



The Panther's Price

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Category: Fantasy

Description: Lucien Umbraclaw was the Panther Queen's blade—loyal, lethal, and forged in obedience. He didn't ask questions. He didn't hesitate. And when his mother commanded him to hunt a girl in the Borderlands, he didn't expect to care who she was.

Until he found her.

Evryn Hale lived quiet. Hidden. Healing the sick and minding her secrets. She didn't know the blood in her veins once belonged to a royal line slaughtered generations ago. She didn't know the Court feared what she might become.

And she sure as hell didn't expect the panther prince to come for her.

He was supposed to kill her.

She was supposed to run.

But fate has other plans. Plans written in shadow and blood, claw and bone.

Because the second Lucien looks her in the eyes—

He knows he's already hers.

She was born to be hunted.

He was trained to obey.

But gods help the crown—he's about to betray it.

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ONE

LUCIEN

The Court smelled like secrets.

Lucien Umbraclaw moved through the marble corridor with the quiet menace of a shadow made flesh, his boots silent against ancient stone polished by blood and time.

His cloak whispered behind him, black and layered, its hem dragging hints of darkness like oil through water.

He didn't rush. No one rushed in the Court of Claws unless they were prey or foolish.

He was neither.

"Prince Lucien," a guard murmured, bowing low as he passed. The man's voice cracked on the name.

Good. Let it.

Lucien didn't glance his way. He didn't need to.

Let them remember what he was. What he had been made into.

He passed beneath twin statues of panthers mid-pounce, their stone fangs frozen in eternal threat.

Beyond them lay the Throne Hall—his mother's lair.

The heart of the panther kingdom. Cold, vast, cathedral-dark, and hung with black velvet banners that rustled without wind.

The air here was dense with old magic and older sins.

Lucien's breath misted, even though no cold should've lingered this deep in the heart of the fortress.

She always kept it this way. A reminder.

He stepped into the hall and was hit, as always, by the scent of her magic: smoke, violets, and the bitter sting of something long dead. Shadows curled along the edges of the space, licking the walls like lazy serpents. They bowed to her will, as everything did in this cursed place.

Queen Selyne Umbralclaw sat upon her onyx throne like a goddess grown bored with mortals.

Her hair was woven in silver braids sharp as wire, her skin porcelain under the dim light, and her violet-black eyes gleamed with that ageless, predatory patience that had earned her the crown two centuries ago.

"Lucien." She didn't rise. She never did. Power didn't rise—it summoned. "Kneel."

He didn't question.

He knelt. Because obedience had been bred into his bones, seared into the marrow by decades of training, of lessons carved in pain and praise. Because she was his mother. His queen. His creator.

His jailer.

“You summoned me.” His voice was low, sandpaper and smoke, deliberately calm.

“I did.” She stood now, silk whispering around her like a spell. “There is a problem. And you, my sweet knife, are going to carve it out.”

Lucien looked up slowly. Only to her collarbone. Never higher unless permitted.

“A name,” he said, voice flat. “Give it.”

She descended the obsidian steps with the elegance of a falling star. “Evryn Hale. Human, allegedly. Lives on the outer Borderlands. But she is not what she seems. The Sight is active in her, and... there have been whispers.”

Lucien’s mouth tightened. “What kind of whispers?”

“Old blood. Forgotten blood. She is no commoner. She is one of us. A relic of the royal line wiped out in the First Betrayal. Somehow, she survived. Somehow, she hid. And now she dares to exist.”

Lucien exhaled through his nose. A relic. A ghost.

A girl.

“Kill her.”

His body didn’t move, but something deep inside flinched. A moment passed, and his mother’s head tilted. “You hesitate.”

Lucien’s hands curled into fists behind his back. “I don’t question your orders,” he

said.

“But you question your heart,” she murmured, stepping close. Her cold fingers cupped his cheek, nails grazing his skin like little blades. “You were not made to feel, Lucien. You were not made to doubt. I shaped you in shadow, forged you in silence. You are mine.”

Her lips brushed his brow. “Do not disappoint me.”

The shadows stirred like crows in a storm.

He stood, rigid. “I’ll find her.”

She smiled. That terrible, beautiful smile. “Good boy.” She handed him a sealed paper with a satisfied smile.

He didn’t breathe again until he was alone.

Lucien paced the upper balconies of the Court’s west wing, ignoring the murmuring courtiers and wide-eyed servants who slipped out of his path like ghosts fleeing fire. His black hair hung damp against his neck, sweat slicked beneath his collar despite the cold.

Evryn Hale.

