval of four unknowns isn't exactly how I work."

Beatriz snorted. "I would think not. Your actions at the ball have shown that you are a volatile variable. No one would just let you do what you want."

"Precisely." My smile broadened. "I'm so happy we understand each other."

The long sigh that came out of Beatriz showed her age, even if her face didn't. "I'm assuming you want me to agree to whatever it is you're after in exchange for keeping my secret." She flicked her hand toward her face.

"And here I thought you were going to be difficult." My head cocked to the side. "I had prepared to have to get a bit more aggressive but, while it may seem like I want to cause others harm, it's really not on my agenda or something I enjoy."

"I hardly doubt that."

The lethal look I gave Beatriz made her flinch. "As you know, I'm human, at least partly. I want to improve the lives of my fellow humans. While I've been told this isn't something that can happen overnight, I think we can make my dreams come true much faster than Arch Mage Adam thinks."

The disgusted noise that came from her made my jaw clench. "So, you're behind the new bill suggested about humans."

"Not exactly. Arch Mage Adam wants to do things the right way..." I trailed off, lifting my hand a flicker of fire came to life on my hand. My insides squirmed with excitement as Beatriz flinched back. "Now, I'm not too inclined to wait for a bunch of mages with an exaggerated degree of self-importance to tell me the right time to give up power and realize that humans aren't lesser than you."

“You don’t know how they were before. You weren’t here.” Beatriz leaned forward to argue, then jerked back, remembering the fire in my hands. “They almost destroyed this planet. If we hadn’t taken over, there wouldn’t be a planet to even live on.”

I let the flame bounce in my hand, rolling it over my fingers and letting it dance. “As I’ve been reminded ad nauseam, not all mages are bad, and neither are all humans. So, to punish all of them for the few that cannot control themselves isn’t quite fair, now is it? Or do you think differently? Maybe I should punish all the mages?”

“N–no.” She shook her head weakly. “I agree. Not all humans are bad nor all mages. We can live together in harmony. But...”

“But what?”

“We only control Neo New York. We don’t control the planet. Even if you make things better for humans here, there will still be pushback from the other regions. They might even send in someone to deal with the problem.”

The way she said it made me wonder how exactly the mages’ government was set up. If this council dealt with this region, that lead me to assume there were others.

However, was there someone above all of them? A King? A Queen? Someone who made all the rules and made the others follow them? It was something I would have to talk to Rebecca about, because I didn’t want to show all my cards to this one mage.

“Let me worry about that.” I gathered up the pictures and put them back into the envelope. “Here, for you.”

Relief bloomed in Beatriz’ eyes, and I was swift to shoot it down. “Don’t worry, we have more. I expect to have your backing when the time comes.”

“Of course, yes. I understand.”

I stroked my hand down Jewel’s back one more time before standing.

“There will be others who won’t be as easily persuaded,” Healer Beatriz cautioned. “I’m too old to fight for something I don’t even care about. But others, like Carisa and Jetta, won’t give in just because of some veiled threats and blackmail.”

The smile on my face wasn’t a pleasant one before I let my magic wrap around me. “I’m counting on it.”

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After checking back in with Rebecca, I wondered how I would approach the other two council members. If even Beatriz was warning me to be careful, I had to take them seriously.

That meant I needed more information.

I could visit Zane again and see if my demon had any information for me. However, Gage had caught me last time and, while he didn't do anything, I didn't want to take the chance. They all knew I'd visited the twins and Zane, so they'd be looking for me to come back to see them at some point.

The fact that I hadn't visited Gage yet might have been lost on them, but the Sentinel wasn't someone I could trust to hear me out. His suspicious and cautious nature made him a danger if I didn't know for sure that he was on my side.

Walking over to the desk in my room, I found a scrap of paper. I lifted what I thought was a writing utensil and scribbled out a note to meet me at my tower at midnight. Then I spelled it so that only the demon side of Zane would be able to read it. I twisted my wrist and the paper disappeared.

My eyes drifted to the nearby clock, sighing with impatience. Now we waited.

The hours ticked by at an excruciating pace. Rebecca came in and out, offering me options to pass the time or to give me the latest news. For a short time, I sat with her and watched the same drama Luke and Blake loved. It made me homesick, so I excused myself to go back to my room and wait.

The majority of me knew I was doing the right thing. For the humans and for justice for my mother.

However, another part of me wished I could go back to when I'd first been rescued from my tower. I could just be with my mages and not have all these extra complications getting between us. While I had Rebecca, I couldn't help feeling lonely.

Finally, the time came and I could make my way to Old Central Park. I wrapped myself in a long black hooded cloak, pulling it up over my blonde locks to hide my identity.

I didn't tell Rebecca where I was going. Not that I thought she would stop me. If anything, she would have encouraged me to find out everything I could to reach our goals.

However, meeting Zane's demon in the middle of the night could turn into a different kind of meeting than she'd expect. I didn't want her to think that I was letting them influence my actions.

My magic placed me in the tree line across from my destroyed tower. Stepping out from the shadows, I made my way over to it, staring down at the broken pieces of my past. A thousand years and it had all been reduced down to rubble.

Smoke tickled my nose, and a burning cigarette fell at my feet. I stepped on it, putting it out, and turned.

Red eyes bore into me beneath Zane's brows. His glasses tucked into the front pocket of his shirt, the demon wearing Zane's body stalked toward me.

I drew my cloak further around me, peering up into those demonic eyes. "Do you

have what I asked for?”

“What?” His lips curled, flashing Zane’s canines. “No hello kiss?”

I grabbed the cross hanging from his neck and jerked him toward me. My mouth crushed against his for a brief moment, just long enough for him to try and deepen it before I pulled back. “There. Now, talk.”

“I see what this is, you’re just using me for information. Luring me in with the promise of violence and then using me to get what you want.” He grinned maliciously, chuckling. “I love it.”

“Good, now spill.” I poked him in the chest. “What do you know about Cleric Jetta and Conjurer Carisa?”

“You should just kill them. It would solve your problem, and we wouldn’t have to do all this complicated stuff.”

I trailed my fingers up his chest, my voice coming out into a purr, “But then we wouldn’t get to meet up like this.”

He clasped my hand gently, leaning his forehead toward mine. “That’s true.” He grabbed the back of my neck in a painful squeeze, my hair tangling in his fingers, jerking my head back. “Maybe I should just kill you then?”

I laughed and grinned up at him. “Now where would the fun in that be?”

“Well, the unending pain it would cause the cleric would be plenty of fun for me.” His other hand wrapped around the front of my throat, not squeezing while making the threat clear.

His nose brushed against mine, and I lifted slightly to nip at it. “Harder.”

The demon threw his head back and laughed darkly. “You are one fucked-up human. Fine. Fine.” He released my throat and stepped back. “We’ll do it your way... for now. I don’t know much about the conjurer, but Jetta, the naughty boy, has a warehouse no one thinks he owns where he does his experiments on humans.”

Anger built in me. The bastard wasn’t just talking about cutting me open to study me. He was actually already doing it to others.

Suddenly, the demon’s idea to just kill him wasn’t looking so aggressive. Maybe I’d do a bit of experimenting myself and then the mage could see what it was like to be under the knife.

“I don’t know what you’re thinking about, but I can feel the bloodlust from here and it’s getting me hard.” The demon dragged me against his front, grinding Zane’s length against my stomach. “I need to have you again. Right now. While you’re still thinking about blood and violence.”

I put my hands on his chest, pushing at him. “No. Not while you’re in his body. Not without his permission.”

My moral compass may not go north, but there were some things I wouldn’t do. I cared about Zane, and the thought of using his body without his knowledge made my inside squirm.

The demon growled against me, his teeth clenched. “Then just let me taste you.”

Those red eyes burned me, making my clothes feel tight and itchy against my body. The next thing I knew, one word came out. “Okay.”

He swirled me around, pushing me back into the tree line. My back scraped against the bark of the tree. He knelt before me, and my pulse ratcheted up.

The sight of Zane kneeling before me the way he did when in his chapel made me clench my thighs together. I knew it wasn't Zane and yet, my mind couldn't separate the two of them.

"You smell so good," the demon growled, pushing my skirt up until the cool air brushed against my center. "I can't wait to have you in my mouth." His nails dug into my leg as he threw it over his shoulder, eliciting a sharp pain.

"Just a taste. If you take flesh, I will rip you out of Zane, shove you into a tiny box, and throw you into the ocean."

"Oh, please, sinner. Talk dirty to me." He buried his face between my legs, latching onto my clit without warning.

I screamed before shoving my hand over my mouth.

"Don't hold back," the demon snarled. "I want to hear those pretty screams."

His lips wrapped around my clit once more, sucking and pulling on it until I bit into my hand, the tang of my blood filling my mouth. The moment the demon scented the blood, he shoved a finger inside of me.

"Fuck, sinner. If I were in my true form, I'd rip you open with my massive cock and bathe in your blood until you begged for mercy."

"Stop talking." I shoved at his head, forcing his mouth back where I wanted him. "You wanted a taste, now lick me like you mean it."

If I could say one thing for the demon, he knew how to work a woman's body. I wasn't sure if that was concerning. How many women did he seduce as a demon? Did he use Zane's body for it? If so, did Zane know?

Jealousy and rage filled me. My hand tangled in his hair, thrusting my hips against him.

His fingers curled inside of me, hitting a spot that made my eyes roll back in my head. I cried out as liquid gushed from me.

I didn't care who heard me or that I was making a mess. I hoped it covered him in it, marking Zane and the demon as mine.

My leg dropped, and the demon lifted his head to meet my gaze. His tongue peeked out to lick my essence off his lips as he grinned up at me. "I know what you're thinking, little sinner."

Breathing heavily, I cleared my throat and straightened my dress. "I doubt it."

Standing, he leaned over me. Putting one hand on the tree behind me, he brushed my lips with the same fingers that had been inside of me. "I'm going to make sure that the cleric wakes up to find your smell all over him. You're going to be on his tongue, his lips, burrowed into his skin. I want him to know exactly what I've been doing with his body while he was away."

"You're seriously fucked up." I couldn't hold back the grin that took over my face. "Now, go find out something about the conjurer and, if I need to kill her, I'll be sure to let you know."

He sucked on his fingers, still grinning down at me. "Oh, I'll be counting on it."

Zane walked away without a goodbye, a slight swagger in his step. I sank against the tree, my face hot and my legs wobbling enough that I wasn't sure I would be able to move any time soon.

A twig snapped.

My head jerked toward the sound, pulling my cloak tighter around me.

Gage stepped out of the shadows, his mask covering half his face. His arms crossed over his chest, pulling his shirt tight against his large muscles. The ones in his arms flexed deliciously.

I snapped my mouth shut and cleared my throat. "Gage, what are you doing here?"

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Gage stood there menacingly in the shadow of the trees. The presence of the demon was nothing compared to the Sentinel before me. My back sank against the tree. I didn't trust my legs to work yet, and I definitely didn't need the glowering mage knowing that.

"I knew something was going on with Zane when I caught you in the chapel the other day."

My eyes narrowed at the accusation in his voice. "What is that supposed to mean?"

"You know." He stepped forward. That one step forward had more violence in it than the whole of what the demon said to me mid-oral. "I knew you were a manipulative bitch from everything Zane had learned about your history, but I didn't think you would go so far as to fuck him without his permission."

Before I was irritated. Now, I'm pissed.

"How dare you!" I shoved myself off the tree and stalked toward him, ignoring the twinge between my legs, a reminder I would have of my time with the demon for days to come. "I love Zane. I would never take advantage of him like that."

"Then what did I see in the chapel? You were just fucking him because you loved him?" Gage stopped in front of me. "Or did you not use him to get to the demon, so you could have him do your dirty work?"

"I will have you know I could have gotten the demon to do my bidding without sleeping with Zane." I wagged my finger at him. "And way to be judgmental. Don't

you basically kill people for the council? How is that any better?"

"That's different."

I snorted. "How exactly?"

"It's my job." He grabbed the finger in his large grasp. "Stop with the finger."

I tugged on my finger, lifting the fireball I formed in my other hand. "That doesn't make it any better."

His grip tightened until I winced. "Drop the fireball or I'll break it."

I seethed. "Make me."

Without warning, Gage had my arm twisted behind my back, pulling it until I yelped. He grabbed a handful of my hair, jerking my head to the side. "Drop it."

Teeth grinding, I extinguished the fireball. "Fine. Let me go."

"Not yet," Gage growled into my ear, his hot breath brushing my face. "I want to make something clear. We are not your toys to use for your little vengeance plan."

I struggled against his hold, my head bumping back against his chest. "I'm trying to do what's right. You're the ones getting in the way with your stupid rules."

"Those rules are there to keep people, like you, from taking over and becoming a tyrant." Gage yanked on my hair to emphasize his point. "I won't let you ruin us because you don't have any patience."

"Ruin you?" I squawked. "Ruin you? You trusted me enough to show me your face,

and now I'm going to ruin you?"

"I showed Eva my face. Not you." His mask pressed against the side of my face. "I don't know this rage-filled woman who threatened Healer Beatriz and somehow convinced that demon to help you take down the other councilors. She, I don't know."

Gage put pressure on my arm, and I winced. "Gage, I'm still Eva. I'm still that same woman you saved from the tower. I'm just the queen, too. We are the same person."

I felt his head shake against me. "No, you're not."

"Gage," I lowered my voice, pleading with him. "Please let me go. I'm not what you think I am."

His hand loosened on my arm for a moment before he stiffened, putting the pressure back on until I cried out. "No, this is exactly what you did to Zane. To the twins."

"The twins?" I frowned, trying to angle my head to look at him. Pain shot through my scalp. "I didn't do anything to Luke or Blake."

"You fucked them, didn't you?"

I sagged against him, no longer fighting against his hold. "I wasn't using them if that's what you think. They caught me practicing with —" I caught myself before I told him about Rebecca.

"With who?"

My lips pinched together.

Gage spun me around, finally releasing my arm and hair, they tingled where the blood came rushing back in. He cupped my face with both hands. “Who is helping you, Eva?”

My eyes locked on his piercing gaze, stubbornly holding my tongue.

He leaned down until he was an inch from my face. “I will find out, Eva. You need to stay away from them... us.”

“You’re banishing me?” I gaped at him. “Are you so afraid of what I’ll do, you don’t want me around?”

Gage released me suddenly, my legs wobbled beneath me. “Until you can control yourself, yes. You need help and, since you refuse to let us help you, just stay away.”

“You can’t keep me away.” I snapped at his retreating back. “Even if I didn’t show up, you all would find me. You can’t help yourself. You love me.”

Suddenly, he was there in front of my face again, a hand on my throat. “Let’s get something straight, princess. Those weaklings might believe your ruse, but I don’t. I do not and will not ever love you.”

He shoved me away so hard that my knees buckled. My butt hit the ground so hard that my teeth chattered. My fingers curled into the ground, ripping up the grass beneath my fingertips.

When Gage was safely gone from sight, I let out a rage-filled scream. Power shot out of me, burning the surrounding grass around me.

If that ass thought he could control me, then he has another thing coming. I wouldn’t be controlled. What I was doing was the right thing. Why couldn’t he see that? This

world had become too reliant on their rules. How dare he judge me? I was a queen, and I would not be collared.

Gage would be back. He could say what he wanted, but he couldn't stay away from me.

I'd make sure of it.

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The next morning, I sat at breakfast with Rebecca, pouring over a map of the city through one of her tablets, as she called it.

“There are hundreds of warehouses in the city,” Rebecca began, tapping on something that made red dots appear all over the map. “Where did Zane say that it was?”

I sipped from my tea cup and sighed, “It’s the demon, not Zane. I’m not sure Zane even knows what’s going on though, if Gage caught me last night, I’m sure he will be more than delighted to let Zane know all the horrors I’d been doing.”

Rebecca peered up at me silently.

I sniffed and glanced away. “Don’t look at me like that. It’s not like I took advantage of him. I’m simply using what’s at my disposal.”

Rebecca arched her brow.

I sat my cup down with a loud clunk and huffed. “Fine, yes, I feel guilty about using Zane to get to his demon. But I didn’t have much of a choice. Adam wouldn’t listen to me, and the rest of them all do whatever it is Adam does.”

“I’m not judging.” Rebecca held her hands up in defense. “I’ve done all that and more to get where I am today, sitting in front of you.”

Rubbing between my brows, I squeezed my eyes shut for a moment. My insides were all mixed up. The old me wouldn’t have thought twice about using Zane to get

information. The sweet innocent Eva would have balked at it. Since I was now somewhere in between, I did what I had to do, but it came along with a heavy dose of guilt.

Breathing in deeply, I blew it out and turned back to the map. “He didn’t say which warehouse, only that it was on the outskirts of town.”

“Alright.” Rebecca pressed something, and the red dots disappeared so only those around the city were visible. “I’m assuming it won’t be so easy as to find the warehouse owned by Cleric Jetta?”

“I doubt it. He will likely use an alias to cover his tracks with human experimentation being illegal. He wouldn’t want it tracked back to him.”

My mind drew up the image of the Cleric from the last time I’d seen him. Back then, I was just scared, memoryless Eva, cowering before the mage council like they had my life in the palm of their hands. Cleric Jetta had looked at me like he wanted to know what I looked like on the inside. I wasn’t a person to him. I was something to cut apart and put back together as he saw fit.

No doubt he had many humans locked up in his warehouse of horrors.

“Well, I’ll gather the list of warehouses and have my people do a deep dive into who owns which. Hopefully we won’t have to wait too long to find the bastard.”

My ears peaked at her words. “Your people? You keep mentioning having people. Are these rebels, mages, humans? Can you trust them?”

Rebecca stood as the doorbell rang somewhere in the house. “A combination of the three. Some are rebels, some are just sympathetic to our cause. Many of them want to see the world become better, not worse, and know you are the only way to do it.”

“So they know about me?” I wasn’t so sure that was a good thing. The more people who knew about me, the more likely someone would find where I was hiding and try to stop me.

“Yes, but only the minimum amount of information. Hold on.” She rushed off in a flurry of skirts toward the increasingly obnoxious ringing of a bell.

My fingernail tapped on the glass table while I waited for her to return. If these rebels or sympathizers knew about me, maybe it was time to meet who was working with me? If I planned to take the ruling position here in Neo New York, I should know my people and what they wanted, right?

I ignored the nagging part of me asking if I even wanted to rule. The aspect of ruling over everyone seemed taxing, and I’d been fighting for so long. I just wanted revenge for my mother and freedom for the humans. Did that mean that I had to be queen or whatever the equivalent it would be now?

Unfortunately, I didn’t have time to think about it. Rebecca approached with four familiar figures behind her. I shoved to my feet, the tea sloshing over the sides of its cup at my sudden movement. My hands flexed by my sides, unsure if I would be attacked or not by the visitors.

“What are you doing here?” I tried to keep my voice neutral as I surveyed Luke, Blake, and Zane. Hidden behind the three of them was a surprising person, Sentinel Nickolai. The young dark-haired mage kept his expression unreadable as he lingered behind the other three.

Rebecca took her place by my side, clearly drawing a line between us and them. “They claim they’re here to talk, and that’s it. They wouldn’t tell me how they found you.”

I nodded, lacing my fingers in front of me to calm the jitters in my hands. “So? How did you find me?”

Luke gave a sheepish grin. His hand dashed through his messy mop of white hair. “Uh... Gage put a tracker on you last night.”

My brows furrowed. “A tracker?” I swept my magic over myself, finding no trace of a magical tracking device.

“An electronic one,” Blake clarified, his furry little sidekick nowhere to be seen today. It didn’t bode well for how this meeting was going to go.

At my puzzled expression, Rebecca huffed. “I’ll be right back.” She hustled out of the room, tossing me a wary look over her shoulder.

I let my gaze move over them, not having seen any of them since the time we had been intimate. The twins didn’t seem any worse for wear. If anything, they were standing stronger than ever. A small part of me hoped it was my doing.

When my gaze bounced over Zane, I swallowed thickly. I couldn’t meet his piercing hazel eyes behind his eye wear. I had the urge to wrap my arms around my waist and hug myself but, with the council member present, I couldn’t show weakness. “What do you want?”

It was Zane who spoke this time. His voice soft, like a caress against the side of my face. “Gage wanted to come himself, but we convinced him not to.”

“Why?” I finally forced myself to look the Cleric in the eyes. The judgement and accusation I thought I would see in those eyes was nowhere to be found. They crinkled slightly at the edges, his lips lifting on one side.

“We had a better idea. One that Adam and Gage don’t necessarily agree with.” Zane stepped up to the table, a hand on the back of a chair. “May we?”

I shrugged, settling back in my own chair. I swiped my napkin across the table, cleaning up the spilled tea from before. “I’d offer you some tea, but I’m not sure you would take it.” My eyes were on the council member and not on the three men who had touched and claimed my body not too long ago.

Sentinel Nickolai smiled, tilting his head slightly like a cat might do. “You don’t seem the type to poison someone to get what you wanted.”

Once again, I shrugged. “I’m not a hundred percent sure what’s off the table at the moment. I’m having to rely on more aggressive measures to get events moving the way I want them to.”

The council member inclined his head, a solemn look on his face. “That’s what I’m here about.”

This time, I let my lips spread into a wide grin, mischief filled my face. “Do you wish to be the next of my victims, council member? I never thought one of you would come to me for a house call. I thought I’d have to chase you all down like strays.”

Nickolai laughed. “No, no. I’m not here to fight you. I... we...” He gave a pointed look at the twins and Zane. “We agree with you. While Arch Mage Adam has good intentions, he’s an idealist. He thinks that we can just talk it out and reach a willing compromise. Push this bill here, pass this proposal there, and get what we all want.”

“And what is that?” My gaze stared at him from over my tea cup lip. “What do we want?”

“The humans freed, of course.”

I studied the council member for a moment. Nickolai had been the one voice of reason among the four other members. He'd been the one who spat on Cleric Jetta when he talked about his experiments. Something inside of me told me I could trust him.

My eyes wandered to the twins for a moment, watching them for any sign that what the mage before me said was false. Blake only stared at the table, while Luke gave me an encouraging thumbs up. I resisted the urge to smile back at him, when I searched out Zane's gaze.

I needed to talk to him. Not just about this, but about what Gage had surely told him I was doing with his demon. Zane pulled his long red braid over his shoulder and inclined his head toward me as if to say it's my choice.

Nice to know someone thought I got one.

Clearing my throat, I focused my attention back on the council member. "Alright, Nickolai, tell me what you think I should do?"

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Before Nickolai could reply, Rebecca hurried back into the room with a flat clear disc in her hand. “Here it is.”

My lips pulled down into a frown at the disc and the interruption. “That’s a tracker?”

“Yes,” she breathed heavily as if she had run to get back to me. “It’s magically undetectable so you wouldn’t have even noticed it unless you knew what to look for.”

She held it out to me to inspect. “I suggest we destroy it though, I suppose the queen is out of the bag so to speak.” Rebecca’s eyes swept across our guests with a haughty air.

Blake snorted. “I do not know if it is a relief that the woman we knew as Rebecca is a fake or to be worried that you were able to fool us so easily.”

“You got that right,” Luke jumped in, eagerness making his hair bounce slightly. “When Gage said you had Eva, we were completely blown away. I couldn’t believe it. None of us could. Like, of all the people in all the world, you would have been the last person we would think was hiding our Eva.”

My heart warmed and sank down to my toes at how easily he claimed me as theirs. “Believe me,” I murmured, letting my appreciation for the woman who saved me flow through my eyes, “it was a surprise to me too.”

Rebecca ducked her head to me. “Should I?”

I waved a hand for her to go on.

The disc dropped to the ground and met with the heel of Rebecca's stiletto. A small crack filled the air and then the disc was destroyed.

"Well, that's covered. No one else will be able to use it to find you. You'll have to figure out what to do about them," Rebecca tossed a hand at our guests, "and the others know about us. Perhaps we should move?"

I leveled a look at the mages who had done more than save my life. They had filled it with more than just revenge. "No, I think we can stay. They won't tell."

The amount of love that came barreling at me from all three of them almost knocked me out of my seat. I hadn't said the words but I felt them. Was it nice to get a big declaration of love? Yes. However, just them being here, showing up for me, said far more than words ever could.

"Before we get into what Sentinel Nickolai thinks you should—" Zane began, pulling his glasses off to clean them.

"Call me Nick. Nickolai is so formal." The council member crossed his leg over one side, leaning back in his chair. "If we're going to start a rebellion, I think we can at least drop the formalities."

My lips twitched. "A rebellion, huh? Alright, Nick. Zane?" His name came out of my mouth like a prayer, like a plea for him to forgive me.

"Nickol— Nick." Zane cleared his throat. "Would you and Rebecca give us a moment alone?"

Rebecca exchanged a look with me and then gestured to the council member. "Have you seen my garden, Nick? It's absolutely breathtaking."

She looped her arm through Nick's and led him out of the house, leaving me alone with the three mages who had found a place in my heart.

"Eva." Zane took up the chair Nick had vacated, placing him close enough to reach out to touch my hands. "About what happened last night and, I suppose, the other day as well..."

"Look, Zane." I sighed, slipping my hands out from his. "I don't know what Gage told you—"

His lips curled up into a wicked grin. It startled me enough that I searched his gaze for the telltale signs of the demon in his eyes. Except only Zane looked back at me.

"Gage didn't have to tell me what happened, Eva." His tongue swiped out across his lips and my face heated at the implications. "I could taste you on my tongue. I just wanted you to know I'm not mad."

I arched a brow and glanced over at the twins. Who only watched in silence. "You're not? But I used you to get to your demon."

Zane chuckled. "Yes, you did. And initially, I was angry. Only because you were putting yourself in danger."

"I wasn't in danger. I can handle him."

The smirk on Zane's mouth made me want to kiss him. "Yes, I gathered that. In fact, it seems the demon is quite taken with you. He hasn't acted up ever since that time in the chapel. If anything, he keeps pushing me to see you." He angled his head to the side, letting his hair fall partially over his face.

"Oh," I breathed. "Oh!"

The demon in Zane hadn't seemed too upset that I called upon him last night. Now, after what Zane had just said, it made more sense that he hadn't tried to give me as much grief as before. It definitely tipped the scale in my favor to know the demon actually wanted me.

"Eva." Zane scooted forward in his seat, his knees bumping against mine. "You have no idea how much relief you have given me."

I stared at him.

"I've been terrified the demon would come out and hurt you or worse." His fingers rough against mine, stroked along my knuckles. "I've always held myself back from getting close to anyone because of the demon. You have dashed all those worries and fears away in a span of a few days. I can't tell you how happy that makes me. And as far as taking advantage of me..." he smirked, side-eyeing the twins. "You have my full permission to use whatever part of me you want as long as it keeps that demon happy and off my case."

"But..." I stopped, opening and closing my mouth, getting myself together. "I don't understand. I was using you to get information about the council. Doesn't that bother you?"

Zane shrugged. "You didn't have to fuck me to get the demon on your side and yet you did. That means something doesn't it?"

I licked my lips, the sound of the prim and proper cleric saying fuck, made my insides twist in delight. "He told me... that you were in love with me?"

The fear that welled up in me. Hearing the demon say it was one thing. Actually, hearing Zane say it was another.

Zane cupped my face between his hands, his eyes peering into mine. “Eva, I love you. It may be too fast for others. But not for me. I love the sweet shy Eva. The one who kissed me in the kitchen and blushed furiously about it.”

I giggled slightly.

“And I love this version of you. This confident ‘takes what she wants, fighting for those who can’t’ version. The version who literally battled my demon for me.”

Blake snorted.

I gave him a curious frown.

“I don’t know if letting him bed me counts as battling him.”

Zane grinned that wicked smile of his.

“And,” Luke interrupted before Zane could go on, “not to piggyback off of Zane’s confession, but... Blake and I... well...” his face turned beat red, his golden eyes blinking up shyly at me. “We love you too.”

My eyes locked with Blake’s single golden one.

Blake didn’t shy away from the full force of my stare. He nodded. The only confirmation that what his twin said was true.

Well, it wasn’t a declaration like Zane’s, but it did answer some questions that had been bothering me. If the old me had known that one day not one, but three, mages loved me, I think that she might destroy everything in sight.

Standing, I moved into Zane’s grasp, sliding into his lap, my arms around his neck as

I peered down at him. My mouth brushed against his pursed ones. "I love you, Zane."

Zane pinched my chin between his fingers and deepened the kiss. His tongue stroked and folded with mine until my body heated and I squirmed. Too soon the kiss was over.

I swept out of his lap and moved around the table. My hand curled into Blake's hair, tipping his head back to me until my lips found his. Blake nipped and bit my lips until my knees grew weak.

"I love you, Blake." I breathed against his lips.

Before I barely moved away from Blake, I was jerked by my dress and landed in Luke's lap. I laughed, my hands on his chest. "Well, hello."

Luke wrapped an arm around my waist, cupping my face before devouring my lips. My hands delved into his hair, holding him close, my body catching on fire as it molded against his chest.

Zane cleared his throat, chuckling.

Breathless, I pulled away from Luke. My lips were swollen and sore. "I definitely love you."

Luke squeezed me closer with a dark chuckle, the aftereffects of our kiss evident against my butt. I wiggled against it slightly. Luke groaned, filling me with a feminine satisfaction.

"This isn't going to start being a competition between who loves me more, now is it?" I glanced between them barely restraining the lust in my face. "Because I would be okay with that."

The male laughter that followed made my heart swell. This moment was perfect. Or almost perfect. I tried not to let the disappointment of who was missing ruin this moment.

“Now, that we have that settled.” I shifted to move out of Luke’s lap, but he held me tight. “You’re going to have to let me go eventually.”

Luke’s boyish grin was contagious. “Not if I can help it.”

“Yes, well, it won’t look too queenly, me sitting in your lap when talking to Nick, who’s coming this way with Rebecca.” I pointed toward the open patio door.

His hands smoothed up and down my back, his other hand creeping up my exposed leg.

I grinned, pushing his hand away as I stood. “Stop that.”

Rebecca arched a brow at me, taking in my disheveled form.

I ignored her and focused on the council member that could be the very turning point of this battle.

“Eva,” Nick began and paused, a quizzical look on his face. “Or do you prefer Your Majesty?”

I waved him off. “Either is fine. Please have a seat, and we can talk all about our revolution.”

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Rebecca led us all from the sitting room to the living room. Apparently, Nick had something to show us on the television. I hoped it would help me figure out what to do about Gage and Adam.

Though my heart felt full and on the cusp of bursting from the trio's declaration of love, it put a gulf between us and Adam and Gage. I didn't want to be responsible for breaking their group apart, but Gage's words last night were vivid in my mind.

I do not and will not ever love you.

The rage and disgust on Gage's face churned something ugly inside of me. Was I ruining them? I glanced around the room at three men who had rallied to my cause. Were they here because they wanted to be or because of their love for me?

Nick said they agreed with me. But did they really? Did they think Adam was being too idealistic? I was definitely the more pragmatic out of the two of us. I only wished Adam could see it my way.

Gage, on the other hand, should have agreed with me. Out of all of them, he has the most blood on his hands already. Was it simply out of loyalty to Adam and the council that he stands against me? Or was it something else? He had finally started to open up to me before. He'd even let me see his face.

And yet...

He couldn't come to terms with the fact that the Eva they saved and the Eva I am now was one and the same. The mage was stubborn, and it would take nothing short of an

act of God to get him to change his mind.

Shoving those thoughts away, I focused on Nick. “What did you want to show me?”

Nick found the controller for the television and pushed a few buttons before a news channel appeared. The date and time in the corner showed it was from earlier in the day. My brows furrowed as Adam appeared on the screen with one of those sticks pointed at his face.

“Arch Mage Adam,” the reporter called out. “Is it true that you and Rebecca have called off your engagement? Can you tell us what happened?”

A small gasp escaped before I could hold it in.

Rebecca placed a hand on my shoulder from behind the couch I sat on. I glanced up at her, questions whirling through my mind. I didn’t voice them now, but she certainly knew there would be an inquisition later.

“Unfortunately, it is true. I’m sorry to tell you but there was no big scandal. We both want different things, and I still care for her very much and wish her all the happiness in the world.”

Nick pushed a button, and the video of Adam sped up until it started playing normal again. I barely could pay attention to it, my heart thumping in my ears.

Adam broke the engagement. Or maybe Rebecca did? Either way, he wasn’t attached to her anymore.

Elation filled me. A desire to run to him, kiss him, beg him to help me wrapped around my every thought. Then a hand on my thigh, squeezing slightly drew me back down to earth.

I glanced over at Luke, who smiled in understanding. His fingers traced a path up and down my thigh. Blake, on the other side, held my hand firmly with his own. The small brush of his fingers against my wrist made my pulse jump.

“Pay attention to this,” Luke murmured into my ear, gesturing with his free hand to the television.

Zane sat on a chair to the left of us, his eyes softening as he took us in before turning his gaze to the television as well.

A new reporter was speaking this time. “You have just stepped into your role, and yet you are pushing for a bill that many would say is a radical change in our way of life. Do you think that you are, as some are saying, pushing for too much too soon? What would your grandfather think of this new path you are trying to set the council on?”

The condescending tone to their voice as they spoke to Adam set my teeth on edge, my fingers tightening around Blake’s. He squeezed back, grounding me to the couch in that moment, keeping that rage inside of me from becoming all encompassing.

Adam ran his hand through his spikey, ash blonde hair and then stopped, as if remembering where he was, who was looking at him. “My grandfather has long believed that we need change. The balance of the human-mage alliance has teetered for far too long toward the mages, and I believe that we are ready to release the reins.”

The reporter coughed to cover a laugh. “It doesn’t seem like the other council members agree with you. A three to two vote. Ouch. How will you convince the others that it's time to change?”

“It will take time, but I believe we will get there if we have the patience and drive to do it.” His eyes locked on me through the screen, as if he were saying those things

directly to me.

Three to two? My insides seethed.

I was up and out of my seat before either twin could calm me down. “I’m going to kill her.” My hands flexed at my side, burning magic seeping out as my rage boiled to the surface.

“Eva,” Luke began, crossing the room to stand near me but not touching me. I didn’t blame him, I’d likely burn the whole house down with how pissed off I felt right then. “It’s alright. It’s just a small setback.”

I turned my glower on him, my words stumbling from my mouth in a torrid wave of vitriol. “I knew she was being too agreeable. I should have sic’d her own dog on her, let him chow down on her face. Then see if those fancy treatments could fix her mangled face.”

Luke continued trying to soothe me, his words nothing but noise in the face of my blood pumping in my ears.

If I’d been in my right mind, I would have thought about what Nick would think of me now. He’d been on my side as soon as he stepped into Rebecca’s house. Would he backtrack his support after seeing me lose control like this?

Zane’s voice, but not Zane’s, pulled me from my tirade of murderous thoughts. “I wondered how long it would take you to stop trying to please them.”

My glare landed on the demon, his red eyes burning through Zane’s as he pulled a cigarette out of his coat, perching it between his lips.

“Don’t smoke in here,” Rebecca snapped, snatching the stick from his mouth before

he could light it.

The demon snarled at her.

“Don’t,” I snapped, dragging his attention back to me. “Behave or I’ll make you leave.” I flexed my fingers in his direction.

Unsurprisingly, the demon laughed. “Oh, don’t threaten me with a good time, sinner.”

“Is this the demon inside Cleric Zane?” Nick’s voice quizzical but wary. “I’ve never met him before.” Nick glanced in my direction. “You’ve encountered the demon before?”

My rage lost its blunt edge as it focused on the demon in the room. Something that I could hurt. Something that wouldn’t break if I did. “Yes, we’ve had the pleasure.”

I knew the words were the wrong thing to say the moment they came out of my mouth. The demon licked his lips, eyes burning into me. “And it was delicious.”

My face burned, the memory of last night making my insides clench. “If you want it to happen again, you will be useful to the conversation, not a threat.”

“He’ll always be a threat.” Blake’s purple eye peeked out beneath his black hair, glowing faintly.

Leaning toward Blake, the demon snapped his teeth in his direction. “That’s right, conjurer. I’ll rip into your flesh and feed on your organs the moment you look the other way. Then that little hell hound of yours will be dessert.”

Sighing, I stalked over to Zane and flicked the demon in the forehead, sending power

down where I touched him.

“Fucking hell’s balls, what the fuck was that for?” the demon howled, claspings the spot on his forehead where it burned a faint orange.

“I said behave. I have enough to deal with without you threatening the only mages on my side.”

“Well,” Nick lifted his hand, a sheepish expression on his face, “not the only ones. That’s what I also wanted to talk to you about.”

“Hold on a moment.” I turned back to Zane’s body, glowering down at the demon. “Can you behave, or do I need to send you away?”

His hand shot out, grabbing me around the waist before pulling me into his lap, his hand sliding up the inside of my thigh through the slit in my dress.

“Oh, I’ll behave alright,” he breathed into my ear before a shudder went through him. Zane froze beneath me, his eyes flickering back to his natural green brown hue. “Eva, I... sorry... the violence you were emitting summoned him. I couldn’t hold him back.”

“It’s fine.” I didn’t move from his lap, his fingers flexing against my inner thigh. “He just likes to cause chaos. But I’ll stay here just in case he decides to come back, if that’s okay with you?”

Zane inclined his head, not lifting it to meet the eyes of everyone else in the room. The cleric might have come to terms with his demon, but he still seemed to hold some sort of shame in losing control of him.

I wished I could help him, but this was something Zane had to fix on his own. I couldn’t make him change his outlook on his demon. Only he could do that.

Shifting my attention back to Nick, I waved my hand magnanimously. “Please continue. Tell me how the mages in this room aren’t my only allies. Because all I want to do right now is hunt Beatriz down and show her I don’t make idle threats.”

It was Rebecca who spoke this time. “As I mentioned before, there is a group of mages who have been fighting to give humans the same rights. Even more humans have been joining the group now that word has gone around about you.”

“They know about me?” I arched a brow, forcing back the shiver that Zane’s fingers were causing as they slipped up and down the line of my thigh.

“Yes.”

“But not enough of them,” Nick interjected. “This has been long in the making. An underground chain of mages and humans working together to break the chains of the power the mages have held onto beyond what was necessary.”

My fingers curled into the blood red locks at the base of Zane’s neck, anchoring myself as I took in all this new information. “How do we spread the word then? If they know about me and what we are trying to do, will they stand up with us? Force the council to change?”

“You.” Nick pointed at me. “You’re going to tell them you’re here. You’re going to make the world see you and see us. That we aren’t going away. That we won’t stop until the humans are given the same freedoms as the mages.”

I leaned into Zane’s body, a hum of excitement zipping through me. “And how am I going to do that?”

“You just continue doing what you planned to do. Beatriz, Jetta, and Carisa are probably going to be collaborating together now. Which means they’re going to be

ready for you. And you're going to give the world a show."

The hand on my waist tightened almost painfully. Red eyes burned through hazel, his lips ticked up into a wicked grin.

My heart beat in time with Zane's, rearing with excitement together for what was to come.

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Darkness fell by the time we finished discussing our plan. It was extreme. Something I wouldn't have done in the past. Back then, I worked behind the scenes, manipulating everyone and everything around me to get what I wanted.

Except this was the future.

Nick made a good argument for being visible with my actions. I had to let the humans and the mages know that I was fighting back. I had to rally the people. Give them the courage to fight back too.

The worry about how the rest of the world would react added an additional factor.

If the people were behind us, if what we did was shown to the rest of the world, the hope was that other areas would follow our example. That we would be the match that started the fire. While it wasn't quite the bonfire I had imagined to get back at the mages, it was something.

Something magical.

Rebecca went to bed with a promise of discussing what happened with Adam later. The sly gleam in her eyes told me exactly what she expected to happen when she was gone.

"So I suppose you're going to go home now?" I sighed, leaning against Blake's shoulder, my hand holding Luke's on my other side.

Zane pushed his glasses up his nose. "It would seem suspicious if we didn't come

back.”

“You could,” Luke squeezed my hand, “come back with us.”

I lifted my head from Blake’s shoulder and scoffed. “Gage wouldn’t like that. He made it clear he didn’t trust me or want me near any of you.”

Blake turned, pinching my chin between his fingers. “We won’t let him hurt you. It’s not up to him whether we spend time with you or not. He doesn’t control us.”

My body warmed at his protectiveness and, my lips curled at the edges. I placed my hand on his, pulling him closer to me. My voice went low, seductive. “Please. Stay.”

A low growl rumbled from Blake. Then his lips were on mine. I pressed up against him, his hand in my hair, and he sucked my lower lip into his mouth, dragging his teeth across it until I moaned.

Consumed in the kiss, I briefly felt Luke’s fingers stroke up and down my hand before placing it on his lap.

My fingers wrapped around Luke’s hard length, rubbing and stroking him through his pants. He thrust up into my hand, his other hand trailing through my hair as I kissed his brother. The hand on my face slid down, brushed against my cleavage before dipping beneath the neckline of my dress.

I gasped into Blake’s mouth, his hand cupping my breast, thumb brushing over my hard nipple.

A long drawn out groan came from Zane.

My eyes crept open, sliding over to the cleric. They moved over his face, his glasses

fogged up as he breathed heavily, his hand moving slowly up and down his cock. My hand tightened on Luke, making him grunt.

I couldn't pull my eyes away from Zane's movements, tracking his hand as it moved up and down, squeezing the top in a twisting motion, forcing glistening liquid to drip out.

Blake growled into my mouth, which had grown passive while I watched Zane. Without warning, Blake dragged me away from Luke and onto his lap, pulling my legs on either side of him.

My aching core pressed against the hard ridged length of him beneath his pants. My hips rocked, and we both moaned. Blake's mouth captured mine again, his hands going into my hair as he ravaged my mouth.

Something tugged on the back of my dress and loosened it. Hands trailed over my shoulders, sliding down to my chest where my dress had dipped. They cupped and molded my breasts in their hands, pinching my nipples until I gasped and bucked against Blake.

Dragging my mouth away from Blake's, I leaned back to find Zane's face close to mine, while Luke's hands pulled at my dress until it pooled in my lap. Blake gripped the fabric in his hands, pulling my hips down as he ground against me.

"Off," I gasped into Zane's mouth, pulling at my dress. I wanted skin against skin. I wanted to touch and take and taste. I wanted it all.

Riiiiip.

I didn't know if it was Luke or Blake who ripped my dress before they jerked it off my body and threw it somewhere in the living area. I didn't care because the moment

I was bare, hands and mouths roamed over my skin, setting me alight with need.

It still wasn't enough.

Naked. They needed to be naked. My skin felt tight and sensitive, craving the stimulation of their skin against mine.

Without asking, I pushed on Blake's coat, pulling it off his shoulders. My eyes shifted over my shoulder to silently command Luke and Zane to do the same.

That one hot look from me was all they needed. By the time I had Blake's top bare and was unbuttoning his pants, they had quickly discarded their clothing and were pressed up against me once more.

If having them all together with me at once bothered them, they didn't say. It hardly crossed my mind to ask with how overwhelmed I was.

Blake's cock bobbed as it popped out of his pants, long and hard between my thighs. Two others pressed against my back, and I wasn't sure how I was going to take them all at once.

They must have had some silent conversation without me, because they lifted me off Blake's lap as they maneuvered us around. Blake laid out on the couch, his hands moving me until I knelt over his face.

"I need to taste you," he murmured against my folds, pushing me down until all my weight sat on him.

My nails dug into the couch arm as I rode his face, his tongue lapping at my clit in a maddening rhythm that had me writhing.

“Let’s get you good and ready, gorgeous,” Luke groaned in my ear, his fingers pressing inside of me. “I want to take that luscious ass of yours this time.” He split between fucking me with his fingers and rubbing my juices around my back hole. After a few moments, he went further by pushing one finger into me.

I gasped and pushed my butt back toward his fingers. While I’d had plenty of sex before I was locked up, no one had ever wanted to touch such a forbidden place. The idea thrilled and terrified me. Each new touch was another thing that stroked that queenly ego inside of me.

“Eva.” Zane’s voice was low and full of desire. His thumb traced over my lower lip. He stood before me bending over so he was sharing breath with me. “This mouth. I’ve dreamed of this mouth every night since we saved you.”

My mouth parted, tongue sneaking out to wrap around his thumb, drawing it into my mouth. I sucked it deep, keeping my eyes locked on Zane’s the whole time.

Blake scraped his teeth against my clit, making me groan around Zane’s thumb.

“Fuck, Eva.” Zane licked his lips, standing fully until his cock bobbed in front of my face. “Take me in your mouth. Please.”

Hearing Zane beg for it shot me over the edge. My mouth opened wide, releasing his thumb with a pop.

Zane brushed the tip across my lips, painting them with his cum. I lifted my hands to grab him, but he pulled back. “No. Keep your hands on the couch.”

Luke pressed another finger into my back hole as I brought my hand down, slapping it against the couch, my fingers digging in. It burned, but my orgasm had ebbed and another one had begun to crest.

The tip of Zane's cock pressed into my mouth, stroking it back and forth across my tongue. I closed my mouth around him, sucking him into my mouth further.

"That's it, beautiful," Luke murmured from behind. "Zane feels good, doesn't he? I know something that will feel better. Blake." I groaned; the licking stopped. "Zane."

"No," I whimpered as Zane pulled away from my mouth.

"Don't worry." Luke kissed my neck, pulling me away from the edge of the couch. "We're going to give you what you need."

Luke drew my hips back until I sank back onto Blake's length. I moaned, dragging my hands down Blake's chest, riding him while Zane brought his cock back to my mouth.

Hands in my hair, he fucked my face in tandem with my movements. It wasn't until Luke lined up with my back entrance that I tensed.

"Shhh," Luke cooed, his hand brushing down my back. "Relax, just feel." His tip pressed against the tight ring, thrusting just the tip in and out of me. "You're taking us so well. Isn't she, Zane?"

Zane thrusted fully into my mouth until I gagged, tears trailing down my cheeks. "You look so pretty right now."

I swallowed around his tip, making Zane cry out.

"Do that again," Zane begged.

I didn't get a chance to do what he wanted before Luke pressed all the way inside. I swallowed involuntarily before gasping.

Full. I felt so full. Like I could be ripped in half, except I didn't care. Having all three of them in my body right then and there felt right, felt so good. I couldn't imagine stopping now.

"Look at our queen taking us all at once," Luke grunted, thrusting into me. I cried out around Zane length. "You're loving this, aren't you? Having us all crawling to be inside of you, to just be by your side. You want Adam and Gage here, too, don't you?"

My mind swirled thinking about how I could possibly take the other two mages who had somehow captured my affections. Even with the angry words Gage had spewed at me, I wanted him. I needed him inside of me. That face he kept covered all the time scrunched up in ecstasy.

Just the thought of it sent me over the edge, squeezing around both Blake and Luke until they both grunted and tensed against me. They filled me until it was dripping down my legs.

Zane wasn't too far behind. His breathing increased, and he thrust into my mouth faster and faster until he cried out, releasing down my throat.

I swallowed over and over. Still some of it dribbled out of the sides of my mouth.

He sighed and drew back, brushing his fingers along the sides of my mouth.

Luke pulled out and nipped at my shoulder. "You did so well. Fuck, I wish I had recorded this."

"Perv," Blake grunted, his hands stroking my sides.

I giggled and then groaned, Blake softening but still inside of me.

“The demon didn’t come out this time,” Zane mused, almost in wonder. “I don’t know how I kept him back.” He smiled down at me, cupping my face. “But I know it’s because of you.”

I sank down on top of Blake, laying my head on his chest. His heartbeat beating rapidly against my cheek. “Hmmm. Maybe he was entertained enough not to interfere.”

Luke stood and dragged his pants on. “We should test that theory some time. See what exactly will make him come out.” He pulled his pants back on, buttoning them.

I pouted at the loss of skin. “You’re leaving?”

“We have to.” Blake stroked my back, his fingers trailing a path up and down making me tingle all over before he kissed the top of my head.

I turned my head, sitting my chin on his chest. “I know, but it doesn’t mean I have to like it.”

He gave me a genuine smile. “You’re right, you don’t.”

“None of us like it, Eva.” Zane sighed, it was long and full of sadness. He’d already put pants back on. “We want to be here with you. To stay by your side and watch you change the world. But first, we have to go back. We need to get Adam and Gage on your side.”

I knew he was right. I didn’t like it. But I understood.

Now all I could do was continue forward with the plan. Adam and Gage would come around eventually. I hoped because that’s all I could do.

I clung to Blake, the last one who hadn't moved to leave. My eyes burned with emotion. I didn't want them to go. I didn't want them to—

The doorbell rang.

A voice came through the system. A voice I had craved to hear ever since I watched the news interview. A voice that made my heart race.

“Eva? Eva, please, let me in. I just want to talk.”

My eyes darted to the others. “Adam.”

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I scrambled off of Blake, searching the ground for my dress. Lifting it to cover myself, I grimaced at the ripped shreds of my dress.

Zane draped a black coat over my shoulders. I glanced up at him, his features serious, all evidence of what we had just done erased from his face. A softness returned to his gaze as he looked down at me.

“It’s up to you.”

I buttoned his coat, covering my nakedness before nodding. “Let him in. We should at least hear him out.”

Luke headed for the front door. I swept around the room until I found a tall-backed chair to sit in, crossing one leg over the other to hide my lack of clothing.

Zane sat on the arm of the chair, drawing my hand into his lap where he laced our fingers. Fully clothed, Blake sat on the ground by my feet, his arm wrapped around my leg, his fingers trailing a liquifying path up and down my calf.

Normally, when faced with an opponent I meant to intimidate with my presence, I would’ve made my mages keep their hands to themselves. In the past, I was strong on my own, I didn’t need anyone or anything.

Now, I welcomed their presence. Their touch grounded me, and their blatant display of whose side they were on warmed my heart.

I could still taste Zane on my tongue. Blake and Luke’s release still decorated the

inside of my thighs, pooling beneath me on the chair. I wiggled slightly at their cooling essence. I'd need to bathe soon, but I wanted to sit here before him with his friends' cum in and on my body.

Even if he couldn't see it, I wanted the reminder that they had me and he didn't.

The door burst open, and there was a low murmur of voices before boots clacked on the wood floors. Adam appeared in the doorway of the living area, Luke trailing after him. Adam's eyes searched the room before landing on me.

Those mahogany eyes traced over my body, taking in every aspect, Zane's jacket, my bare skin peeking through the folds, their hands on me, before sniffing the air. I expected anger or at least jealousy from him at the obvious stench of sex in the air but, if anything, Adam's eyes filled with sadness.

Luke placed himself at the empty side of me, behind his brother, his fingers finding their way into my hair, stroking it in long, soothing motions. I kept a hand free in case I needed to defend myself. I didn't think I would, but I couldn't be too careful.

It was a miracle Rebecca hadn't woken because of Adam. Or the woman knew to give us privacy. Either way, I was happy to not have to face her and Adam together. Even if they were broken up officially, a small kernel of jealousy still lingered in my chest.

"Adam," I greeted, keeping my tone flippant. "What do we owe for this late visit?"

The Arch Mage visibly swallowed, licking his lips before stepping forward. "I didn't know you'd still have company." His eyes darted to the other mages at my side. "Though I'm not surprised. I figured they weren't coming here to bring you back."

My lips tugged at the edges. "No. They didn't, and I wouldn't come back anyway.

You and Gage have made your positions quite clear.”

Adam winced. “I know you’re angry at me... and Gage. He’s just trying to protect us.”

“And I understand that. The only ones I want to suffer are the mages who are responsible for my people’s suffering.”

He tousled his hair before looking off to the side. “And I suppose I’m one of those people.”

“Are you?” I canted my head to the side. “You might not agree with my methods, but you are trying, Adam.” I said his name softly, earning his gaze on once more. “It’s not your fault that the other council members don’t share your compassion for the humans. Besides Nick that is.”

Adam’s brow lifted. “Nickolai was here?”

Zane squeezed my hand, urging me to continue.

I was sure they all wanted Adam and me to make up. I wanted it, too. I wanted him by my side, but there were things we just weren’t going to agree on. Humans were one of them.

“Why are you here, Adam?” I asked, not answering his question.

If my intense gaze bothered him, Adam didn’t show it. He hadn’t even brought out his little book, which was as intriguing as it was confusing. What was he thinking?

“I wanted to be the one to tell you,” he began, his hands shoving into his pockets. “I meant to be here earlier, but my meetings took longer than I expected.”

My lips ticked. “If you’re here to tell me about your engagement, I know.”

Adam’s eyes locked with mine, his eyes searching my face for my reaction to the news. When I didn’t elaborate, he moved further into the room. The others tensed, not moving from my sides.

“I’m curious, though. Did you end it, or did it take Rebecca to make you finally put an end to the facade?” I shifted in my chair, uncrossing and recrossing my legs.

Blake shifted with me, his hand moving slightly higher.

Adam’s gaze dipped down at my movement, and a tortured longing filled his face. His mouth parted to speak, his eyes shuttering his emotions. “She did.”

His words pierced my heart, and it took a moment to regain my breath. “I figured as much. Your position is far too important to you to let anyone get in your way. You probably would have gone so far as to marry her, if it meant keeping that big fancy Arch Mage title.”

“It’s not like that and you know it,” Adam snapped, finally letting go of that carefully constructed cage he had on his words. “Ask any of them. All I’ve talked about was ending things. I agonized over how long it would take, how much I hated that I hurt you, and how I couldn’t be there for you. You don’t know how much it killed me to watch them take you away and then come to find out that, not only was Rebecca working for the rebels, but she was housing the woman I loved.”

I didn’t blink. I didn’t dare to breathe. My fingers tightened on Zane’s, unable to make myself believe what Adam had said.

“It’s true.”

Finally remembering how to breathe, I glanced up at Luke, who peered down at me with a soft smile. “He was insufferable the entire time you were gone. I almost wished for him to shove his face back into one of his stupid smutty books.”

Lips brushed along my ankle and up my calf, leaving a trail of fire in its wake. “He kept secrets from all of us,” Blake murmured against my skin.

“He was trying,” Zane added, his thumb smoothing back and forth over my hand. “You should have seen him after you showed up giving him an ultimatum.” He gave me a wicked grin that looked more at home with the demon’s face than his. “Jealousy is very becoming on you, apparently.”

“I don’t need you to defend me.” Adam crossed his arms over his chest and glared. “I told you it was for show, and I was going to end it eventually. Rebecca just beat me to it.”

I leaned my head against Zane’s arm, feigning boredom. “Rebecca’s loyalty is stronger than yours, it seems.”

“Loyalty?!” Adam bellowed, his eyes burning with anger. “You speak of loyalty as if everything I’ve done has not been for you.” His steps brought him just shy of Blake’s bent leg.

“It was me who kept Master Tuck from scaling that tower and taking you then, in the hospital when he tried to take you away from us again, I stopped him. Not to forget when I stood up to the council when they wanted to lock you up for testing. You have thrown everything into a tailspin the moment we rescued you from that tower, and I have been scrambling to keep you safe. Is that not loyalty? Am I not worthy of your trust?”

Before I could respond, a dark chuckle from my right filled my ears. Zane’s hand

released me, his eyes burning red as he pulled off his glasses. “Worthy of her trust? That is a funny one, mage.”

Adam glowered at Zane’s demon. “What do you know about it, demon?”

The demon reached across and dipped his hand into the top of Zane’s jacket. He took a moment to trace my breast with his nails, flicking my nipple before digging into the inside pocket. He withdrew a cigarette and brought it to his lips, lighting the end with Zane’s magic, or was it his magic?

Either way, he took a long drag before staring Adam down. “Have you done all this for our little sinner or to assuage your own guilt?”

My gaze bounced from the demon to Adam and back. Even the twins had questioning looks on their faces.

Adam’s jaw clenched, his hands dropping to his sides in tight fists. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

A sense of dread prickled along my skin. “What are you talking about?”

The demon grinned with uncontained glee as he breathed out a long line of smoke. “Our boy here didn’t rescue you from the tower just to keep Master Tuck away from you.”

It was hard to swallow around his words. I knew whatever it was he was going to say would break my heart, and I didn’t want to hear it. But I had to know, as much as I dreaded it.

Adam and I had a push and pull between us since the very beginning when he first found me. A part of me thought we would get past whatever was keeping us apart.

That part waited with bated breath for the demon to shatter me.

“You don’t know what you’re talking about,” Adam growled a warning. The very sound sinking in, creating another fracture in my heart.

“Oh, you were playing the long game, of course,” the demon purred, leaning against me as if we were just chatting about the weather. “What a spectacular actor you are to pretend like you didn’t know that tower was there this whole time.”

I swore even my heart froze at his words.

Luke’s hand paused on my head. Blake’s fingers tightened on my calf. It was as if all the air from the room had been sucked out of it, waiting for those damning words to be spoken.

Adam’s eyes fell on me, regret and guilt raced across his expression.

“Adam?” That one word made my voice crack.

“When my grandfather told me about our ancestor’s journals, I never believed they were real. Not until the tower appeared in Old Central Park. I knew that, if the journals were true, I couldn’t let Master Tuck get a hold of you. You have to understand the way Snow described you...”

He shook his head, his eyes filled with emotion. “I thought I was going in there to kill a monster. One who was not only a threat to me, but to everyone.”

I could hardly breathe as he spoke. That crack in my heart splintered deeper and deeper with each damning word.

“Then I found you. You were so beautiful. So innocently happy just to see our faces,

and I knew..." He fell to his knees and reached for my hand. I pulled back, barely restraining the tears that burned in my eyes. "I knew that whatever you did or didn't do, you didn't deserve what my ancestor did to you. I couldn't leave you there, let alone let Master Tuck have you."

"I lied, yes." Adam continued, not seeing how my world was falling apart. "I lied to all of you. I don't know how Rebecca or Master Tuck found the journals. No one knew about the journals but my family, and they were only known to us as a warning in case you ever broke free."

"Eva..." He tried again.

The desperation on his face would have broken me, would have made me kiss him and forgive him for all that he had admitted to, until he uttered those last words.

"I wanted to protect you. From this world, even from yourself. I knew there was no way this beautiful creature could have done those horrible things, and I couldn't bear to see your past-self tearing you apart."

He continued to make excuses, to tell me how much he loved me, but I could barely hear it over the thundering of my pulse. All the hope and elation I felt about Adam breaking up with Rebecca, chasing me down here, and trying to make things right disintegrated into hot molten rage.

My hands curled around the arms of the chair, digging into the fabric of the furniture. "Protect me? You wanted to protect me?"

"Yes," Adam breathed, hope filled his gaze. "Eva, please, tell me you understand."

"Yes," I drew out, a malicious smile curling up my face. "I understand perfectly. You wanted to protect me. Except you can't, Arch Mage. You can't protect me, because I

don't need protecting. You can't protect me anymore than you can protect those sniveling, power-grabbing mages you bow down to on the council. You should have taken your ancestor's warning to heart, because I'm not some innocent little damsel in distress. I'm the Evil Queen and I won't let anyone stand in my way."

I leaned forward, tipping his chin up with my finger. "Even you."

Adam clasped my hand firmly. "Please, Eva. Don't do this."

I shook my hand free, releasing myself of him once and for all, even as my heart screamed at me to stop. "For all that you have done in the name of protection, I'll give you this chance to walk away."

"Eva," Luke murmured, stroking his hand down my arm. "Think about this."

Blake silently stroked my leg once more, but even I could feel the hesitancy in his movements.

If Zane was there, I was sure he would have advised me to be cautious, to think this through thoroughly before I did something I would regret.

Except I couldn't. I couldn't think past the sight of Snow before me. Her descendant. Her legacy. Adam lied to me, used me, made me fall in love with him. All things I might have been able to forgive, but I couldn't forgive the blood running through his veins.

I knew it was hypocritical. I was doing the exact same thing that the mages did to the humans. And yet, I couldn't find it in me to care over the rage and despair that tangled in my heart. I could offer him the only mercy I could give him at that moment.

“Leave. If I see you again, Arch Mage, it will be as enemies.”

Adam’s face fell, his heartache so palatable that it almost reached through my own turmoil. He pushed up to his feet and adjusted his coat, before nodding his hair falling over his eyes.

For a moment, I wanted to tell him no, stop, I didn’t mean it. But I had my pride.

Pride was a nasty thing that would destroy even the best of people. Pride made me let him walk out that door. The sound of it shutting destroyed my already splintered heart.

Zane’s demon turned to me in the remaining silence, grinning with unfiltered delight. “You’re right, this was fun.”

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The next few days were a blur. My goal was well in hand, and yet I could barely bring myself to care. I laid in bed, staring off into space, my eyes puffy and red from finally letting myself break down after the others left.

They'd tried to talk to me about what happened. They felt just as betrayed as I did, but I couldn't just forgive Adam the way they could. They'd known Adam longer, loved him like a brother. They would get over it.

If it had just been the lying, I might have been able to forgive him eventually. I told myself that I shouldn't punish the child for their parents or, in this case, their ancestor's crimes.

Yet this dark ugly ball of hate in my very being couldn't separate the man I'd fallen in love with and the very symbol of my hatred.

A thousand years. A thousand years, and Snow White still held onto the power she'd stolen from me. It might not be in the same kingdom, but somehow, they'd still found a foothold in the new world. A new place for them to conquer and mold for their own selfish purposes.

I sometimes wished I'd never left my tower. If I could, I'd put each brick back up until I could climb back inside of it and pretend like this never happened. That I hadn't fallen for my enemy and then had my heart ripped out in the end.

Except I couldn't and wouldn't. I might not have Adam, but I wasn't alone. I still had Zane, Blake, and Luke. They loved me as much as I loved them, and I wouldn't give up that feeling for anything in the world.

They'd been giving me space while we waited for the designated day for our final stand. They still needed to keep up appearances, or someone would get tipped off about our plan.

Rebecca and Nick had taken to pulling all the stray pieces together. Gathering the rebels for more protests. Making sure that the press would know where to be when it finally came down to it.

This would be the final spark that would ignite the world into change. Nothing could go wrong. Which meant, I needed to pull the pieces of my broken heart back together and be the leader that they all wanted.

Rebecca left food for me each day on the side table. I'd pick at it, forcing myself to eat though my stomach rolled with each bite. I didn't have time to be heart broken. I needed my strength for what was coming. So I forced myself to eat, to bathe, to dress, to move around the room.

Then the day finally came.

Everything was coming to a head. Everything that I ever wanted and desired would be accomplished tonight. I just had to keep my head straight and not let what happened with Adam frazzle me.

There were people depending on me. I wouldn't let them down. I wouldn't let my mother down.

"My queen?" Rebecca knocked on the door, before pushing it open. "Are you ready?"

I glanced over myself in the mirror, searching for any hint of weakness.

The makeup Rebecca had taught me to use covered up the bruises under my eyes from lack of sleep. The red lipstick was stark against my pale skin. We'd decided to leave behind the crown and majestic dresses for something more modern that would make the masses think I was one of them and not some foreigner coming to conquer their city.

The pants suit was unlike anything I'd ever worn before. The pants clung to my backside and thighs, flaring out as it hit the knees in a pale shade of violet. We left my chest bare under the jacket, and the buttons starting just below my breasts made the look feminine and yet powerful.

The high heels she paired with the outfit were three inches and, while normally I wouldn't care, I worried that, if tonight's event went wrong, I wouldn't be able to run away.

Still, I trusted Rebecca to know what kind of statement we wanted to make and wore them.

I breathed a heavy breath, before turning to her. "This will work."

Rebecca inclined her head. "It will. It has to. If it doesn't..."

"No." I shook my head, approaching the door. "We can't think about second chances. This will work. We have to keep that in mind. We have no other option."

"Right." Rebecca gestured for me to exit the room first. "Your chariot awaits, my queen."

"Eva," I reminded her with a smile.

"Right, Eva." Rebecca returned my grin as she rubbed her hands up and down her

thighs. She was nervous. We all were. We couldn't afford to fail this.

Unfortunately, we were relying on a lot of unknown variables to strike this revolution into a full movement. Every piece had to be perfectly in place, with me creating the biggest spark.

It was a lot of pressure, pressure my still tender heart didn't want to deal with. Still, I shoved down my emotions and made myself put one foot in front of the other.

I could have teleported to the warehouse, but Nick wanted to go over some final details on the way. I stepped into the car waiting in front of the house. Rebecca sat in the back with me, while Nick drove.

"Is everything in place?" I asked the mage, my eyes staring out the window as the scenery passed by. My hands were slick with nerves, and I resisted the urge to wipe them on my pants. I had to be perfect tonight and sweat stains wouldn't make the statement we wanted.

Nick looked in the mirror above his head, meeting my gaze as he drove. "We have tips being sent out to every reporter and news station in approximately twenty minutes. Once they hit, you will have only about fifteen minutes to do what you have to do before the place is swarming with them."

I swallowed the lump in my throat. "I'll be ready."

"Eva," Nick started, his eyes flicking between me and the road. "If something goes wrong..."

"It won't," I clipped. I couldn't let even the possibility slip into my mind or we were all lost. Just the slightest slip-up and not only could I be locked back up or worse, but so would Rebecca, Nick, and all those who supported us.

Zane, Luke, and Blake were going to meet me there, coming in as surprise back-up when I faced down the three council members. Nick had found out they were meeting in secret at one of Cleric Jetta's warehouses.

The fact that all three of them already knew about his experimentation made me wish I'd just killed them all when I'd had the chance.

Instead, I'd tried to be diplomatic. Tried to do it the peaceful way. Adam's way. And look where that had gotten me.

The scenery changed, and the sparse buildings looked even more menacing in the shadows of the night. There weren't any mages or humans walking along the side of the roads. As if even they knew to stay away from this place.

The large warehouse crept into view, its dim grey siding hiding the horrors that happened within.

My heart stuttered in my chest, telling me this was it. Everything would happen tonight. Everything would change. And for better or worse, I would get my revenge for the humans, for my mother, and for myself.

I stepped out of the car with barely a word to Rebecca and Nick, pulling a cloak of magic over myself to hide from any cameras that might be watching.

They would only see a car stopping briefly and then leaving. They'd never see me coming until it was already too late.

The lights in the building were dim. The fact that any light was on at all this late in the evening spoke of secret meetings and immoral things happening inside.

My steps were soft and muffled as I approached the building. Nick had shown me a

map of the building the other night, indicating which door to enter to bypass any extra security that might trip me up.

I was supposed to enter the side door and head toward the center room where the council members would be meeting. The others would show up shortly after me as back-up, because one against three wasn't exactly great odds.

I could barely handle it. However, it was always better to be prepared.

My appearance would throw them off their game. I'd mock and taunt them until they were too frantic to think straight. Then Zane, Blake, and Luke would appear, helping me bring them down together.

Each step into the warehouse sent a sinking feeling in my gut. It was quiet. Too quiet for a place that tortured and experimented on humans and mages alike.

My eyes scanned the open areas. Clear plastic curtains separated empty beds and discarded equipment. Any sign that there had been prisoners here had been wiped out. No blood, no evidence of foul play. It looked as if it were a makeshift hospital that had been abandoned overnight.

Had we gotten it wrong? Was Nick's information incorrect? Or did someone warn them ahead of time?

I should leave. This wasn't right.

But...

If I left, this would have all been for nothing. I couldn't fail tonight. Even if there were no humans or mages to save, no proof of their wrong doing, I could still take them out. I could still move us forward in our plan.

My feet slowed as I came to where they were holding the meeting. My hand twitched at my side, ready to send my power out at the first provocation.

I stepped into the circular room, my eyes adjusting to the brighter lights. My glamor fell at the sight before me.

A lone table and chair sat in the middle of the room. A curtained-off area to one side that could have all manner of things inside of it but, as I rounded the area, I could see between the edges, showing a toilet and shower.

My lips twisted to one side.

On the other side of the curtained area sat a figure. My eyes trailed up the familiar boots to find Adam sitting on a single person bed, his hands between his knees as his head hung forward.

My confusion turned to anger, burning into a fireball in my hand. “Didn’t I tell you what would happen if I saw you again? Did you think I was making an idle threat?”

Adam lifted his head, the sadness and regret on his face causing my rage to falter briefly. “Eva, you shouldn’t have come here.”

My fingers played with the fire in my hand, unable to release the magic completely or attack him with it. “Why are you here? Where are the council members?”

With each question, I stepped toward him, my fireball raging in my hand suspended in my indecision.

“Eva.” Adam stood but didn’t move toward me. “You need to leave. You can’t do this. You don’t know what will happen if you start this war. They could kill you. Kill all of us.”

My teeth gnashed together, hating that he sounded like he actually cared. Someone had leaked what we were planning. Was it Rebecca or Nick? Or maybe one of the other rebels? It could have even been one of the news outlets they'd contacted.

In the end, it didn't matter who did it. Their plan was ruined. There would be no spark to light that fire.

"You should be more worried about me killing you." I lifted both hands up now, fire burning in my palms. "You were stupid to think that I wasn't serious. Did you think you could come here, plead to me on your own, and I would just roll over like a good little human?"

Adam dragged a tired hand through his hair, shaking his head. "No, I didn't."

I stepped forward, my feet passing a black line that traced the floor, and I jolted. I shook my head, feeling strange.

"What was that?"

Adam stepped around me, keeping a few feet of distance between us until he was outside of what I noticed now was a circle of black around the bed, table, and makeshift bathroom.

Odd.

I spun around to keep my eyes on him. Another figure stepped out of the dark, his face half covered but his dark eyes narrowed on me.

Gage.

"I told you I would protect you, even from yourself," Adam murmured, the words

dejected and defeated as if he didn't want to be there anymore than I did.

"I already told you." I stepped forward, determined to make him understand. "You can't protect me."

Except when I hit the black line, I couldn't move forward. I bounced off an invisible force. My hands went up, touching the air that thickened and refused to let me through.

"You're right," Gage quipped, his lips curling beneath his mask. "We can't protect you from yourself, but we can protect everyone else from you."

That's when I realized that these weren't some random items in the middle of the room, a random circle on the ground.

This was a prison cell. A prison for me.

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Magic and rage burned in me welling up until it pressed against my skin and burned my insides. I threw a fireball at the barrier that kept me from leaving. But, unlike the barriers that Rebecca had put up before, this one absorbed my magic, sucking it into the shimmering surface.

“Let me out of here,” I screamed, slamming my hands and fists against the invisible barrier. “You can’t keep me here forever.”

“We won’t.” Adam gestured to the area. “This was the best we could do on such short notice. It’s not like we have a tower we can put you back in, now do we?”

I let out a sardonic laugh. “Oh, Snow would have been so proud of you, Arch Mage. You trapped me just as she did because you couldn’t control me. Tell me,” I purred, prowling along the edges of my cage. “Will you go mad thinking about me every day? Anxious and worried I’ll break out and get my revenge?”

Adam stepped up to the edge of the black line on the floor. His hand reached up, stretching out until he almost crossed the barrier and then stopped, dropping it to his side with a sigh.

“That’s not what this is, Eva, and you know it.”

I backed up slightly, turning around my little prison cell before whipping my head back around to smirk at them. “It’s no matter. I won’t be here long in any case.”

I strolled over to the bed and sat down, pulling the heels off that were making my feet ache.

Adam breathed out an irritated breath. “It didn’t have to be like this, you know. You could have just worked with me. In five, ten years, the humans would have been free, and you would have gotten your revenge for your mother.”

The mention of my mother sent the rage bubbling inside me into overload. I picked up my shoes and stalked across the concrete floor. “You do not get to talk about my mother .”

I threw my shoe at the barrier, expecting it to bounce back, but it sailed through, smacking Gage in the shoulder.

The barrier could absorb my magic and keep me from leaving. Everything else was fair game.

I held onto my other shoe for the moment, the urge to lob it at Adam’s face almost too much to resist. Instead, I glowered at the two of them. “What are you going to do when the others get here? Surely, you didn’t think I was going to do this alone after you witnessed them on my side the other night.”

Gage lifted his phone out of the pocket of his pants and tapped a few buttons on it. “Don’t worry about your little boyfriends. They’re just a bit delayed.”

He turned the black box around and showed me a video on the screen. Zane, Luke, and Blake fought with the front door, unable to step a foot past the threshold. With a triumphant grin, Gage tucked the phone back in his pocket.

“So that’s it.” I shrugged my shoulders. “You’re just going to keep us all prisoners until you decide you’re ready to let us go?”

“They’re not prisoners,” Gage explained, his eyes narrowed on me. “We just needed them out of the way until we had you caught in our trap.”

I let out a dark, ugly laugh. “And trap me, you did. Such big strong men can’t take on one little girl without resorting to tricks.” I stalked up to the edge of the cell, pressing my hand against the wall as I leaned into it. “You’re cowards.”

“And you’re reckless,” Adam snapped, jerking my gaze to him. “I tried to reason with you, Eva. When the others didn’t come back right away the other day, I came looking for you to try one more time to get you to see reason. But you wouldn’t listen. You are so hell bent on revenge that you would let the whole world burn down so you can revel over the ashes.”

That fracture in my heart throbbed. His words solidified something I’d suspected all along.

“So you weren’t there to get me back, were you?” I said quietly, my hand rubbing at my chest. “You don’t care about me at all. You only care about what I’m doing to your council. To your power structure.”

I dropped my arm. “I hate you,” I snarled.

“And I love you,” Adam shouted just inches from my face. “Damn it, Eva. I wasn’t supposed to like you, let alone love you. I knew who you were when I got you out of that tower, and I tried, I tried so hard to just be your friend.”

“Oh, yes, friends kiss each other all the time,” I crooned, sarcasm laced in my words. “I could see how you would make that mistake.”

“You have no idea how hard it has been to stay away from you. I literally put another person between us by pretending to be engaged to Rebecca so I wouldn’t cross that line again.” The anguish in his voice would have melted me had it not been for the prison cell I currently stood in.

“I couldn’t be with you, not because of the Arch Mage position or because I wanted someone else. It’s because I knew the moment that you found out who I really was, you would hate me for it. Just like you do now.”

He flashed a sad smile, swiping his hand through his hair. “So, yes. I’m going to keep you here until you can listen to reason because, believe it or not, I am not Snow. I don’t want to destroy you. I want to protect you. I’ve always just been trying to protect you, Eva.”

This time, he reached out, his fingers passing the barrier to stroke the side of my face. I let him trace my jawline, leaning into his touch for just a moment before sinking my teeth into his palm.

Adam jerked and cried out, pulling his arm back. Blinking down at his hand, he gasped. “You bit me.”

Letting him touch me had been half desire and half calculation. I shoved down the part of me that wanted to forgive him and just tell him to kiss me, hold me, love me, and held onto the part that hated him for who he was and what he’d done to me.

He’d proved one thing, though. It proved once more to me that the barrier was made to keep me in, but anyone and anything could go out. I just had to figure out how to use that to my advantage.

“Keep your fucking hands to yourself,” I sneered, swiping my mouth off with the back of my hand. “You don’t get to imprison me and get to touch me. You can’t have it both ways.”

Gage, who’d let us argue silently from the sidelines, suddenly crossed the barrier. He grabbed me by my throat and dragged me against him. “Oh, but I thought you liked being roughed up. Isn’t that why you spread your legs for that demon?”

I pressed my full form against him, letting my hands lay on his chest. “There’s a difference between flirting with danger,” I hissed, “knowing I can get out of it, and being completely helpless. You have me trapped and powerless. Tell me, Gage, does that get you hard?” I reached between us and grasped his clothed member, stroking my hand as I glared up at him.

“You are hardly powerless, and I wouldn’t do that to you or anyone.” Gage released my neck and stepped back across the barrier. “You will be safe here, and everyone else will be safe from you. Maybe you should use this time to think about what’s important. Your revenge or your life. Because one of them is going to leave you all alone.”

My fingers tightened around the shoe in my hand, and I chucked it at his retreating back with an aggravated scream. “You’ll regret this. I promise you. If you think that this little cage is going to keep me safe, you’re delusional. I’ve already started this war, and the council members won’t hesitate to finish it with me as they bloody prize.”

With no more ammunition to use, I threw myself down on the bed, staring up at the metal ceiling and glaring light. “You could have at least given me a window. The tower had a window.”

My anger was still there, but it had ebbed to a simmer, despair filtering into its place.

Adam rubbed his hand where I left teeth marks on him and watched me quietly. “In case you were wondering, Nick and Rebecca are fine. They were escorted back to their homes and told to stay there. The news crews never found out about your plan. Nick’s messages were intercepted.”

“Who betrayed us?” I hated to ask the question but I needed to know. If I was going to get my heart broken again, then I’d rather have it done all at once than wait for it to

be sprung on me later.

“No one did.” Adam answered quietly. “Gage knew the others were coming to see you and planted a bug on each of them. We’d been there the whole time.”

My face heated at his words. “The whole time, huh?”

The thought of Gage and Adam listening to me take all three of the others at the same time both annoyed and sent a rush of desire through me. I’d have teased Adam about it, but I didn’t have the energy to bother.

Adam didn’t say anything for a long moment and then cleared his throat. “I’ll bring you something to eat and clothes. You should get some rest.”

I snorted at how normal he made this sound. If I closed my eyes and thought back to it, this was almost identical to the way he treated me when he first pulled me from that tower. Except this time, I couldn’t leave.

“I am sorry it ended up this way, Eva,” Adam breathed, lingering at the edges of the barrier. “I wanted it to be different.”

I waited until his footsteps faded away before I replied, my eyes burning with tears. “I wanted it to be, too.”

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:47 am

My mind was restless. I slept in short spurts. Each time I woke up, panic raced through me, my breathing short and fast until I felt as if I would pass out.

I would have to remind myself of where I was, who had put me there. I wasn't back in the tower, but it was close enough to the same that it had reawakened my trauma.

The first few times I'd woken, Adam and Gage weren't there, but they'd left a plastic bottle of water on the table.

This time when I startled awake, sucking in long streams of breaths, my eyes locked onto Gage's. He sat a tray on the lone table. I expected anger or even disgust to reach me, but what I didn't expect was pity.

That was so much worse.

Rolling over, I put my back to him, ignoring him as he set out the meal I wouldn't be eating.

"If you can't sleep, we can bring you something to help."

My arms wrapped tighter around myself. I wouldn't give him the satisfaction of seeing how being caged affected me.

"Eva." Gage's voice grew quiet, his presence a shadow over the bed. "You need to eat. I brought you some clothes to change into. If you don't like them, I can find something else."

“Leave me alone,” I muttered, squeezing my eyes shut. I couldn’t bear how nice he was being to me. Where was the asshole who threatened me in the park? The one who told me to stay away from him and his friends? Why was he acting like... like he cared?

“You can pout all you want, but I’m not going to let you starve yourself.”

His firm grip dragged me from the bed, lifting me up into his thick, warm arms. I pushed against him, slashing my nails at his face until he dropped me into the chair at the table.

“Fuck, Eva. You’re being a child,” Gage snapped. He dropped into the chair on the opposite side of the table, touching the side of his face briefly.

I smirked as blood welled up from one of the scratches I’d left on his face.

“Eat. Or I will force feed you.” Gage gestured at the plate in front of me.

My lips pulled down at the sides at the plate. It was flimsy and, with a bit of pressure, ripped. The sandwich and cold vegetables on the plate didn’t require utensils, and he hadn’t given me any. I poked at the food and sneered. “Afraid I’m going to use the plate as a weapon?”

Gage crossed his arms and leaned back in his chair. “Not taking any chances. You’re violent when you’re mad.”

I picked up a carrot and snapped it between my teeth with a vicious grin. “I wonder why.”

Silently, I took one bite of food after the next, not really tasting it as I swallowed it. My eyes burned into Gage’s face, the mask covering his lower half just a reminder of

how much he didn't trust me.

"Shouldn't you be on the other side of the barrier?"

Gage cocked his head to the side, and I didn't need to see his lips to know he was smirking at me. "Why? Are you going to kill me?"

I lifted my hand, letting a small ball of fire swell there. "I could easily kill you."

"You won't, though," Gage shot back, tapping his foot under the table. "I'm finally starting to figure you out."

I let the fire go out and shifted back in my chair, crossing one leg over the other. "Oh, really? Please enlighten me."

"You're all bark and no bite." He tapped his fingers on the table with a grin. "You could have killed Beatriz, too, instead of just threatening her."

I shrugged a shoulder. "Maybe I was giving her a chance to change. Obviously I was mistaken."

"You could have attacked me the moment I walked through the barrier, but you didn't."

"Haven't yet."

"You won't."

"It's not too late to test that theory."

Gage threw his head back and laughed. "See? All bark."

“And what about the party? I didn’t just bark then,” I snapped, irritated that he was making me out to be some weakling who couldn’t follow through on her promises.

“A fluke. You were fighting your other self and lost control.”

My brows rose at that. Lost control? Sure, I’d been fighting my other self, but there was no loss of control. I had killed Master Tuck because I wanted to. I hadn’t been aiming at anyone in particular outside of that, just angry at the sudden news of Adam’s engagement.

I wasn’t known for my cool head, after all.

I didn’t want to kill Gage or, if I was being honest, Adam, no matter how much his heritage or lying angered me. However, I wasn’t going to be seen as some yappy little dog who wasn’t a threat.

Cocking my head to the side, I let my fingers trail up and down the opening of my jacket. I held back my smile as Gage took the bait, his eyes locked on the curves of my breasts just barely peeking through the sides.

“You think you know me so well, do you, assassin?” I unsnapped one of the buttons that held the jacket closed, his eyes locked on my movements. “I’ve been around for a thousand years, waiting, plotting, boiling in my rage while the mages took over the world.”

Another button snapped open.

“Everyone I knew and loved died a long time ago.” My fingers followed the line of skin that stopped mid stomach. “The mages killed my mother. So I killed their king.”

“That was ruled an accident,” Gage murmured, his eyes still focused on my hand.

My lips curled. “Oh, yes, he accidentally drank the poison I put in his cup.”

Then there were no more buttons to pop. My jacket spread slightly, giving him just a peek at what was underneath. What he could have if he had just given into me before.

“My whole life has been devoted to avenging my mother and the humans who have suffered at the mages hands.” I stood from the table, his body tensed but those eyes kept watching me above his mask.

He didn’t resist when I slipped into his lap, my fingers playing along his jawline, the fabric of his mask separating our skin. His hands stayed by his sides for a moment before grasping my hips, fingers tracing the bare flesh above my pants.

“The only good I had in my life was Ferdinand, and even he was taken from me.” I leaned forward until my breath brushed against his cloth-covered mouth.

“How did he die?” Gage’s eye lids lowered to slits as he leaned into me, our mouths almost touching. A taunt and a tease for both of us.

“Take your mask off, and I’ll tell you.” I licked my lips, wetting the material against his mouth.

“Do you think seeing my face is going to get you out of here?”

I smiled against his mouth, and my hips shifted over his lap. I could feel how hard he was getting just from my being there. “No, you’ll let me out... eventually. I just want to see that you finally trust me. After all, you just said I’m all bark and no bite.”

Gage stared at me for a long moment, his fingers tracing patterns on my skin before he lifted one hand up. The last time I’d seen him without his mask, he’d been under a boils curse, and I couldn’t actually appreciate the beauty of his face.

Now, that curse was gone. His handsome face was the kind that would make women and men alike stop on the street. The kind of face that was remembered. Not a good thing in his line of work.

I placed my bare hands on both sides of his face, feeling the scrape of his scruff against my palms as I leaned in and kissed him.

For a moment, I thought he wouldn't kiss me back. After all, he had been adamant about keeping me away. Claimed he didn't and wouldn't ever love me.

So, when he kissed me back, I forgot what I was doing and where I was for a moment.

His mouth pressed firmly against mine, tongue darting out to brush across the line of my lips. I opened to him, sinking into the kiss, my body pressed flush against him.

Gage pulled away for a second and bit the finger of his glove, pulling it off before his rough hand slid beneath my jacket to cup my bare breast. I pressed into his touch as his mouth found mine once more.

Even if he had a shitty personality, I could give the assassin one thing—he could kiss. His mouth pressed hard against mine, his tongue fucking my mouth without giving me the chance to reciprocate.

I had no doubt that, if we had sex, he would be in complete control, leaving me to take whatever he gave me and I would have begged for more.

Gage's kisses and hands made my head whirl. My thoughts clouded together as desire overtook me. Somehow, this game I'd been playing had been turned on me, and I couldn't afford that.

Withdrawing reluctantly from the kiss, I held his face in my hands, nipping and teasing him without giving him more. “Don’t you want to know what happened?”

Lust glazed over Gage’s eyes. The hand holding my breast traced around my nipple before pinching it between his fingers. “I’d rather know about the rebels.”

I grinned against his mouth. “You haven’t earned that information yet.”

“Oh?” Gage mused, moving his hand from my chest and down to the edge of my pants. “What do I need to do to get that information?”

It would be so easy to just tell him that I didn’t know anything about the rebels. Which I didn’t. Rebecca and Nick kept a lot of the specifics quiet. It was better that way. The less people who knew about the whole operation the better. I only cared about getting my pound of flesh.

But Gage didn’t need to know that.

“We’re not talking about rebels,” I reminded him, my hips wiggling against him. “We’re talking about me.”

He popped the button of my pants and pulled them open, his hand ducking beneath the material to cup my center. His thumb made a circle around my clit, ripping a moan from my lips. If I wasn’t careful, he would beat me at this game.

“Are you sure?” Gage purred, pressing his mouth to my lips, chin, and then the junction of my neck before thrusting two fingers without warning into my soaking heat. “I could make you feel so good if you’d just tell me where the rebels gather.”

I almost laughed, had he not curled his fingers inside of me. Instead, I threw my head back to let out a gasping scream.

Gage's mouth sucked on my exposed throat, growling and thrusting his hips against my back side with each thrust of his fingers.

Pleasure meshed my thoughts together, making the only thing I wanted was to reach that peak. So close. Just a little more.

His hand stopped moving.

I cried out in protest, trying to move my hips, chasing that release.

"Tell me, and I will let you come." The wicked gleam in his eye both pissed me off and made me laugh. He'd played me at my own game. Except he didn't know that we weren't playing on the same level.

Breathing heavily, I pressed my forehead against his, my hands cupping his face once more. "You misunderstand me, Gage." I let my gaze meet his, my powers billowing beneath the surface. "Ferdinand didn't die." I poured my persuasion into my voice, my eyes a hypnotic lure that made the smirk on his lips flatten out as I whispered against his mouth.

"I killed him."

Gage's body flinched against those words, but he didn't move, his face slack and his fingers still buried deep inside of me. I kept eye contact with him as I fucked myself on his fingers, racing toward that edge while Gage stayed locked in place.

I shattered and released my hold on Gage's mind.

Gage threw me onto the table, a hand around my throat. Snarling down at me, one of his daggers appeared out of nowhere. He pressed the tip into the center of my chest.

I breathed heavily and laughed up at him, my body still recovering from my release.
“Was it good for you?”

“What the fuck was that?” The hand on my throat tightened until I could barely breathe. “I couldn’t move.”

I licked my lips, my breasts exposed now beneath the dagger. I pressed up into it to draw a rivulet of blood. “Are you going to kill me, Gage? After all your talk of wanting to protect me? I’m hurt.”

“How did you do that?” Gage asked, ignoring my taunting. “How did you control my mind?”

I lifted my hand, and he flinched.

Enjoying his wariness, I let my finger trail down the exposed muscles of his biceps. “Ferdinand was the first man I ever loved, the first one I’d ever let myself love. My whole life was for revenge. I married the king for revenge. I let him fuck me every night for revenge. I played the dutiful wife, the perfect queen, the doting stepmother. I did everything I was supposed to do. I gave up everything for my vengeance until I met him.”

Gage’s breathing slowed as I spoke, his hand loosening around my throat.

“We were going to run away together. I was going to give it all up for him. Fifteen years of planning and sacrificing my own happiness just to toss it away for a single man, unextraordinary by most people’s standards.”

“You controlled me just now, didn’t you?”

I didn’t answer.

“Shit, Eva. It’s no wonder you ended up in that tower. You can’t just control people like puppets on a string waiting around to be used as you want.”

Ignoring his accusations, I continued my story. “She stole him from me. He was mine, and she stole his love and took him. He was going to run away and marry Snow instead of me.”

I pushed up, forcing him to either move back or stab me as my anger from that day seethed inside of me. “So I ripped him apart.”

Gage’s eyes widened slightly, disbelief in his eyes.

I let him see me then, truly see the dark twisted thing that lived inside of me. “I’m not some pet that can be tamed into behaving, Gage. If you hurt me, I’ll hurt you back tenfold. And, when I threaten you, you take it as a promise because I always follow through.”

Gage let his dagger droop between us, his hand tightening on the hilt while his jaw clenched. “Where are the rebels?”

I wrapped myself in my magic, disappearing and then reappearing on my bed, where I placed my hands behind my head and smiled. “I have no idea.”

He took one step toward me and then thought better of it, shaking his head before stalking back through the barrier.

“Thanks for the ride,” I called out to his retreating back. “Let’s do it again sometime.”

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:47 am

After that, Gage or Adam would bring my food only when I was sleeping. While they only brought me food once a day, in addition to the sandwiches and other hands-only food, I received packaged meals, fruits, and vegetables that could be eaten throughout the day.

Several sets of clothing mysteriously appeared after that first day. Dresses and underwear all in the violet shade that I typically wore when living in their home. Brushes and toiletries were also provided.

They had thought of everything except how to keep me from being unbelievably bored.

I laid in the middle of my cell, staring up at the metal ceiling as I floated a few fruits in the air above me. I twirled them around, making a magical dance of fruit that had me smiling.

For a brief moment, I thought of showing it to Luke. He'd have enjoyed my little display.

Then I frowned.

Anger rolled through me, causing the fruit to zip chaotically in the air.

Gage's betrayal wasn't exactly surprising. He'd already threatened me on more than one occasion. Locking me up once he realized he couldn't keep me from his friends was only the next logical step.

Adam, though.

Fire raged inside me, boiling through my blood, sizzling in my bones. All the happiness and hope I'd had for him after hearing about his and Rebecca's separation hadn't even had time to be processed before he threw his ancestry in my face.

Being Snow's descendant was bad enough. I could have forgiven him eventually. I understood why he kept it from me. If I'd been in his place, I would have been hesitant to tell a stranger of unknown powers that I was their enemy, too.

Except...

I loved him.

He loved me.

Everything in me wanted to forgive him for his lies. To get past his lineage and embrace him. Adam wasn't Snow. He didn't take Ferdinand from me. He hadn't put me in that tower.

And yet, he had locked me up all the same. That, I wasn't sure I could forgive.

Why couldn't he have just been truthful to me from the beginning? Why did it have to be about lies, manipulations, and easing people into things?

There was a right and there was a wrong. Clearly, the mages knew what they were doing was wrong. No amount of diplomacy or compromise would make them give up their power.

The more my mind raced, the faster the fruit moved until I finally let out an aggravated scream. The fruit shot across the space and pelted the barrier, shattering

into mushy bits that rained over the floor of the cell.

My eyes narrowed on where they had hit. The mostly invisible shield rippled, and a distinct crack appeared in the otherwise flawless surface. That wasn't supposed to happen.

When I'd thrown my shoe at Adam, it had gone straight through the barrier. Why did the fruit hit it?

Crawling up from the floor, I inched over to the line on the ground. My fingers trailed over the surface, not finding any give until I came to the place where the crack had formed.

I pushed on the crack, sighing when I was met with resistance.

I glanced down at the fruit with a frown.

Picking up a chunk of apple, I stepped back and threw it at the barrier. It sailed through, skidding against the floor on the other side. My lips quirked up as an idea formed.

Using my magic, I picked up the pieces of leftover fruit and hurled it at the crack in the barrier. The pieces smashed into the crack, causing it to widen and stretch.

Having figured out the trick, I moved over to the table where the tray still sat. The fact that they thought I only needed a sharp implement to cause damage should insult me. Except, in this case, the bigger the item, the better.

Lifting the tray with magic, I aimed for the growing crack in the barrier and threw it with all my strength. Unlike the fruit, the tray didn't break apart on impact. It fractured the barrier until a tiny hole appeared, and the tray fell to the ground on my

side, ready to be used again.

“Well,” a familiar voice purred with unrestrained delight, “I never dreamed the day I’d see you locked up where you belong would come true, and yet here we are.”

I lowered my hands, scowling as I turned on Healer Beatriz. “What are you doing here?”

Healer Beatriz’s robes brushed against the warehouse floor. She smiled to herself as she walked up to my prison. Unlike me, her eyes spotted the black circle surrounding me, and she kept her distance as she circled the space.

“Arch Mage Adam informed me he had taken care of the problem, and I just wanted to see it for myself.” She cocked her head to the side, peering into the barrier as if I were some intriguing creature she’d stumbled upon in the wild.

I’d never had the urge to choke someone before. It came on so viciously that I had to curl my hands into fists at my side to keep myself from launching at the barrier.

Would Adam and Gage really have let her come here? They told me this was for my protection. How exactly did that work when those who would hurt me knew where I was?

“I don’t think you’re supposed to be here,” I warned her through clenched teeth.

She sniffed and fluffed her coiffed white hair. “Well, it did take a little digging to find out where they were holding you but, as you can see, I can do as I like.” She smirked and leaned in close to the barrier. “And there’s nothing you can do about it.”

Oh, if she would only move a little closer. One step into the barrier and I could do what I should have done from the beginning. My eyes slid carefully to the hole I’d

begun to make in the barrier.

Strolling along the edge, I pushed as much nonchalance into my movements as possible. “You think you are untouchable, do you?”

“Of course.” Healer Beatriz followed me as I knew she would, unable to help wanting to see my face as she gloated.

I pressed my hand to the barrier and leaned close, until my face was pressed close to the shimmering magic. “I might be stuck in here, but there are others out there that want the same thing I do. It’s only a matter of time before they take you down.”

The healer threw her head back and laughed, stepping closer to the barrier and me. “Oh, you mean that sad excuse they call rebels? We have already found them and are in the process of silencing them. Nothing will change, and you will live out your days in a cage.”

She moved even closer until our faces were only separated by the barrier. “Who knows? The Arch Mage might even give you to Jetta for his little experiments, see what makes you tick. The humans are right where they belong, under our feet, and there is nothing you can do about it.”

Without warning, my fist smashed into the hole I’d started. The barrier cracked further. My hand shot through the hole and grabbed the mage by her robes, jerking her into the space with me.

Eyes wide and chin wobbling, Healer Beatriz screamed and pulled at my wrist.

I lifted a fireball up, baring my teeth at her. “You were saying?”

Sweat streaked down her face as the fireball pressed closer to her, her hair singeing at

the ends. Beatriz's magic burned against my skin where she grabbed me, trying to force me to release her.

I laughed, the pain only making my desire to end her grow larger.

“Eva!”

My head twisted toward the sound of my name to find Gage and Adam running toward the barrier. Before they could reach me, I lowered my hand and extinguished the fire.

The look of relief was stark on their face.

I grabbed the crying mage by the face and brought my face inches from hers. “Long live the queen.”

Magic pulsed through my muscles and the quick snap of my wrist made breaking her neck easy as clicking my fingers together.

Adam shouted my name again.

I released her, letting her body flop onto the ground as I backed away. My eyes locked with Gage's. Even with his mask on, the anger that radiated from his eyes made me smile.

“Woof, woof.”

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:47 am

Gage peered at the hole I'd made in the barrier with narrowed eyes. Every few moments, those dark eyes would dart to where I sat at the table, peeling an orange as if it were an average afternoon.

They had removed Beatriz's body with a combination of fear and intrigue on their face. More like annoyance from Gage, but the effect was the same. They weren't taking my threats idly anymore.

"You know, I wouldn't have poked at the barrier so much if you'd entertain me." I hung my head back and groaned. "It's so boring here."

"You should have thought of that before."

"The least you could do is entertain me," I pointed out, my fingers picking at the orange peel in my hands. "Tell me about yourself."

"You know all you need to know."

It was like pulling teeth with this man.

"Well, I know you're a paid killer for the council." That earned me a pointed look. "You're a grumpy ass and have to hide your face because of how ugly you are. Seriously, babies would cry if you walked by." I smirked and popped a piece of the orange into my mouth.

Gage snorted a laugh, shaking his head. "We both know that isn't true."

Ignoring his comment, I continued on my search to learn something deeper about this man that kept me at such a distance. “Do you have any family?”

He sighed. “I have a mother and a sister.”

“Do they live here?” I glanced around as if they would show up out of nowhere.

“No.” He paused. “I don’t really talk to them. None of us do.”

None of them talked to their families? With only a mother myself, I couldn’t imagine never talking to her out of choice. Especially, since my choice had been taken away from me.

“Why?”

“Why, what?” Gage snipped, dropping his hands from the barrier.

“Why don’t you talk to them?” My head tilted slightly to the side.

“It’s better that way.” He scratched his jaw line through his mask. “We all have prestigious jobs and if we kept in touch with our families someone could use them against us.” He gave me another pointed look.

Point taken.

We went silent for a few moments and then just as I was about to ask something else, Adam walked in with a broom in hand. His eyes darted between Gage and I, seeming to sense the tension between us.

“How did you even figure out how to make this barrier?” I asked, gesturing around with an orange piece in hand to distract myself.

Adam looked up from where he swept up the fruit from the ground and dumped it into a trash can. “Zane helped us.”

My heart clenched.

“Zane?” I choked out. “He helped you make this?”

Adam paused, his lips pressed tightly together before shaking his head. “Not in the way you’re thinking. After the party, we started looking for backup plans in case you... got out of control.” He shot me a look that said, “Like you are now.”

Huffing, I returned to my orange, biting into a piece before sucking on the juices. “I’m not out of control. I gave her a chance to do the right thing, and she blew it. If you do not inflict consequences when someone breaks their word to you, your threats have no effect.”

“You didn’t have to kill her,” Adam said quietly.

“Yes, I did.” I finished my orange and proceeded to suck the juices from my fingers.

Adam’s eyes dipped to the motion, memorized. I languidly sucked on it, letting my tongue slide up and down the digit before pushing it all the way in. I closed my eyes and hummed a moan.

Adam cleared his throat.

My eyes opened, and I grinned at his back as he pretended to be interested in cleaning.

The fact that he still found me attractive even after seeing me end someone’s life shouldn’t have made me happy, but it did.

A wet cloth sailed across the room and smacked me in the face. I grabbed it, glaring at Gage. His eyes were on the hole, but they were crinkled at the edges.

I wiped my fingers off and crossed one leg over the other. “Instead of yelling at me for killing her, you should ask yourself how she even found me. You can’t protect me if the council members know where I am.”

“They weren’t supposed to find out,” Adam tried to reassure me. “We didn’t tell anyone about where we set this up and assumed they’d stay away.”

I snorted. “You give them too little credit. Just like you give them too much credit as reasonable beings. They won’t ever agree to let the humans free, no matter what you offer them. The only way to fix the problem is to destroy them.”

For once, Adam didn’t argue with me. He exchanged a look with Gage, a silent message I couldn’t read in their eyes.

What was that about?

Not commenting on their exchange, I returned to the issue at hand. “What’s to stop the others from showing up and trying to kill me? I’m a sitting duck here. They might not be easily tricked like Beatriz. Knowing those cowards, they’ll try to kill me from the other side of the barrier.”

“That’s not going to happen,” Gage announced, his hand over the hole as it filled in until it was a smooth shimmering surface again.

I shoved out of my chair and stalked over to him. “How do you know that? You obviously made the barrier to hold me and my magic in, but other things can go out. You can go in and out as you please. And since I was able to pull Beatriz in, you didn’t guard against others from coming in if they want. Tell me exactly how I’m

going to be protected in all this.”

“I’ll alter the barrier to keep them out.”

I cocked my head to the side. “And how exactly are you going to do that?” I lifted my head, peering up at the barrier with a thoughtful expression. “If your barrier is the kind I think, you can’t just pick and choose who can pass and who can’t. This barrier was created from part of my essence.” I lifted a brow at Adam, who had the decency to look guilty.

“Hair from your brush.”

“So unless you have Jetta’s and Carisa’s essence on hand, I don’t see how you’re going to make it so they can’t get in.”

“Let me worry about that,” Gage muttered, stepping through the barrier to push me back from the edge, but paused before touching me. A flicker of uncertainty crossed his eyes.

“You’re afraid of me now, aren’t you?” I couldn’t help the gleeful tone in my voice.

Some might call me crazy for being turned on by the fact that the men I was involved with loved and feared me equally, but I didn’t care.

What was a little excitement without a little fear? It was why I’d always been able to toe that line with Zane’s demon. He could kill me at any moment, and the uncertainty that he just might made me come harder than I’d ever come before.

“No,” Gage snapped, dropping his arm. “I won’t make the mistake of underestimating you again.”

Adam shoved the trash can out of the cell. His eyes bobbed between the two of us. “I’m missing something here. You’ve seen her kill someone before. At least this time, there’s no pieces to pick up.” A shudder went through him as he grimaced.

I smirked at Gage, lifting a hand to trace along his jawline. He kept himself still, stubbornness shining in his eyes. It was clear he wanted to keep me from touching him, and yet he refused to give in to that fear.

“Gage didn’t like the trick I played on him.” I stepped closer until my front brushed against him, my hand landing on his chest. The rapid beating of his heart thudded under my fingertips.

“No one likes to be controlled.”

I giggled, pushing up on my tip toes until I could feel his breath on my face. “And fucking me with your fingers wasn’t you trying to control me? Don’t be mad because I outmaneuvered you.”

His hands grabbed my arms in a biting grip. “You didn’t outmaneuver me, you used magic to take over my body. Then you fucked yourself on my fingers.”

I pulled my lower lip between my teeth, peering up at him beneath my lashes. “You started it, I just finished it.”

“That’s beside the point.” Gage lifted me slightly so our eyes met. “How can we trust you if we know you can take over our minds any time you want? How can anyone trust that you won’t just make us all into your puppets?”

I sighed. I knew this was going to come up. It was why I didn’t show many my compulsion ability. They start to question everything about me and how they felt.

“I can’t just do it whenever I want,” I started, glancing between Gage and Adam. “I have to be touching you, preferably your face. It’s easier to get to your mind that way. And it doesn’t always work. If you’re strong of mind, I’d have a hard time getting you to do anything.”

I let my lips tick up into a smirk. “Guess we know which one you are.”

“I was distracted,” Gage growled, releasing me abruptly so I stumbled.

I caught myself before I fell, shooting him a glare. “Rude. And yes, distraction can cause it to work easier. Big emotions, physical exertion.” I slid a sly look at Adam. “Arousal.”

Worry painted his expression and then something I didn’t expect happened. Hand stroking over his jaw, Adam shook his head and laughed.

“You think it’s funny?” Gage practically shouted at him. “She can control us whenever she wants.”

“If she wanted to control us, don’t you think she would have done it by now?” Adam raised a brow. “And it seems like you were playing dirty as much as she was. How can you fault her for using it? Besides,” his hot gaze slid over me, heating my body against my better judgement, “I for one would be interested to see this compulsion in action.”

A shiver ran through me that had nothing to do with the temperature and everything to do with every naughty thought that just ran through Adam’s eyes. Oh, the things I could make them do to me, to each other. The list was endless and not something I should be thinking about while trapped in their prison.

I crossed my arms over my chest and harrumphed. “You haven’t earned that pleasure

yet.”

“Yet?” Adam crooned, he sauntered toward me as boneless as a cat. His fingers pinched my chin, turning my face toward him. “I can work with yet.” His thumb rubbed back and forth over my lower lip, his lids lowered as he watched the movement. “Will you ever forgive me for lying to you, Eva?”

The urge to lick my lips, to taste him on my tongue was strong but I shoved that feeling down. “I don’t know. Maybe. This though?” I gestured around us as I pulled away from him. “I don’t know if I can forgive this.”

“I know.” Adam’s voice was low, no longer filled with desire. “I could say I’m sorry, but I’m not. We didn’t know what to do. You’re like a wave crashing against the rocks. Untamable and unpredictable. We’re scrambling to keep ourselves together while you wage war on everything we’ve ever known. It’s a lot to adjust to.”

“Adjust faster.”

Gage snorted and turned his back on us, walking out of the barrier and then the room.

Adam stepped away from me with a sad look. “I wish it hadn’t been this way. However, each day brings me closer to thinking you might have been right all along.”

As he walked away, I hugged myself tightly. The cracks in my heart were starting to fill back in slowly.

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“I want to see the others,” I demanded, standing at the edge of my prison. I pressed my palm against the barrier, glowering at Gage.

Gage didn’t even glance up from the tablet in his hands. “No.”

I slammed my fist against the barrier and growled. “You can’t keep us separated forever. They will eventually come looking for me.”

His finger swiped across the screen before his eyes flicked up to me over his mask. “If they know what is good for you, they won’t. Besides, Adam is keeping them busy hunting down rebels. They aren’t even thinking about you.”

“You’re a liar.” I bared my teeth at him, not believing him for one second. They wouldn’t forget about me. Every time I’d been separated from them, they’d searched for me. Even Adam and Gage couldn’t stay away, no matter how much they wanted to deny it.

Gage stood and stalked toward me, stopping just on the other side of the barrier. “Then why aren’t they here?”

I shook my head, my fingers curling into fists. “You’re keeping them away somehow.” I paused and then a wicked smile curled my lips. “Besides, a certain demon is going to get bored eventually and then you won’t be able to keep us apart.”

Rolling his eyes, Gage peered back down at his tablet. “Only you could turn a demon into a trained dog.”

“Oh, someone sounds jealous.” I preened up at him. “Don’t worry, Gage, I have room for all of you.” I trailed a hand down my front, my pride swelling as his eyes followed my hand’s path. “Did Adam tell you what we were doing when he came by Rebecca’s house?”

I gripped the skirt of my dress and slowly lifted it in a teasing taunt. “Luke couldn’t stop praising how well I took all of them. I might like to be in charge, but I know how to kneel...” I blinked up at him beneath my long lashes. “For the right man.”

Gage cleared his throat and scoffed. Though he turned his face away, he couldn’t hide the hunger that darkened his eyes.

I dropped my skirt and turned my back on him. “You could at least bring me something to do. A book, television, something.” I collapsed dramatically on my bed. “There’s a reason I almost went mad while in my tower. One’s own company can drive you crazy.”

“You are hardly alone.” Gage snorted, setting his tablet down before stepping through the barrier. “And I’m not giving you anything you could use to break my barrier again. You’re lucky you’re still getting food after that stunt with the fruit.”

A hand above my head, I let my eyes trail over him as my other hand made a path down my body. My gaze passed everything from his thick calves to his powerful thighs, lingering on the sinch of his belt before hungrily devouring the long hard planes of his chest.

It was like this man was sculpted out of muscle. Each piece of him was carved into a deadly weapon. I couldn’t wait to have that strength against me, inside of me, begging me to let him taste me.

“Stop looking at me like that.”

I blinked coyly at him.

Gage crossed those delectable arms over his chest. “You’re fucking me with your eyes. It won’t work.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” My fingers traced over my breast, causing my nipple to pucker against the material. “You won’t give me anything to entertain myself. You won’t talk to me or let me talk to anyone else. What am I supposed to do with my time?”

Gage’s eyes stayed on mine, but the tension in his jaw tightened. “If you want out, you can make a blood promise to not attack the other mages.”

I made a rude noise in the back of my throat. “I could make you promises until the end of time, and that still wouldn’t keep them safe from me or me safe from them. I put myself in their sights and, no matter how much you and Adam try to hide me away and protect me, they’re going to find a way to get me.”

My hand continued its path down my stomach and settled between my thighs. I didn’t move it or draw my dress up my thighs. I simply left my hand there, taunting him with what he could have if he’d just give in.

“That won’t happen.”

The certainty in Gage’s voice made me want to laugh. How trusting he was of their government. How naive he was to think they wouldn’t come for me.

“You forget, Gage.” I closed my eyes, teasing the inside of my thigh but going no higher. “I’ve been through this before. No king, princess, or council member will let my actions go unpunished. So either I come for them or they will come for me. No matter how pretty their promises are to you and Adam.”

Gage huffed, and his footsteps drifted away from me.

I sighed and let my hand fall to my side. This was getting pointless. I hadn't been lying to Gage. I wasn't some power-hungry idiot who didn't know the consequences of my actions.

Someone would die. Whether it was the council members or me, there would be blood shed before this was all over.

I must have drifted to sleep at some point because I woke to the sound of laughter.

Groaning, I rolled onto my side and peeked out beneath my lashes.

Zane stood on the other side of the barrier line, his lips curled as he sucked on the end of a cigarette. A red burning gaze swept over me and my new home.

"Well, well, well, the little birdy has been all caged up with nowhere to go." His voice was a rolling taunt as he walked along my cell.

My body uncurled from the bed, languidly drawing myself up into a sitting position. My fingers dragged through my hair, letting the sheets of pale blonde hair cascade over my fingertips. "This little birdy wouldn't have gotten caught had someone been where they were supposed to be."

The demon stopped his prowling, his fingers pinching the stick in his mouth. "That was not my fault. If that damned cleric had let me loose, I could have broken through their wards easily."

"Oh?" I purred, leaning back on my hand. "You took your precious time getting here."

He lifted a foot to move and then stopped, eying the line on the ground.

“You won’t get stuck in here.” I sighed, waving a hand languidly in the air. “Only me.”

The demon let out a vicious growl. “They think to keep you safe when anyone could stroll in and hurt you.”

I let my lips curl into a grin that promised violence. “Let them try.”

He sniffed the air and then returned my grin with one of his own, his mixed with desire. “Did my little sinner kill someone?”

My head tipped to the side, a playing grin on my lips. “Perhaps.” Then my lower lip pushed out into a pout. “But I’m so bored. They won’t give me anything to do or even play with me.”

The demon tossed his cigarette away and stepped through the barrier. His feet stalked toward me, those red eyes zeroing in on my form. “My little sinner wants to play? How can I resist such a tempting offer?”

I stayed where I was until he hovered over me, his hips pressed between my thighs. My hands drifted up above my head, leaving myself in a vulnerable position just for him. “Did you know...?” I trailed off, his nose burying in the fabric between my breasts. “Our little cleric has given full permission for me to do whatever I want with his body?”

Red eyes burned into mine, his lips curling maliciously. “Oh, did he now?”

I grinned down at him, humor crinkling the sides of my eyes. “It seems someone thinks I’ve tamed you.”

His hips surged against me, the hard length of Zane's cock hit my sensitive clit. I gasped a silent scream. "Tamed me, have you?"

Licking my lips, I wrapped my feet around his calves, dragging him closer to me. "Taming is such a sad word. Like you've lost all your bite," I fluttered my lashes at him, "when we both know that's the part I love best."

"Oh, little sinner, you have no idea the plans I have for this body." His hands trailed down my sides, grabbing handfuls of my breasts until I arched and cried out at the mixture of pleasure and pain zipping through my core.

I let him explore and touch and bruise, taking everything the demon wanted to give me. Each touch a promise of violence and pleasure wrapped into one. When his fingers prodded my entrance, I twisted myself away with a shake of my head.

"Nuhuh, no fucking until you get me out of here."

The demon's eyes burned into me as he tried to pry my legs apart. "I should have known you weren't going to make it easy for me."

I laughed, grasping his face with my hands. "Where's the fun in that?"

A hand wrapped around my throat, lifting me up and off the bed so his mouth pressed to mine in a bruising kiss. His tongue shoved into my mouth, not giving me a chance to respond back and he fucked my mouth with his tongue. He kissed me until my lungs burned with the lack of oxygen and still I let him continue.

Only when my vision started to darken did I grip his chin with my hand, my hand heating until he hissed and jerked away from me with a laugh.

"Careful, you'll hurt the cleric."

“He’ll be alright,” I quipped, nipping at his lower lip. “Now, get me out of here and then we can play.”

“Zane, what are you doing here?” Gage’s voice echoes through the warehouse.

I tensed beneath the demon, holding me before looking him in the eyes. “We need his blood to break the barrier.”

A deadly glint zipped through his eyes before the space between my thighs was cold.

The demon shot across the room, heading straight for Gage. I pushed off the bed and scrambled to my feet, realizing too late that I hadn’t been specific enough.

“What the fuck, Zane?” Gage snarled, dodging the demon’s attacks. His arm comes up in a block only for the demon to drop down low, a knife appearing in his hands from somewhere unknown.

“No cleric here, killer,” the demon crooned, slashing the knife at Gage’s mid-section.

My breath caught in my throat until I see that the demon had missed.

“Don’t kill him,” I ordered, rushing to the edge of my cell.

The demon chortled and licked his lips. “You said you needed blood, I’m going to get you blood.”

I growled to myself frustrated at being caged and unable to help Gage after I sicc’d a demon on him. “Blood, yes. Death, no.”

Gage’s eyes widened at my words before his eyes narrowed. “See? This is why we didn’t tell the others where you were. You would just use them against us.”

I pressed my hands against the barrier, willing it to go away though I know it is useless. “He won’t kill you. Just break the barrier and then he’ll stop.”

“No. Fucking. Way.” Gage snapped out between dodging and blocking each of the demon’s attacks. “Call him off, now.”

Their fighting took them around the room, and it only took a few moments to realize that they were headed my way.

If Gage refused to drop the barrier, I needed his blood to force it down. However, I wasn’t a hundred percent sure the demon would stop at just a single slice.

This was getting complicated.

The demon howled in delight, red dripping off his knife. He’s scored a long slice along Gage’s forearm. Still the demon didn’t stop.

“That’s enough,” I commanded, slamming my fist against the barrier. “Bring it to me.”

The demon hissed and ignored my call.

Fuck.

I couldn’t do anything from inside the barrier. My magic wouldn’t even reach him from here. It would just bounce back into the cell. My eyes darted around and terror ripped through me, I was helpless.

I couldn’t stop the demon. I couldn’t save Gage. Guilt and horror warred inside of me, unable to forgive myself for sending the demon after him in the first place.

And if he killed Gage?

The absolute devastation it would cause Zane to know that his friend died by his own hands was enough to make my inside churn. I'd done this. Every step I'd taken had been for my revenge. Every decision I'd made for the sake of getting justice for my mother. For the humans.

If Gage died because of my recklessness, I would never be able to live with myself.

"Gage!" I shouted, their fighting only feet away from me now. "Get inside the barrier."

"A little busy here," Gage gritted out between clenched teeth. Several cuts decorated his arms and sliced through the material of his shirt.

"Please," I begged, slapping my hands against the almost invisible wall. "Get inside the barrier."

"It won't stop him."

"I know."

"Stop distracting my prey, sinner." The demon snarled and snapped his teeth at Gage. "It's no fun if the killer isn't at his full strength."

Gage dodged another blow but, instead of continuing to go on the defensive, he landed a hard blow against Zane's beautiful face.

The demon's head whipped to the side, distracted enough that Gage could slip by him, darting to the other side of the barrier.

He sucked in breaths, swiping his face with his hand. He winced, glancing down at the cuts on his arm.

“Oh, God.” I stepped over to him, wishing for once that I had healing magic and not only the ability to destroy.

“Come, killer. That’s not how you play fair, hiding behind our woman.” Zane’s body moved with the poise of a panther, shifting more than walking toward us. “I’ve been waiting for this moment to see if you’re really as good as they say you are.”

The demon kept his distance, circling around us as he taunted Gage. Bloodlust curled around in his eyes, and I knew there was no talking him out of what he planned. I started this, and I would have to be the one to stop him.

“Gage,” I murmured, low enough only he could hear. “Stay behind me.”

“What?” He gaped at me, his jaw tightening. “No. If I can’t beat one pain-in-the-ass demon, I’m not worthy to be called a Sentinel.” He pulled two knives of his own from a magical pocket and palmed them. “Let’s finish this.”

“No, Gage.” I grabbed his arm. “You’ll hurt Zane.”

Gage’s head tilted slightly. “You should have thought about that before you set your fucking hound on me. I won’t kill him, but this won’t end unless one of us is bleeding.”

I dug my fingers into his arm. “You are bleeding.”

Blinking down where my hand touched him, Gage shook his head. “There’s going to be a lot more blood than this.” He shoved me behind him and faced the demon in Zane’s body head on. “You want a fight? You’ve got one. Bring it on, hell spawn.”

“Oh, I’m going to enjoy this,” the demon crooned before he shot across the barrier line, his knife poised and ready to plunge into Gage, going for the kill.

I couldn’t let this happen. It was my fault the demon went after Gage. It was my fault I was stuck in this stupid cage to begin with. While I didn’t agree with Gage all the time, I couldn’t let the demon kill him. Nor could I let Gage hurt Zane. He could mess up and do something unrepairable.

No, this was my fault. I had to fix it.

The second I made a decision, I threw myself forward. Someone called my name off in the distance. But it was too late.

The knife sank into my chest, just missing my heart.

Unending pain scorching through my body from where the knife stuck out of me like a pin cushion. My feet stumbled under me, and I fell against a hard familiar chest.

“Oh, shit, Eva.” Zane’s voice was no longer hard with the demon’s voice. “What have I done? what have I done?”

Zane kept chanting the same refrain as Gage peered down at me, his face stricken with horror and fear. “Eva, why did you...? What did you...?”

I reached a hand out to him, my vision darkening. “I couldn’t let him... kill you.” My lungs seized and I coughed. Pain sliced with each breath, blood dripping down my lips with each ragged exhale.

“Eva!”

The ground rumbled underneath my body, making me groan. If I died here, I

wouldn't have accomplished my goal. Once again, I would have failed to avenge my mother.

Except I couldn't find it in me to care. Zane and Gage were alive. The others were somewhere, coming, blurry figures standing over me.

"Are you happy now?" a voice, I think Luke, yelled. "Instead of fighting each other, we should be fighting the council."

My hand weakly waved out, trying to find Luke. "It's not their fault."

"Eva," Luke's broken voice made my heart ache or it was the knife in my chest. "I'm going to heal you okay, just stay still." His voice lifted, commanding in a way I hadn't heard outside of the bedroom. "Gage, hold her. Zane, I need you to pull the knife out when I tell you."

The voices grew quiet around me, my vision darkening further. All I could think was that to die surrounded by the men I loved wasn't such a bad way to go.

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“Did you ever love me?” I asked the man before me, his hair graying and balding on the top. “Or did you only want me for my powers?”

The man who called himself king chuffed a laugh. “Let’s not pretend this was anything other than what it was. I wanted a powerful mage to be my queen, the fact that you were beautiful was only an added benefit.” His beady gaze leered over my body, making the layers of my dress almost nonexistent.

“And you wanted to be in a place of power. You got what you wanted. So why are you complaining?” He lifted his golden chalice to his lips, gulping down the wine like a disgusting pig. Dribbles of the dark red liquid dripped out and stained his ostentatious golden shirt.

Gold. Gold. Gold.

That was all my husband thought about. Gold clothes, gold curtains, even our fucking bed sheets were golden. If I didn’t see the ugly yellow brown color again, it still wouldn’t be long enough.

The Kingdom of Phrygia hadn’t been poor when I appeared, per se, but they weren’t rich. Not like the neighboring kingdoms that were readying their armies to take the little place over. It was probably why Midas didn’t think too far into my background before he agreed to marry me.

Lady Eva of Barrowhallow. A made-up name if anyone had ever heard it. And yet, all I had to do was charm my way into the right party, rub arms and flirt with the right aristocrat, and then I was being invited to the palace, twirling around the ballroom in

a gown I'd sewn myself and jewels I'd glamourised to look real.

The king was smitten at the first look of me. Or at least in lust. When he learned of what I could do with my magic, he proposed that very evening. Years later, and here we were. The richest kingdom in the continent, no heir, and no closer to my revenge on the mages.

"We can't go on like this," My fingers trailed the satin tablecloth. "The mages are gaining more power every day. Soon, they will overrun the kingdom. Then the humans — you and your daughter included — will be nothing more than cattle to them."

Midas waved me off as he had every time we'd had this conversation. "The mages serve the crown. You are making something out of nothing, Eva. Go back to planning your parties and flower arranging. Don't you have a lover you've been keeping? Is he not keeping you satisfied?"

The nasty gleam in his gaze kept me from gasping at his question. It was no secret the king bedded whoever he wanted and often. Most nights, I didn't even bother waiting for him to call for me, knowing he'd have whoever was the newest prettiest noble in the court in his bed.

But the fact that he knew of Ferdinand made my gut clench with anxiety.

"I won't be brushed aside anymore, husband," I snarled, placing my hand fully on the table before him. "You are a weak and greedy man, who cares more for getting your cock sucked than your people. I won't let you be blinded by your pride."

He threw his head back and laughed, pouring himself another drink. "And what are you going to do about it, dear wife?" He spat the word like a curse and not an endearment. "You were nothing more than a gutter rat slut before I picked you out of

the crowd. You should be begging to suck your husband's cock every day for deigning to allow you to call yourself queen."

My magic burned underneath my skin, a snarling whirling infection that pushed and fought against my restraint. I could kill him right here. I could wrap my hands around that body part he loved so much and turn it into the gold he so adored. He'd never fuck me or any other unsuspecting young woman again.

Yet, it wasn't enough. It would only end with my head on the chopping block. Too many knew of my powers. Too many would look my way if my dear husband died by magical causes.

No, it had to be subtler, something a low born would do.

I calmly sat on the chair beside him, poured a glass of wine, and pushed it toward him. "You're right, husband. I have been nothing but wretched to you. I apologize. I just worry. You don't hear the way they talk about me when your back is turned."

Midas huffed, nodding. "No matter what I say about you, it wouldn't do for them to be talking ill of the queen. I will take care of it." He lifted the chalice to his lips and drained it once more. A loud wet belch left his mouth before he smacked his lips and leered at me once more. "Now, my love, show me how grateful you are to your husband."

I smiled prettily at him. "Oh, I already have."

The king stared up at me with a perplexed expression before his face turned red. His hand scratched at his throat as he fought against the poison that ran through his system.

I propped myself up on the edge of the dining table, lifting the goblet he'd been

drinking to my nose before sniffing it with a grimace.

“You poison yourself every day with this trite and never noticed I’d added something extra to it this time.” I gave the barest of smiles before setting the cup back on the table. “You are a sniveling, worthless excuse for a man. The kingdom will prosper once you are gone and I’m their queen.”

He reached out to me, his eyes full of wild rage, foam and spittle spewing from his lips. I laughed as he pawed at me, his strength leaving him too quickly for him to do any damage.

I pulled a cloth from my sleeve and patted my cheeks with a sniff. “Snow and I will mourn you in public, of course. But I will dance on your grave, knowing weak men like you will never run this kingdom ever again.”

Drawing in a deep breath, I screamed and stumbled away from the table. I thought of what my mother looked like that day in the square after the mages had gotten their hands on her. Her lifeless eyes staring at nothing, her mouth open in a silent scream. The tears flowed freely then, and I crumbled to the ground.

Guards rushed into the dining room, their swords drawn, eyes frantically searching for the source of my screams.

“Your king,” I shouted, pointing a finger at the already dead man, his face squished into his porridge. “Someone has poisoned your king!”

A guard coddled me close to him, while they called for a doctor. I sniffled and wailed into the guard’s chest, playing the grieving widow while, on the inside, I crowed with victory.

No longer would I have to simper and play the docile bitch for a hairbrained king. It

would be me on the throne and then real change could begin. The mages wouldn't know what hit them.

"This has gotten out of hand." Adam's voice filtered through the dining room.

My brows furrowed. Adam? What was he doing here?

The vision of my triumph melted away only to be replaced by a scene of his office. All five of my mages sat around the room. Anxiety, rage, and sorrow painted their faces. I would have expected Zane to be the worst of the five, since it was his demon who had stabbed me.

Right, I had been stabbed. I glanced down at my body. The gown I'd worn in the palace had been replaced with the dress I'd been wearing before, blood decorated the front of it, marring the violet color an ugly brownish red.

Was I dead? I didn't feel dead. Though, I suppose I wouldn't know how being dead felt. If being dead felt like any of my other dreams where my magic pulled me out of my body to spy on who I really wanted to see.

"You think?" Luke snapped, jumping to his feet. "None of this would have happened if you hadn't locked her away again."

"We agreed it was for the best." Adam tried to placate his friend.

"No, you decided," Blake snarled, Izzy growling at his feet. "You decided what was best, like you always do. No one else's opinions matter when it comes to the great Arch Mage." He spat the words as if they burned his mouth.

"They have a point." Zane stared down at his feet, his glasses in his hands. He lifted his head, and those beautiful hazel eyes hardened on Adam and Gage. "We should

have been working with Eva from the beginning to find a solution. Instead, you made it us against her.”

“The way it should be,” Gage interrupted. “It’s always been us against the world. Why should a woman be any different?”

“Because she’s different,” Zane roared, jumping to his feet. “And if you don’t see that, you are a fool and a coward.”

Gage stepped up to Zane, towering over the cleric. “I am not a coward.”

Zane laughed, a bitter sound in his throat. “You can face down death every day and still be a coward, because you refuse to open yourself up to others. You do more than hide behind your mask every day.” Zane’s face swung toward Adam. “And you, behind your position.”

Clearing his throat, Zane placed his glasses back on his face. “Unless it was unclear before, I stand by Eva’s side. I choose her.”

“We do, too,” Luke stated, while Blake nodded in agreement.

“And if you continue to fight against her, you’ll have to fight us too.” Zane’s eyes narrowed, a hardened edge to his expression that I’d only ever seen on the demon’s face.

“We don’t want to fight her,” Adam interjected, dragging his hands through his hair before throwing his arms up with a sigh. “We fucked up, alright?! Eva was right from the beginning. The council, sans Nick, was never going to compromise enough to let the humans be free. I thought I could change them, that I could get through to them.”

Adam shook his head and flopped back into his chair, his fingers rubbing his temples.

“Why did I think I was the one who could make a difference when my grandfather couldn’t get them to budge?”

“At least, you’re trying.” Gage turned away from Zane. “The last person they sent me to assassinate wasn’t even some high-powered mage. It was just some nobody with barely a blip of power.”

“What?” Luke’s brows furrowed. “Why would they choose someone like that?”

“I looked into it.” Gage pulled his small square from his pocket, flicking across the screen before holding it up to them. “They’ve been sending me after human sympathizers. Anyone who might cause a problem in the future.”

“Culling the herd before they can rise up against them.” Adam nodded with a serious tone. “I wouldn’t put it past them. I don’t know if my grandfather was aware of these, but I will get with Nick to put a stop to any executions that don’t have just cause.”

“What about the other council members?” Luke brought his arms crossed over his chest as he stared Adam down. “They won’t just let Eva live. Not after they find out that Beatriz died by her hand.”

Adam and Gage exchanged a look before turning their attention back to their friends.

“We’ll decide together,” Adam announced, earning an approving round of smiles from the others. “But first, we need to take care of Eva.”

My vision grew dimmer as Gage moved toward the door. “I’ll take care of her. After all, that knife was meant for me.”

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My mind crashed back into my body just as the door clicked shut. I shifted in bed, the softness of the mattress making me sink in so much that I feared I couldn't get out. A masculine mixture of spices and something else that was all Gage filled my nose.

I must be in Gage's room then.

A creak and the slide of leather told me Gage had taken a seat near me. I waited for him to say something. Though my eyes were closed, I wasn't bothering to feign sleep.

"You were listening before, weren't you?" Gage's voice filled the silence of the room, and I rolled over until I faced the direction of his voice.

The dim light in the room did nothing to help the burning in my eyes as I squinted them open, peering over at his large frame bent over in his reclining chair.

"Does it matter?" I croaked and then cleared my throat.

Gage leaned forward and offered me a glass of water. "Partially. There's nothing Adam or I can do to make the others step down and let us take care of it."

I snorted before sipping my water. I held it back out to him, and he placed it on the side table.

"I don't agree with just killing people because you don't agree with the way they are doing things." Gage steepled his fingers in front of him. "I'd only ever taken assignments to kill those who were a true threat to peace and had malicious

intentions. But I grew complacent. We all did.”

I opened my mouth to respond, but he held up a hand.

“No, let me finish.” Gage shifted from his chair to the side of the bed, the mattress dipping toward him. “I’ve always just taken orders. Doing what I was told without asking why. I didn’t see the world the way you did, I thought that, if the humans were assigned as lesser, then it was for a reason. Who was I to question that reason?”

I narrowed my eyes on his use of the word lesser but didn’t interrupt him.

Gage’s hand reached out, and he rubbed the ends of my blonde hair between his fingertips. “Zane’s right. I am a fool and a coward.” His dark gaze landed on mine. “A fool for following the council’s orders without question. A fool for believing that just because it looks like a duck and quacks like a duck doesn’t mean that it’s a duck.”

My brows furrowed at his words.

He laughed at my puzzled expression. “It’s an analogy. What I mean is I judged you based on your actions and not the reasoning behind them. You shared your story with me.” His fingers shifted from my hand to where my hand sat against my stomach. “And while I know you were doing it to frighten me, it made me realize something. Villains aren’t born, they’re made by the choices we make. You weren’t born to be evil, Eva.”

His eyes bore into me over his mask, and my fingers itched to pull that last barrier away from his face, to have him fully open up to me once again.

“A series of events caused you to take one extreme and then the next.” His fingers laced with mine, and he lifted it up to cup his face. “I stay away from my mother and

sister because I know that, if something were to happen to them, I wouldn't stop until I burned the world down looking for their killer. You're just a daughter who lost her mother, a lover who lost her love, and the only person in this godforsaken world that makes me want to question the why of everything."

He curled my fingers beneath his mask and pulled it down. Three times now I'd seen him without the cloth and, every time, he was breathtaking. The first time I'd seen his face was the old me, the second time because we were playing the 'who would fold first' game, but this time, this time Gage was opening himself up to me as who I was now.

Not sweet innocent Eva. Not someone he thought he had to save or save others from. Just as me. The Evil Queen and all.

My fingers formed to his face, sliding along his cheek to cup his jawline. My thumb brushed over his lower lip, slightly larger than his top one. I lifted up from the bed, and surprise colored me when no pain shot through my shoulder.

Gage must have read my expression. His other hand found the neckline of my dress, the old one covered in blood having been replaced, and brushed the material aside. Unblemished skin appeared where there should have been at least a scar of where I'd been stabbed by Zane's demon.

My skin burned where the supple leather of his gloves stroked my skin. I licked my lips and glanced up at him, a question in my eyes.

"Luke's best work by far," Gage murmured, those fingers dipping to brush the top of my breast. "I swear, they almost killed me for letting you get hurt. I'd never seen Zane so irate before, even though we assured him it wasn't his fault."

"It wasn't." I placed my hand on top of his, holding it to my heart. "I set the demon

loose on you, it was my fault.”

“Is that why you stepped in?” Gage’s eyes flicked up to mine, a vulnerability there I’d never seen before. “Because you thought it was your fault?”

I rolled my lips, trying to explain the agonizing panic that had ripped through me when I realized the demon meant to kill Gage. “Partially, yes.”

“You could have just used magic to stop him. Or let me handle it. I wouldn’t have killed him.” His hand loosened to drop from me, but I held on tighter, leaning toward him to capture the back of his neck with my other hand.

“Gage,” I breathed, shaking my head. “You really are a fool.”

I crashed my lips against his before he could protest, pressing his hand to where my heart raced in my chest. This stupid stubborn man just couldn’t believe that I jumped in front of him for a glaringly large reason.

For a moment, he froze against my mouth. Then his free hand tangled in the hair and angled my face so he could kiss me deeper, longer. Gage kissed me until my head felt light and my toes curled. We were both panting by the time we broke apart.

Gage pressed his forehead to mine. “That wasn’t... that wasn’t your powers, right?”

A stuttering laugh came out of me. “My compulsion? No, I didn’t use it on you. You kissed me back all on your own.”

“That’s what I thought.” Gage nodded against me. “I just needed to be sure.”

Lifting my head away from his, I stared into his eyes. “I don’t make a habit of using my powers on those I love without their consent.” I paused for a moment, thinking.

“Unless they’re being a huge ass and refusing to let me come.”

Gage chuckled darkly, then his eyes widened as if realizing what I’d said. “Those you love?”

I pressed my lips to the side of his lips once and then the other side. “You can’t hide me away like your mothers and sister.”

Gage smirked down at me. “I think you’re a little bit harder to kill than them.”

“You think?” I grinned.

He lifted my hands up from where they rested in our laps, pressing my hands to the sides of his face. My breath caught in my throat at the implications of the position.

“Use me.” Gage’s eyes darkened, his tongue darting out to wet his lips. “I took away your choice by locking you up, not once but twice. Now I’m giving you my choices. Use your... compulsion on me. Use me, punish me, find your pleasure in me.”

“Gage, I...” I swallowed thickly. No one has ever offered themselves to me fully the way he was right now. I’d used my power on lovers before, but those were passing fancies. Not someone I loved. Not since Ferdinand.

“Things will never be even between us until we make this right.” Gage pulled one glove off and then the other, dropping them to the ground. “I made you vulnerable. Now it’s your turn to do the same to me.”

My eyes followed his fingers as he unsnapped his belt, pulling his shirt up and over his head, My hands moved from his face as I gaped at his muscular build. I hadn’t realized how much muscle this man had on him until he was bare before me.

My fingers traced down the bulging muscles of his chest, my nails scraping against the defined abs of his stomach. God, the things this man could have done to me with this much strength, and he wanted to give up all his power to me.

“Are you sure?” I murmured, not afraid to admit I was drooling a little bit.

Gage chuckled, a dark masculine sound that zipped straight between my thighs. “If the look on your face is any indication, I’m more than sure.” He grabbed my hands once more, placing them back on his face. “How do you want me?”

I chewed on my lower lip for a moment, thinking of his words and the balance between us. A slow wicked grin filled my face as I poured my magic into his mind. His eyes glossed over and his body relaxed, waiting for my command.

My fingers moved from his face into the short bits of his hair, before angling his head to the side so I could whisper into his ear. “Lay on the bed.”

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I had to admit watching this strong, massive man, who could snap me like a twig, give complete control over me was a heady feeling. I watched Gage with hooded eyes as he moved to the center of the bed. He laid flat on his back, his eyes up at the ceiling.

I released a bit of my control, letting him move his eyes where he willed as I knelt at his feet.

I could have used my magic to undress him, but there was something so intimate about taking someone's clothes off for the first time. I wanted to savor every moment of it, not sour it with magic.

My fingers unlaced one boot and then the others, my eyes locked on Gage's where he watched my every movement. I could let him speak and move on his own, using persuasion to have him do what I want rather than complete control.

But this was what he wanted. He needed us to be even, and I wasn't about to deny him that desire.

The front of my dress dipped, Gage's eyes following the exposed skin. The side of my lip ticked up as I leaned over his waist, my mouth pressing to the dark line of hair that disappeared into the waistband of his pants. My eyes flickered to his, my fingers making quick work on the buttons on his pants.

"Lift," I murmured quietly.

Gage's hips arched up. My mouth watered with each inch of him that came into view.

The length and girth of him had my pulse racing. My body warmed, softening at the thought of having inside of me.

With the mage stripped bare, I straddled his lower legs as I brought my face down to his impressive length. My eyes locked with Gage's dark ones as I lowered my mouth to kiss softly along the ridged flesh of his cock. I brushed against the tip of him, knowing he couldn't do anything but take what little or as much as I gave him.

I wanted to hear him beg. To have him at the edge but unable to come. If he wanted punishment, I was more than willing to give it to him.

Unable to thrust into my mouth, he had to stay completely still while I lowered my mouth over the head of him. I sucked him tightly into my mouth before releasing him with a pop and a coy smile. "I bet you're regretting your decision about now."

I sat up, one hand playing lightly with the length of him while the other dragged the neck of my gown over one shoulder. I pulled that arm out and then switched hands before doing the same thing with the other.

Gage's eyes went from my hand to my breasts. The hunger and desperation burned along my skin, making my nipples pebble.

"You know," I leaned forward, my breasts hanging over him so that the tips brushed along his stomach, "I could fuck you just like this, You would feel me but wouldn't get to watch." I pressed an open mouth kiss to his abs before grinning up at him. "But I'm a benevolent queen."

I whipped the dress over my head, leaving me bare and hovering over his length. "I would hate to rob you of seeing me take every," I sank down onto the tip of him and groaned, "single," another inch disappeared inside of me, "inch." I gasped as I thrust myself all the way down onto him.

Blinking at him, I breathed heavily, allowing myself to adjust to the size of him. My hips rolled, and I felt every long thick inch of him bumping against the end of me. “Fuck, you feel so good.”

Placing my hands on his chest, I arched myself forward slowly before sinking back onto him with one long stroke. A ragged cry of pleasure ripped from me. My nails biting into the flesh of his pecs.

“Gage, ah, so good,” I cried out again, my head falling back as I rode him.

My eyes locked with his, and I could see the desperation in his gaze. I picked up his hands and placed them on my hips, releasing just a little bit of him from the magic. “Make me come, and I might let you come, too.”

The veins in Gage’s neck flexed, his jaw tightening. I want to hear his voice, hear him beg for it, but not yet.

As soon as my magic released their hold on his hands, Gage gripped my hips and lifted me up, shifting me to a different angle before slamming me back down on his cock.

A loud screech ripped from my throat. He did the motion over and over again, hitting a place in me that made my legs wobble and liquid to come gushing out of me.

Gage continued to rock me over his length, even as I collapsed on top of him. The door creaked open, and a startled gasp dragged my head to look over my shoulder.

“Shit, sorry,” Adam muttered, stepping back to shut the door.

“Wait.”

Adam paused at my voice, his eyes lifting to the ceiling before slowly moving back to where I pushed back up into a sitting position. Gage stopped moving me, his eyes locking on the man behind us.

“Stay,” I commanded, almost a question. I jerked my chin at the chair next to the bed. “You can make sure that I don’t overstep.” I smirked down at Gage, rolling my hips on him once more as I locked his hands back down.

There was a moment of hesitation before the door clipped shut and Adam sat on the empty leather chair. He pulled out his little red book, pretending as if he wasn’t looking.

My hips undulated against Gage, enjoying Adam’s attention that darted from his book to me every few moments.

After a moment, his gaze took in our position and the unnatural stiffness of Gage’s body and he frowned. “What’s wrong with him?”

“He’s being punished.” I gave a coy smile, sliding my hands up his abs and chest before dragging my nails back down them, his muscles twitching under my hands.

Adam’s throat bobbed, his expression torn between concern and desire as watched me start to ride Gage once more. “Should I be stopping this?”

Assuaging his concern, I released Gage’s voice allowing him to speak. “Adam, if you don’t shut the fuck up, she’s not going to let me come.”

“You want to come?” I moaned, cupping my breast before slipping a finger down to my clit, rubbing it in tight quick circles.

“Yes,” Gage gasped. “Please let me come.”

“You beg so prettily.” I gasped and bucked my hips.

Adam watched intently, his hand adjusting himself in his pants.

A wicked idea came to me as I looked at Adam. “Touch yourself.”

Adam’s eyes widened. His hand gripped his book tighter.

“You can come when Adam does,” I said to Gage with a salacious smile.

Gage's eyes rolled up, sweat beading on his forehead. “Fuck, Adam. Do what she says.”

I slowed my hips, watching intently as Adam put his book away. His hands expertly undid his pants, and he had his cock in his hand moments later.

Matching my hip movement with Adam’s strokes, I moaned and dug my nails into Gage's chest, leaving crescent moon shapes in his flesh.

“Faster,” Gage told Adam, his eyes darting between me and Adam. “Fuck, please, Adam.”

To my delight, Adam’s hand moved faster, tugging and fitting his tip, his face pinched in concentration.

“Tell him how good I feel, Gage,” I purred, lifting up so Adam could see where we were connected.

Gage grunted and panted, gasping out his words. “Fuck, she’s so wet, I can feel it dripping down my balls.” I squeezed my inner muscles around him to make him groan. “Tight, like a vice. If she wasn’t keeping me from coming, I wouldn’t last.”

Adam's breathing increased as his hand quickened.

I licked my lips, showing him exactly what the sight of him was doing to me.

A moment later, Adam grunted and long white streams of come shot out of him.

“Now,” I whispered, letting the magic holding Gage completely go.

One moment, I was on top of him and the next, he roared and had me on my back. His hips pistoned in and out of me so quickly and brutally that I forgot how to breathe.

Gage bent my knees up to my shoulder, snarling in my face as he fucked me. “I’m going to fill you up with so much cum that it's dripping out of your deviant, wicked cunt.”

My back bowed, I came undone as I laughed and moaned at his words. The movement stuttered Gage's thrusts, and he was coming in moments, filling me with his warm release.

Gage sighed and sank his forehead down to my chest, releasing my legs.

I combed my fingers through his hair with a content hum, my eyes drifting to Adam.

He watched us with envy and a desperate kind of need that made something in my heart clench. Then, without a word, he cleaned himself with magic and walked out.

Gage lifted his head to where the door shut and then back to me. “If you can forgive me, the ass who claimed he’d never love you, then I think you can give him a chance.”

I pursed my lips in thought before pressing my lips to his brow. “Maybe.”

Forgiving Gage was easy. He’d been clear from the beginning about his thoughts and feelings on the council and me. Adam had not.

His heritage aside, it was difficult to forgive the lies he’d told me. But, with every passing moment laying there with Gage, it was becoming easier to push past his betrayal and my pride.

The only thing standing in our way were two mages who were still out for my blood.

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It almost felt like a lifetime ago when they had first brought me to their home, a quivering, innocent damsel, overwhelmed by this new world and the men who had saved her.

Now, I walked down the same hallways, a different person but still the same. Izzy barked and growled somewhere in the house, and the thudding of feet told me Blake was chasing her. I passed by the windowed doors of the chapel and saw Zane laying on a bench, his eyes closed.

The temptation to enter was strong. There were so many things that I needed to say to him. I knew he blamed himself for what happened, and I wasn't sure anything I said would make him listen. Instead, I dropped my hand from the window and stepped back.

I needed to talk to him and yet someone else pulled at my mind. Someone else dragged me by my heart from the chapel and down the hallway until I could hear the clattering of dishes in the kitchen.

With a hand on the door frame, I watched the scene before me. My heart swelled, thinking back to the time it had been me trying to make a simple dish and failing on my own. Adam hadn't hesitated to show me how, his body warm and hand wrapped around mine while my heart pattered in my throat.

Now, Adam stood alone in the kitchen, a pan on the stove, and yet his eyes weren't watching the food he cooked. They stared off at nothing at all, his brows drawn together and a little frown on his lips. I wanted to kiss that expression away.

“It’s going to burn,” I said to announce my presence.

Adam flinched and glanced down at the pan, a curse slipping from his lips before he turned the stove off and sat the pan aside with a long sigh. “I suppose I’m too distracted to cook right now.”

“Maybe,” I mused, sliding into the chair at the island.

My eyes tracked Adam as he moved around the kitchen, putting a cup beneath the machine for coffee and pushing a button. The scent of freshly brewed coffee filled the air, and I inhaled it. One of my favorite smells in this time outside of the men I loved so dearly.

“Coffee?”

I glanced away from the machine to where Adam held up a lavender colored mug, a pretty flower decorating the side of it. I smiled at the sight. “Yes, please.”

Silence spanned the room while Adam made coffee. He poured the milk cream into my cup before sliding it to me. Leaning his elbows on the island, he held his own cup and stared at me.

I matched his gaze, wondering what was on his mind. He didn’t give anything away. His face was like a puzzle I wanted to solve. For once, he wasn’t using his little red book to hide behind the awkwardness.

“I wanted to—”

“What happened—”

We both stopped talking, and I flushed, wiggling in my seat before nodding at him.

“Go ahead.”

Adam placed his cup down and pulled at the nape of his neck. “Look, what happened with Gage, I don’t expect anything from you. I mean, I understand if it was just an ‘in the moment’ thing. You’re not ready to forgive me and I get it. I do. If there was something I could do to make it up to you, I would do it.”

I grinned over my cup. “Are you offering to be my toy like Gage?”

Adam’s throat bobbed deliciously, and the thought of having Adam at my mercy thrilled me more than it should have at that moment.

“If that’s what you want.”

I sipped from my cup and watched him over the rim. “I would love nothing more than to have you begging for me, Adam.”

His eyes darkened, and it took everything in me to stay still and not launch myself at him right then and there.

I couldn’t, not yet. There were things that still had to be said.

“But I don’t think a bit of bondage will fix what’s broken between us.” I arched a brow at him.

“No,” Adam breathed out. “I suppose it won’t.”

“You lied to me,” I stated matter-of-factly.

“I did.”

“You pretended you didn’t know who I was.” The rage I’d felt when I previously thought about his transgressions wasn’t there this time.

“I know, and I’m sor—”

“I’m not done,” I interjected, locking my gaze with his. “Not only did you withhold information about who I was, but you didn’t give me the choice to fall in love with you the right way. With me knowing exactly who you were.”

Adam licked his lips, waiting for me to let him speak.

“I hate Snow,” I admitted, tracing my finger along the edge of my cup. “I hated her father and everything he represented. Even more so, I despised the mages who tortured and killed my mother simply for loving one of them. You knew all this and still you hid it from me.”

I paused for a moment and then breathed out, “Why?”

“Because I wanted—”

“Don’t tell me it was to protect me. You didn’t know me. I was an evil queen in a madwoman’s diary. You had no reason to want to protect me.”

Adam didn’t speak for a moment and then his voice came out low and pained. “I... I was ashamed.”

“Ashamed?”

“When I read the diaries, I thought they were just ramblings of a madwoman. Someone who was paranoid up until the day she died. It wasn’t until I decided to cross reference the diaries that I realized they might not have been so crazy.”

Adam placed his cup down and stepped around the island, stopping near my hands. “This woman my ancestor spoke of was fierce, vindictive, and as cruel as she was beautiful. She blamed all her problems on Snow, even after she was locked away. And yet there was no history of this ruler. No mention of an evil queen who killed her king and was locked away in a tower.”

I snorted. “Snow saw to that.”

“I know.” Adam’s fingertips touched mine. “While she left the diaries, she left us woefully unprepared for the magnificent and terrifying creature inside that tower.”

I wasn’t sure if I was offended or pleased by his description of me.

“I thought I was going into that tower to slay a monster.” Adam paused, clasping my hand. “Then I saw you...” His thumb stroked mine in a slow and hypnotizing motion. “God, you were so beautiful. I couldn’t reconcile the monster Snow had described with this woman before me.”

“To be fair, I wasn’t in my right mind then.” I breathed out a breath, closing my eyes. “I sometimes wonder if that’s how I would have been, had I not been forced to watch my mother die.”

Adam pinched my chin, turning my face to him. “You needed to experience her death to be the strong and fierce woman you are today. I wouldn’t wish that hurt on anyone, but I also wouldn’t want you any other way than the way you are right now.”

I placed my hand on his and pushed it away from my face. “And yet you fought me at every turn. You tied yourself to Rebecca.” He opened his mouth to protest. “Even if it was fake, it still hurt me. Then you locked me up... again! You say you love me, Adam. But maybe it's the version of me that you think I am that you love. Not me. Not the Evil Queen.”

Adam grabbed my face between his hands and pulled my face close. “You are NOT evil.”

His mouth slammed against mine, pulling a small whimper from me. As soon as it happened, he pulled away.

“You killed Master Tuck.” He kissed me again.

“You caused me all kinds of headaches.” His hands were in my hair this time when he kissed me.

“Then when you disappeared, I almost died from worry.”

When he kissed me this time, I kissed him back, grabbing onto his shoulders with as much fierceness as he held me. I tried to deepen the kiss, but he pulled away with a smirk.

“Do you know how much paperwork you’ve made for me? How many hours I spent with Gage destroying any evidence that you were responsible for the party, the tower, and then Healer Beatriz? I’ve spent more time cleaning up after you than doing my job.”

His thigh shoved between my legs as he dragged me off the chair and into him. “Then I had to watch as my friends turned from me one by one, falling for you just like I have. The jealousy I felt knowing that you let them touch you, kiss you, and yet I had to keep myself apart.”

Adam ground his thigh against my core. “All I wanted to do was hide you away from everything. To spank that delectable ass until you forgot all about your revenge.”

I moaned against his mouth, grinding myself down on his leg.

“But no.” He jerked back, breathing heavily. “You had to be a pain in my ass and get caught.”

I frowned at him. “You caught me.”

“No,” Adam growled. “Jetta knew you were coming and was going to make you one of his experiments. I convinced him otherwise. If Gage and I hadn’t been there to stop you, you’d be strapped down to one of his tables now. I can’t think about that without wanting to kill someone.”

“Then why didn’t you let me kill him?” I shoved at his chest. “If you’d just let me get rid of them, this would all be over now and we could be together.”

Adam grabbed my arms, not letting me pull away. “Because they would vilify you.”

I blinked at him.

“If you killed the other council members, their friends would make sure that everyone knew that you did it. Nick’s plan to have you show the world you were fighting for the humans was a good idea, but it wouldn’t have gone the way you all wanted.”

I shook my head, disbelief in my voice. “That’s not true. They want to be free. There are other mages who want to free humans, too. Rebecca and Nick both said so.”

Adam gave me a sad smile. “That’s true in part. But don’t think for one moment that they wouldn’t let you take all the blame if the other regions came to fix the problem.”

“And I’m a problem that needs to be fixed?” I gaped at him, unable to believe what he was saying.

“No, no, Eva.” He smoothed his hands down my arms. “You’re not a problem.

You're mine . You're ours . And I'm going to help you destroy the council and free the humans. Because you were right. If I don't take a stand, no one else will. I won't let you be the scapegoat for a half-assed revolution."

Adam released me and stalked out of the room along with my heart.

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I laid between Luke and Blake, their fingers moving along my bare flesh after we'd spent the last half hour reacquainting ourselves with each other's bodies. A deliciously pleasant ache throbbed through my body. I didn't know how I was going to keep up with having so many lovers, but I was eager to try.

"Do you want something to drink?" Luke kissed my shoulder, his chest pressed into my back. "Or food?"

Part of me preened at their attention. The other half knew I needed to hydrate and eat before I let anything else happen, or I'd pass out for real.

"Hmmm." I shifted against them, my backside finding Luke hardening against me already. "My body says I probably should..." I reached back and grabbed his butt, rubbing myself against him, while reaching for Blake's face. "But I can't seem to think of a single thing I want to eat."

Blake's chest rumbled with his laugh, his mouth meeting mine in the middle. He let me languidly kiss him, his brother's fingers sliding between us to cup my breasts, grinding his length between the crease of my butt.

My stomach made an angry sound.

Blake pulled away with a laugh, his lips brushing against mine. "Food first. Then..." He shoved two fingers inside of me, making a curling motion that had me gasping for breath. "We'll see how many times we can make you come before you pass out."

I rocked my hips against his hand and then whimpered at the loss as he pulled away.

“Fine, hurry up.” I shoved at him and Luke, lying back on the bed with my arms stretching above me. “Feed me and then fuck me, not necessarily in that order.”

Luke and Blake had matching wolfish grins on their faces as they dragged their pants on and darted out Luke’s bedroom door.

A few moments after they left, someone knocked on the door. I sat up on the bed, dragging the sheet around me. Most of them had seen me naked already, but I couldn’t be certain it wasn’t someone else.

“Come in.”

Zane’s red hair popped into the doorway. His inquisitive eyes peered around the bedroom before landing on me on the bed. They darkened with desire and then his expression closed off.

“Eva.” He cleared his throat, pushing his glasses up his nose. “I wanted to talk to you for a moment, if you would like to dress.”

I leaned back on my elbow, peering up at him beneath my lashes. “No.”

Zane’s brows rose. “No?”

“No, I won’t get dressed, and we’re not doing this, Zane.”

Hurt slashed across his expression and he swallowed, touching his glasses again even though he’d already pushed them up. “Oh, alright. I understand. I won’t bother you anymore.”

I threw my head back and let out a long-aggravated sound. “Damn it, Zane. That’s not what I meant.”

“I’m sorry?” Zane paused at the doorway, half in half out of the room. “I don’t know what you mean then.”

I pulled the sheet off my body, curling up onto my hands and knees and crawled toward him. “I mean, shut the fucking door and kiss me.”

Lust burned through the hesitancy in his actions, his eyes eating up every exposed inch of me. He didn’t seem to even notice when he was suddenly next to the bed with my hands on his pants. “Eva, we can’t. The demon—”

“Can wait his turn.” I jerked his pants open until he fell out into my hands long, hard, and all mine.

“No, I mean...” Zane tried to step away from me, but I stroked a hand down him, cupping his balls. “Fuck, Eva. I don’t want to hurt you.”

“You won’t.” I pressed myself against him. “We’re not having this conversation, Zane. I don’t care what happened. It wasn’t your fault. I like to play with your demon, and I let him get out of control. So you can either sulk about something you can’t control, or you can fuck me right now.”

“But weren’t you with Luke and Blake just now?”

I leaned back on the bed and spread my legs, bringing him to my entrance. “Does that bother you? I could shower first.” I smirked coyly. “You could help.”

“No, it doesn’t.” He shook his head, pulling his glasses from his face to tuck into his shirt before chucking off the rest of his clothes. “What if they come back?”

“Oh, they will,” I told him, directing him inside of me. “And they too can wait their turn.”

We didn't take our time. We were both ravenous to have the other. The need to be close after such a traumatic event drove us with each thrust and kiss. By the time the twins came back, my back arched and my hips stuttered against Zane's, crying out my release.

"Well, it looks like we're sharing," Luke commented from the doorway, not at all put out by Zane's presence.

Zane pulled out of me suddenly, spewing his climax across my breasts and stomach. A savage look, his eyes burning red, flashed over me before they faded back to hazel.

I stroked my hand down Zane's back, brushing his hair behind his ear. "I guess I'm getting a bath after all."

Zane choked out a laugh, pulling back to see the mess his demon had made. "My apologies, he showed up so quickly."

I sighed. "It's alright, Zane. It's the universe telling me I can't just spend all my time in bed."

Zane lifted me into his arms and carried me to the bathroom while the twins cleaned up the bed. He sat me on the bench in the shower and turned on the spray, angling it away until the water warmed.

"I know you said you didn't want to talk about it..."

"And I don't," I reminded him, a content sound coming from me as Zane dragged the spray across my body.

"I know, but I need to talk about it." Zane knelt before me, peering up at me in between the steam. "This is going to keep happening. Sometimes you'll be able to

control him and, other times, he'll control me and then someone is going to get hurt or worse killed."

I busied myself untangling his hair from his braid, dragging the strands out to the sides. "Zane, I know what I signed up for."

"But I can't let you be with me like this." Zane leaned me back against the wall, slowly wetting my hair before stroking the spray down the rest of my body.

At first, I thought he was going to make this something sexy, and my body clenched in anticipation before he hooked the sprayer back on its hook.

Zane clasped my hands with his own. "I'm not going to lose you over this. I couldn't live with myself if you or one of the others died because of him."

I let out a frustrated growl, wrapping my hand in his hair, tugging him toward me. "And I can't live without you. Short of sending your demon back to hell, what do you want me to do?"

Zane peered up at me, his eyes widening.

"What?" I squinted at him. "What did I say?"

"Send him back to hell."

Zane shifted until he sat between my thighs, pulling my free hand to the sigil on his chest. "Do it. Send him back to hell and then we won't have to worry about him coming between us anymore."

"Are you sure?" I peered down at him with a frown. "I thought having him gave you most of your powers."

Zane shook his head, furiously. “I don’t care. I’d rather have you and lose my powers than watch you die. Please, Eva. Do this for me.”

I stared at him, not sure what I was hearing. He loved me enough to give up his most powerful asset just to be with me.

“What’s going on?” Luke stepped into the bathroom, the steam hiding most of us in the shower. Another set of footsteps told me Blake had joined him.

Eyes locked with Zane’s, I called out to them. “He wants me to send the demon back to hell.”

“Good,” Luke said.

Blake snorted. “Do it.”

“See? Even they agree with me.”

I shook my head at him, not completely convinced. “I could hurt you during the removal.”

“It’s a risk I’m willing to take. Unless...” Zane’s brows pinched together. “Do you not want me unless I have the demon?”

I cupped his face with my hands. “No, no. That’s not it at all. I love you, Zane. And, while the demon does have his moments, he’s not you. The only reason I let him touch me at all is because he’s wearing your body.”

“So you wouldn’t miss him if he was gone?” Zane asked, his fingers trailing over the spot where I’d been stabbed. “I know that you enjoyed his particular flavor of violence.”

I smirked. “If I want to have someone rough me up, all I have to do is piss Gage off. After the way I edged him, I’m sure he’s more than happy to return the favor.”

“Oh, I’ll do it.” Luke shoved his head into the shower, the spray wetting his hair quickly.

Blake pulled his brother back with a snort. “We both know you’re more of a pleasure dom than anything. You wouldn’t know how to torture someone.”

“And you would?” Luke shot back, shoving his brother. “I could give her pain, too.”

“I doubt it.”

“See?” I pointed at the two of them arguing. “Plenty of volunteers to fill that role. There’s no need to worry.”

Zane let out a hard breath. “Good. Then do it.” He pressed my hand harder against his sigil. “Burn him out, send him back to hell.”

My magic came to life, pressing into Zane’s chest through my hand. The brown-green of his eyes turned to molten red. The hand holding mine now tried to shove it away.

“No, you’re not getting rid of me that easily.”

I grinned at the demon, pushing more power into the mark. “Sorry, looks like your time here is done. Say hello to Master Tuck for me.”

The demon hissed and snapped his teeth at me, trying and failing to remove my hand from his chest. The power burned against my palm, and I knew it was working. This wasn’t my first exorcism.

A few choice words and the demon yowled, his head thrown back, the veins in Zane's neck bulging before his head fell forward in a sag.

I removed my hand from his chest, the sigil crossed out no longer holding any power. My hands cupped Zane's face drawing it up, brushing my fingers across his brow. "Zane, are you alright?"

His eyelashes fluttered and then he blinked, his lips curving into a relieved smile. "He's gone. He's finally gone."

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Thoroughly sated by Luke, Blake, and Zane, I fell asleep curled up between them all. For the first time in a long time, I didn't dream of my past or of what the others were doing. I was completely content.

I shifted in bed, between my thighs was deliciously sore. My brows crinkled. The heat I'd fallen asleep pressed up against wasn't there anymore. The door clicked open, and familiar leather gloves slid over my bare shoulders. The prick of scruff scraped against my skin.

"Wake up, beautiful." Gage kissed my neck, his hot breath on my ear. "We have a surprise for you."

Groaning, I reached behind me, sliding my fingers into his short hair before tracing his bare face. "I think my legs don't work."

Gage chuckled. He looped his arms beneath me and lifted me out of the bed, sheet wrapped around me. "Then I will have to be your legs."

"Where are we going?" I squealed, giggling as I clung to him.

We rounded the bed and stepped into the bathroom. Gage sat me on the counter. He flipped the water on, his eyes darkening as they swept over my sheet covered form.

"Time to get the queen ready for her court."

"Oh?" I purred, smirking at him. "Are you going to be my attendant, Gage?"

Gage caged me in with his large muscular arms. "I'll be whatever you want me to be." He leaned toward me.

My hands cupped his bare face, amazed at how easily he let me see his face now. My fingers stroked his strong jawline, thumb brushing his lower lip.

"Fuck," he breathed, leaning into my touch. "I forgot how good it was to be so exposed."

My lips curled up. "And this isn't even your best feature."

Gage chuckled, and it was all man and sex and dark promises in the night. "Baby, you haven't even gotten the full extent of it. Next time, I'm in charge."

My head tilted up to meet his lips. He ravished my mouth, his tongue stroking and thrusting.

I moaned and arched into him. A tug and sharp pull released my body from the sheet, and my legs parted to accept him.

Gage grasped my butt, dragging me closer to the edge so he could grind himself against me.

I gasped in his mouth, still sensitive from last night, and fumbled for the hooks on his pants. I needed him out and in my hand, inside of me, right now.

Releasing my mouth with a reluctant groan, Gage grabbed my hands. "We don't have time. They're waiting for us."

The desire that lit my body on fire faltered. "What? Who?"

He pecked my nose and stepped back. Those dark eyes skimmed over my naked form. I throbbed for him, my legs instinctively spreading further for him.

With a painful groan, Gage held out his hand. “Come on. Let’s get you ready to meet your court.”

Suspicion made my lips twist to the side, but I slipped off the counter and followed him to the shower. My eyes stayed on Gage while I soaped my body up, moving in slow tantalizing movements.

His eyes tracked each movement. His tongue wet his lips. Feminine pride swelled inside me.

I turned, giving him my back. “Do my back?”

His large hand took the scrubber and brushed it across my back in more of a caress than an actual cleaning. Once he got to the swell of my butt, he let out a low growl. The scrubber plopped to the ground as his hands cupped my cheeks, slick with soap and water.

“The things I want to do to this ass, Eva.” A sharp slap. I yelped and moaned. Fingers slid between the cheeks, circling my back entrance before finding me wet and aching for him. “Do you know how hard it was not to be able to touch you?” His fingers tickled across my folds, touching everywhere but where I wanted.

“Gage,” I whimpered, thrusting my hips back toward him. “Please.”

“That’s it, baby.” He pressed just the tip of one of those thick fingers inside. “I’m going to make you beg so beautifully. We don’t have time for everything I want to do to you right now but this?” He thrust the digit teasing me fully inside. “This, we have time for.”

I scrambled to find something to hold onto, going up on my tiptoes with each thrust of his finger.

Gage pressed a button on the shower controls that I'd never been able to figure out, and a sharp spray shot against my side. Gage twisted me toward it.

"Holy, fuck, Gage." I bowed over the water pounding my clit, my thighs quaking already. "I can't... It's too much. Please."

I whimpered at the emptiness. Two fingers shoved back inside me, thrusting and curling inside of me until my legs gave out. Then Gage was there, holding me up, his clothes getting soaked by the sprayer.

He hit another button on the shower and the water turned off. Gage gathered me into his arms, my head lolling against his shoulder. He sat me on the counter while he toweled me down, being far gentler than he'd been in the shower. With a small spell, his clothes were dry again.

"Think you can stand?" Gage asked, his lips ticked up at one side.

My lids heavy, I placed a hand on his bicep. "You're all wet."

Gage chuckled. "I think that's my line."

"So what's this surprise?" I asked after we entered the bedroom.

Gage helped me into the dress he'd brought. This one, unlike the sweet knee length dresses I'd worn with them before, was made of silky emerald green that smoothed over my body like a lover's touch. A long slit exposed one leg from my hip to my foot.

Kneeling before me, Gage stroked up my calves as he strapped a pair of gold high heels onto my feet. When he stood to his full height, he reached into a pocket dimension and pulled out a golden crown with long points. No jewels decorated it, but it didn't need them. This crown was fierce and strong.

And when he placed it on my head, I felt it.

"They may not see you as a queen, but we always will."

My eyes burned with emotion. "Gage... I..." I licked my lips, emotion catching in my throat. "Do you remember what you told me in the park?"

Gage peered down at me, silent for a moment, then his hands were on mine. "Eva, I've been in love with you since the first time I saw you in the kitchen. All curious and full of wonder at this new world. It scared me."

My heart stuttered at his words.

"Then you turned into this vicious and confident thing that had me so hard that I didn't know how to come to terms with this new side of you." He stepped closer until our breaths mingled.

"I love you, Eva. And I'm scared that someone or something will take you away from us. So much so that I agreed to lock you up again even though I knew it was the last thing you would want and I will spend the rest of my life trying to make it up to you."

I beamed up at him, taking in every word of his declaration.

"Say something, would you?"

Peering up at him beneath my lashes, my lips curled up at the sides. "I knew you'd

give in eventually,” I purred.

Gage growled and dragged me against him, his hands on my butt. “You are just looking to get spanked, aren’t you?”

A knock on the door kept me from answering.

Luke stepped into the room, his eyes immediately finding me. “Wow, Eva. You look... amazing.”

Pulling away from Gage with a flirtatious smile, I headed toward Luke. “Thank you. Maybe you can tell me what the big surprise is all about? Gage refuses to budge.” I shot a hot look over my shoulder at the mage.

Luke looped my arm through his and led me from the bedroom with Gage trailing behind us. Their silence should have scared me.

Except I finally knew I could trust them completely. Whatever was waiting for me wasn’t going to hurt me. And when I stepped into the living room and saw my surprise, my heart swelled with so much love that I thought it might burst.

Cleric Jetta and Conjuror Carisa were bound and gagged on the living room floor, glaring up at me.

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A vicious grin took up most of my face, almost hurting with how it pulled so hard on my cheeks. My gaze slid over the two council members and over to where Adam stood beside them.

His eyes widened slightly before he trained his face into a determined expression. Blake and Zane kept guard on the other side, their eyes sweeping over me in a mixture of awe and desire.

“What’s this?” I held my skirt with one hand, my other holding onto Luke’s arm as he led me forward. I trailed my nails over Jetta’s face, flicking the glasses on his nose. “I thought I was going to have to sneak out to find you two, but here you are, all trussed up for me like it’s Yule day.”

Jetta jerked away from me.

I laughed, then turned my attention to Adam. “What’s this about?”

“I wanted to apologize.” Adam placed a hand on Carisa’s shoulder. She flinched at his touch, her snake slit eyes narrowing on him. “And show you that I’m on your side. You were right. So, we found these two for you, an apologetic offering, if you will. It’s your decision what happens next. Either way, I’ll make an announcement, and the humans will be freed.”

I shot a look at the two council members and then back at Adam. “So you would be okay if I snapped their necks right here in your house?”

Adam didn’t even flinch. “If that’s what you want.”

I stepped up to him, walking my fingertips up his chest. “And if I wanted to rip them apart, cover myself and all of you in their blood? What would you say to that?”

Gage grunted from behind me. Knowing my words turned him on made me want to do it, just so he could fuck me over their bodies. And maybe I would, but I needed to hear it from Adam. That he’d stand by me if I chose to let my vengeance take control.

To my surprise, the dark hooded gaze Adam gave me made my thighs slick with need. “Then I’ll help you clean up the mess. Either way, no one will know it was you.”

This had me stepping back. “What?”

“I want you to get your revenge.” Adam reached out and brushed my blonde hair over my shoulder. “However, we’re not sure letting the public know that you were the one who caused this change is a good idea.”

I frowned, my insides swirling with confusion and rage. “Why?”

“Eva,” Zane stepped in, his voice soft. “If the people see that an outsider killed their leaders and made all these changes...”

“We’re afraid they’ll try to take you out next,” Luke interjected with a sad smile. “Can you blame us for not wanting to lose you?”

I opened my mouth to snap that I could take care of myself, but Blake spoke up then.

“We know you can take care of yourself, Eva.” Blake brushed my arm with his hand. “But you don’t have to do it alone anymore. We want to take care of you. Protect you from this world. Please let us protect you.”

I peered up at Blake, unable to be angry at the pleading in his voice. Would it be so bad to let them take care of me? I'd been on my own since I was a kid.

Sure, I had Katana, but I was more of her student than her child. She didn't tuck me in at night. Didn't tell me stories when I was scared.

Even married to Midas, I didn't feel loved, protected, or wanted. Not the way the five of them have made me feel.

"And did you talk to Rebecca and Nick about this?" I chewed on my lower lip. "This was their plan."

Adam pinched my chin and turned my gaze back to his, his thumb pulling my lip from between my teeth. "They're on board and actually agree this is the better idea. I'm the Arch Mage. It's not unheard of for a new generation to make such drastic changes."

"What are they going to say when their bodies show up?" I gestured toward the two bound mages.

Jetta's expression had turned chalk white, his eyes wide as sweat beads down his brow. Carisa yelled through her gag, struggling uselessly against her bindings.

"They won't even know they're dead." Adam smirked. "We already had paperwork created with the charges being brought up against them." He shot a look at the two of them, a hard look in his eyes. "The many, many illegal activities they participated in. To the public, they will be shipped to a high security anti-magic facility, and new mages will be appointed to their position on the council."

"Us," Luke announced happily.

I twirled around to look at them. “You? You’ll be the council?”

Gage shrugged a shoulder. “Why not? We know how we want the world to look in the future. We want this to be a place where everyone feels safe and free. And with you by our side,” he held his hand out to me, and I clasped it, “we can do anything.”

Those words filled in all the cracks of my heart. While I stood surrounded by the men who loved me, I found that the anger I’d been holding onto for so long, the rage that kept me going every single day, was... gone.

I didn’t know when it happened. When did I become... happy? Fulfilled? My situation wasn’t conventional by any means. It would scandalize the ladies of the court, definitely.

But the thought of those ladies finding out their queen had five men worshiping her made me smile.

Standing in front of the two council members, I pressed my lips together. They deserved to die a horrible, terrible death for what they’d done to the humans and mages. They deserved to have their insides ripped out and intestines fed down their throats until they choked on them.

But...

The desire to be the one to do it was gone.

Turning to my men, I placed my hands on my hips and smiled. “You know what? They’re all yours.”

Looks of confusion and disbelief came back at me. Like they didn’t understand what I was giving up right then. Or if they did they couldn’t believe I would just not want

it anymore.

That made two of us.

I hardly believed what I was saying, and yet it rang true. I didn't want their deaths. At least, not by my hand. I didn't care about them. I finally achieved my goal to save the humans. The only thing I hadn't gotten was revenge on Snow.

My gaze locked with Adam's. This man. This man was the descendant of the woman I hated so much. She destroyed all my years of planning and sacrifice. She took the only man I ever loved — which wasn't true now.

I had them. All five of them had my heart and I had theirs.

The question was... was that enough?

I looked at Adam, and I didn't want to hurt him. I didn't want to blame all my problems on him and his ancestors. It wasn't his fault.

It wasn't his fault.

He lied to me. To protect me, to keep me from hating him at first sight, which I would have. Without question, as soon as I got my memories back, I would have killed him right then and there.

It didn't matter that he was sweet and self-sacrificing. That he read stupid dirty books whenever he was uncomfortable with a conversation. I would have watched the life bleed from his eyes and laughed.

The thought of Adam's lifeless face made my heart hurt. I didn't want to kill him. I wanted to kiss him. I wanted to love him and let him love me.

Giving up some of my control to these men who wanted nothing more than the best for me might be hard. It would take time to let go but I trust them. They would always have my best interest at heart, and that was why it was so easy to just give this one thing.

This symbol of my long fought war, I didn't want it. Not now, not ever. Not anymore.

Reaching for Adam, I smiled softly. My hands cupped his face as I leaned in. "Do what you want with them. I don't care."

"Are you sure?" His arms wrapped around me, the hesitancy in his voice clear. Like he thought I would change my mind at any moment. "This is everything you wanted. Everything you fought for."

"No. It's not. This." I pressed my forehead to his chin. "This is what I want. You. All of you." I glanced to the side, before lifting my eyes to his once more. "I love you, Adam. I don't care that you lied or that Snow was your great-great-great-however-many-great-grandmother. I just want you."

Adam hugged me tightly against him. "About forty greats to be accurate and if you're sure then..." He shot a look at Gage, who walked forward confidently as he drew his knives.

"Eva!" Luke shouted. "Watch out."

I didn't even get a chance to look before Adam shoved me to the side, throwing out a bolt of light. A squeal and then something wiggly shot up into the air. Smoke sizzled off what used to be a snake on the ground beside me.

A snap and hiss jerked our attention to Carisa as she pulled the gag from her mouth, her face seething with rage. Snakes crawled up her body, wrapping around her arms.

“If I’d been able to talk, I would have begged you to kill me right then so you could spare me of your disgusting display of love and...” She gagged, her head darting to the side. “Nauseating devotion.”

Fire burned from my palms. “You should have stayed where you were. I was showing you mercy.”

“Ha!” She threw her head back and laughed, “Mercy? Just like a pathetic human.”

Another snap and Jetta was on his feet. Dark magic billowed around his hands. “You’re going to let us leave, or we’ll tell everyone about your little human here.”

Every one of my men turned at their words, their own powers coming to the forefront. Izzy appeared out of a glowing purple portal, and Blake’s eye glowed as he prepared to attack. Luke created daggers out of pure light, while Zane had his own dark magic wisping around his hands. If possible, the muscles in Gage’s arms bulged and grew larger, his magic sweeping through his body in a show of power.

“You’re outnumbered and outpowered,” Adam said matter-of-factly. “There’s only one way out of this, and that’s death. You’ve already proven yourself untrustworthy, so that threat you just made will only make your deaths more violent.”

Carisa lifted off the ground, her eyes glowing with her powers. “Then death it is.”

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Everyone moved at once in a blur. Izzy snarled and went straight for the snakes slithering across the ground before they reached me. Even with five mages attacking, it seemed our opponents only cared about one thing.

My death.

Gage sliced. Jetta dodged, quicker than I expected for someone like him. I saw him as the studious type, and that did not work well with the way he was moving.

Shadows billowed out of Jetta's hands, twisted and turning into several shadowy figures. They immediately went on the offensive, attacking Gage and throwing Luke across the room.

I tried to help. I really did. But every time I had a clear shot at one of them, one of my men stepped in the way. All I could do was stand on the sidelines and watch as the ones I loved fought for me.

Blake and Izzy killed Carisa's summons as soon as they appeared. Adam finally got his hands on the conjurer, his electricity coursing into her while she hissed and snapped her unnaturally long canines at him.

The scent of burning flesh filled the air, and Carisa gasped, clutching at her chest. Then she was down.

Gage sliced at the shadows, growling when they would just slip through them and reappear.

Zane appeared at Gage's side. "I've got this. Go for Jetta."

Luke got back to his feet, coming at Jetta from the back.

"You and your human whore will pay for this," Jetta snarled at them. "You think the other regions will just go along with your changes? You're all dead."

"No," Gage snapped, grabbing him by the throat, his knife poised in the air. "You are."

Gage shoved the blade deep into Jetta's stomach, while Luke's light knives sliced and carved up the conjurer's back. The sounds the mage made as they cut and bled him would echo in my dreams for weeks to come.

Eventually, Gage dropped Jetta to his feet and, with one smooth movement, sliced him across the throat. Jetta collapsed on the ground, his eyes wide forever frozen in fear.

Blood splatter covered anyone who was close by, which was basically all of them but me. I thought I would have felt useless, helpless in that moment. And yet, watching them fight for me – for us – made me feel more powerful than I'd ever felt in my life.

Blood and carnage decorated the ground and across each of the men. The sight should have disgusted me. If anything, it only made me want them more.

They had spilled blood... for me. Something I never thought or expected to happen. At least, not so directly. After all, they'd planned to kill them. Gage's knives being out proved that.

However, seeing how viciously and mercilessly they had absolutely destroyed our enemies had my body heating in the most inappropriate way.

Adam lifted me up and walked us out of the reach of the blood.

“Wouldn’t want to ruin that pretty dress,” Adam murmured, brushing my hair from my face before lowering me to the ground. “And that’s what I want too, Eva. I want you. Whatever you want. However you want me. I love you, Eva.”

His mouth pressed against mine, sucking and nipping my lips before drawing my tongue into his mouth. I sank into his embrace, giving into every emotion that had warred inside of me the last few weeks.

Standing here with my enemies’ blood and bodies littering the floor at my feet, kissing one of the men I loved, I couldn’t imagine a better ending to such a long and tiring journey.

Pulling away from Adam, I smiled coyly as I stroked his cheek. “Then maybe we get rid of the dress.”

I reached a hand behind my back and tugged the strings free. My dress pooled at my feet, leaving me bare in only my heels.

A low groan came from Adam, his eyes feasting on every exposed inch of me. The others were still there, watching but not moving in to touch me.

My eyes focused on Adam. This was our moment. Right here in front of all of them, with the still cooling bodies of our enemies at our feet.

“Eva,” Adam groaned, palming himself through his pants. “You have no idea how much I want you right now. But maybe we should...” He gestured to the council members’ bodies with a frown.

“No, now.” I stepped close enough to slide my hands up his chest, pressing fully

against him. His hands slid down my sides, tracing my curves before brushing the underside of my breasts. “Make love to me right here.”

“Do you want us to leave?” Luke said from off to the side, always the one to speak what the others were thinking.

Letting my gaze slide toward them, a wicked grin crept up my face. “Do you want to leave?”

“Fuck no,” Luke groaned, finding a spot on the couch, not caring that there was blood everywhere.

Blake sat next to him, his eyes boring into us as if it was the biggest event of the century. Which to me, it was.

Zane pulled his lower lip between his teeth, his fingers twitching at his sides. “If you don’t take her, Adam, I will.”

Gage grunted his agreement.

Adam glowered at them, his voice a low growl. “Hands off. You can watch, but no touching.” His tone lightened as he added, “This time.”

He grabbed me by the thighs and lifted me, and I wrapped my legs around his waist. His mouth found the spot between my neck and shoulder, sucking and biting until I moaned, grinding myself against him.

Adam lifted his head, glancing at me and then down at the ground before smirking at me. “You’re a bad influence on me.”

I grinned down at him. “Why’s that?”

Without warning, Adam dropped us down to the ground, cooling liquid touched my back. With one turn of my head, I was looking into Jetta's lifeless face. I barely had a moment to comprehend what was happening before Adam pressed my knees to my chest and slid into me.

I gasped. My back arched. Fingers grabbed for his shoulders. His hips thrust against mine, hitting me deep inside. He lifted my hips just slightly and then he was hitting a spot that had me seeing stars.

"Gods, that's hot. Why is that so hot?"

My mind couldn't focus enough to figure out who said it, and then Adam had my nipple in his mouth, sucking it hard before laving his tongue over it.

Curling my fingers into his hair, I held him close to me, each suck and flick of his tongue combined his hips thrusting into me to send me flying higher and higher until something snapped.

I arched, my eyes closed and my mouth open wide. I didn't even care that my hair was covered in someone else's blood. My release rippled through me, squeezing Adam inside of me.

That urged him on until he groaned loudly. His body tensed. Heat filled me, dripping out of me and onto the floor.

Each breath came out in a panting kind of groan, my body unwinding until everything was light and just... perfect. Everything was perfect.

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I lounged on my bed, a crunchy, salty snack in my hands. Each of the men had their own bedroom, and it just made sense for me to keep one as well. I didn't want it to seem like I was picking favorites.

Not that I slept in my room that often.

It had been a few days since the encounter that left an imprint on my life and what would soon be the world. Most nights, I ended up in one mage or another's bed. Sometimes with one of them, sometimes more.

I didn't know if the arrangement would stay that way in the future, but I was happy with it for now.

My attention flicked to the television across the room, my heart pounding in my chest, nervous for some reason for what was to come.

Adam stood with the others in front of a group of reporters on the television. They were all shouting questions at him at the same time, not giving Adam a chance to answer any of them.

Someone cast a silencing spell and, suddenly, there was blessed quiet. Adam placed his hands on the podium in front of him, his eyes scanning the crowd. A firm expression flattened his kissable lips into a straight line.

"It is with a heavy heart that I have to make this announcement." Adam glanced behind him at the others.

Each one of them stood proudly and confidently up there next to him. Them being there wasn't required but it showed the reporters and the world they were an united front.

I wanted to be there with my mages. To stand by their sides, while they told the world the script they rehearsed. But I'd had my time in the spotlight. I would still be helping make decisions as the representative for the humans. I just wasn't going to be out there on the front lines, where the human haters wouldn't target me.

The protectiveness of my men frustrated me sometimes. And yet, I understood it. I wasn't part of this new world. I didn't have years playing this world's court games, not like back in my time.

If I wanted change, it had to be with the faces of my men in the forefront.

Was I happy about it? Meh. But I was learning that life and love was about compromise. If it had been Ferdinand, I would have said absolutely not, which was why I think that what I felt for Ferdinand wasn't really love. Not true love. A love that was deep, dirty. and sometimes scary.

Like what I had with the mages who had saved me from my tower. The day they had saved me, I didn't know who I was. Then, once I had my memories back, I lost myself again in revenge. They saved me then too, not just from an eternity of solitude.

They saved me from myself.

“After the unfortunate accident involving Healer Beatriz, there followed a deep undercover investigation into Conjurer Carisa and Cleric Jetta. This has resulted in the discovery of multiple incidents of mistreatment of humans, experimentations on humans and mages alike, as well as a conspiracy to take over the council and remove all freedoms from humankind.”

The crowd shifted agitation at not being able to ask their Arch Mage questions. Whoever cast the silence was smart. Now, Adam could say what he needed to say without interruption and then take questions afterwards. Something like that would have been useful in my time.

“When confronted with their crimes, Conjurer Carisa and Cleric Jetta attacked me in my home. That assault ended in their deaths. Fortunately, no one else was killed or injured during the incident.”

After the fight and my and Adam’s impromptu love making, we had decided together that it would be easier and make more sense to explain what happened, but leave out a few of the important details that would lead to our arrest.

“With the council positions now open, Sentinel Nikolai and I have conferred and have agreed to the following replacements. Healer Lucas, who has recently passed his mastery exams, as well as his brother, Conjurer Blake, will bring a new and fresh view that our council needs desperately. Cleric Zane, who has a vast knowledge of our histories and several degrees in the mythical world, will bring wisdom and a sound mind for our future and those of future generations. In addition, Sentinel Nikolai has agreed to bring on Sentinel Gage as a consultant and extra protection during this time of transition.”

Adam let that sink in for a moment before continuing. “Our first act as your new council is to pass a certain proposal that was previously turned down because of what we now know were malicious reasons. This proposal will grant all humans the right to change jobs and report any and all abuse without fear of repercussion of their employer. They will be given a fair wage equal to what a mage would receive for the same work, regardless of magical abilities. We hope this will be the first step toward a new and glorious future.”

My eyes burned at his words. His eyes bored into me through the screen as if each and every word was for me.

It wasn't the freedom I wanted, the one that broke all the rules and forced the world to deal with it. However, it was a step in the right direction.

The screen changed over to where a new reporter spoke. "Well, that is something for the ages. I'm sure we will all remember this day for years to come. Now we turn it over to CeCe, where she is reporting on the riots and protests that have sprung up around the world after the announcement made by Neo New York's Arch Mage. Follow us on thi—"

The television turned off.

"Hey," I cried out, pointing at the screen. "I was watching that."

Luke chuckled, flopping onto the bed, stealing one of my snacks. "Look at you. No one would look at you and think you're from the middle ages. You are a slave to the television, just like the rest of us."

"I didn't expect you all back so soon." I glanced up from Luke to the others walking into the bedroom. "They must have had a lot of questions for you."

Adam smirked, leaning against the bedpost, his little red book out. "Unending."

"I told them to fuck off," Gage grunted, bending over to kiss me briefly. "We had other plans."

I laced my fingers with his and smiled fondly. "Is that so?"

"Oh, yes," Gage murmured, leaning his forehead against mine.

A presence appeared on my other side, my hand lacing with another's. Something warm and hard wrapped around my wrist, my arm pulled up above my head.

My head turned to see Zane securing manacles to the bed frame. A familiar grey and blue glowing cuff encircled my wrists.

“This has to be some kind of joke?” I tugged on the chain, the magic dancing through my veins filtering down to an inaudible hum.

“Oh, no. This is no joke,” Gage answered, clicking my other wrist with a matching cuff, my arm lifted up to join the other.

For a second, my mind thought the worst. Then I saw the predatory hunger in my men’s eyes and knew in my heart it was going to be alright.

Gage stroked a finger down my cheek, tracing my lips with the tip. “Did you really think you were going to get away with edging me the way you did without repercussions?”

“You asked for that.” I tried to point a finger at him but found my movements restricted. “You can’t punish me for something you begged for.”

“Oh, I did.” Gage dragged the blankets off of me, his fingers walking up the inside of my thigh. “And now it’s your turn to beg for us.”

“So you know,” Zane murmured, “I made a few modifications to your cuffs.” He slid an arm around my waist, pulling at the ties of my dress.

I half-listened to Zane, my eyes on the three men who were prowling toward the bed, all pretense of what this was out the window.

“The stasis spell was hard to replicate.”

“Uh-huh.”

Blake and Luke stripped out of their shirts. They were already hard and ready for me by the bulge in their pants.

“It was even harder to tweak it so that it only affected one particular part of you.” Zane murmured once more, his lips trailing down my throat, drawing the strap of my dress over my shoulder as he went.

“I’m sure it was.”

Adam had his cock in his hand, pumping it slowly as he crawled onto the bed.

“Eva.” Zane bit my shoulder, pulling my attention to him. “Are you listening?”

I swallowed, licking my lips. “Yeah... yes. You tweaked the cuffs. I’m assuming you’re going to let me out of these when we’re done?”

My mouth went dry. Adam’s mouth had found my ankle, his tongue doing delicious things with a part of me I never thought was erogenous.

“Eva,” Gage growled, his hand on my chin. “Zane is trying to tell you about the cuff. You should listen to him... carefully.”

I nodded, turning my eyes back to the cleric. “I’m listening.”

Part of me was listening anyway. The other part was thinking about Luke’s mouth on my knee, moving slowly up the inside of my thigh. Blake licked his palm and wrapped his fingers around his length, his hips jutting forward with each stroke.

Fuck, that was hot.

“Eva!” Gage snapped his fingers in front of my face.

I blinked. Focusing completely on Zane. "I'm fine." I swallowed and then gasped, Luke's mouth had found my aching center now. "Please. Tell me, Zane. A...about... the... ugghhh... cuff. Fuck. Please."

Zane's lips tugged up at the edges. "The cuffs still have the stasis spell on them, except its focus has shifted from keeping you alive..." He trailed his fingers down my chest to cup my breast in his hands. "To keeping you from coming."

"What?" I squeaked, Luke's tongue circling my clit. "For how long?"

Gage gripped the back of my neck, turning my gaze up to him. "Until we decide you deserve it. And you have been a very bad, evil queen. It might take all night."

"Definitely. At least an hour," Blake grunted, finally joining us on the bed.

Luke thrust his fingers into me, my hips bucking off the bed. "Until we fill every part of you with us."

"Do you think you can handle that?" Adam peered up from my leg, stroking up and down in a calming motion that did nothing to calm the raging storm inside of me.

My breathing came in short rapid breaths. The prospect of what was sure to be a long and torturous night glaring back at me. It might kill me.

And yet I didn't know any other way I wanted to celebrate this momentous occasion.

I grinned down at them, feeling powerful and more like a queen than I had in a long time. "Do your worst."