The name tasted wrong in his mouth. Too soft. Too alive.

And the whispers—royal blood, forgotten lines, prophecy—those were stories for fools and rebels. He’d buried enough dreamers in the name of order. He knew what believing got you. Dead, mostly.

But the hesitation...

That had been real.

Lucien leaned against the stone balustrade, staring out over the cliffs where the Shadowfell sea crashed below. The winds tore through the panther spires with a howl that sounded too much like mourning.

He'd killed for less than a name. He'd ended bloodlines on suspicion alone. Why was this different?

He pulled the folded parchment from his sleeve—the Queen's seal cracked and blood-red. Inside: a sketched likeness of the girl.

She wasn't beautiful in the traditional sense. Her hair was wild, curls tumbling down like the woods themselves had claimed her. Her features were strong, stubborn. Her mouth looked like it laughed too little and fought too often.

But it was her eyes that caught him.

Even in ink, they stared back—violet-shadowed, silver-gleaming. Unafraid.

Lucien's chest tightened. He crushed the paper and tossed it into the wind.

He could feel the Court's eyes on him even now. The guards. The nobles. The traitors. Especially Cassian. His little brother was probably already preparing his own moves, his knives hidden behind smiles.

Lucien couldn't afford softness.

His gaze lifted to the sky, where the moon hung crooked and low, silver over the sea.

He whispered the name. Just once.

“Evryn.”

Then he turned from the sea, summoned the shadows with a flick of his wrist, and vanished into them.

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TWO

EVRYN

The dream was sharper tonight. More teeth than shadow. More truth than memory.

Evryn Hale woke with her pulse pounding against her ribs like it was trying to claw its way out.

Her breath came in short bursts, her skin damp with sweat that chilled too fast in the cold air of the Grayridge flat.

She didn't scream. She never did anymore.

Not since the dreams had started whispering instead of screaming at her.

She sat up, pushing tangled curls from her face, and blinked into the dark. The moonlight spilled in through the broken blinds, laying silver stripes across the threadbare blanket and stained floorboards. Outside, the wind howled like it wanted in.

She could still hear it. Faint. Distant.

The voice in the dream.

Not words, exactly, just the ache of meaning. A knowing in her bones. Like her blood remembered something she didn't.

“Evryn,” it had said. Or maybe just girl . But it was always the same presence, cloaked in smoke and pain and inevitability. It never touched her. Just watched. Just waited.

She hated that most of all.

Evryn dragged herself out of bed and padded barefoot across the room to the sink, where the faucet groaned before sputtering out brown-tinged water. She splashed it on her face anyway, hissing at the cold.

“You look like hell,” a voice drawled from behind her.

She didn’t flinch. Just wiped her face with the hem of her tank and turned to face Eamon.

He leaned against the doorway, arms crossed, all scruffy chin and tired eyes. The kind of man who looked like he’d fought death once or twice and didn’t quite win—or maybe didn’t want to. His coat was the same dusty thing he always wore, patched and faded and soaked in road dirt.

“Nice to see you too,” she muttered.

“You were talking again. In your sleep.”

Evryn grimaced. “Was I?”

He nodded, stepping into the room and handing her a mug of steaming something. Probably bitter root tea again. The man brewed potions like witches were still trendy.

“Same dream?” he asked.

She didn't answer. Just sipped the tea and looked out the cracked window.

Grayridge was as bleak as ever, crumbling buildings slouched like old men, rusted signs swinging in the wind, streets lined with potholes and patched tar. The Veil's edge loomed faintly in the distance, a shimmer only she could see, like a mirage half-forgotten by the world.

"Something's shifting," she said softly. "I can feel it."

Eamon sighed. "You've been feelin' it for months, girl."

"Yeah, well." She shrugged. "Now it feels like it's feelin' me back."

He grunted, clearly unhappy with that response. "Might be time we moved again. This place's gettin' too warm."

Evryn turned to him then, finally meeting his gaze. "I'm not running, Eamon. Not again."

"You say that every time."

"And I mean it every time."

His eyes softened, even if the scowl didn't. "Stubborn."

She gave him a tired smile. "You taught me that."

"Yeah. My bad." He scrubbed a hand through his salt-and-pepper hair. "You've got gifts, Ev. But gifts attract eyes. We're not the only ones who know what the Sight looks like."

She bristled. “I’m not marked. You said so yourself. No House would even spit in my direction.”

Eamon stepped close then, hand gripping her shoulder. Not gentle. Not cruel. Just real . “That’s what I hoped. That’s what I prayed. But you’re changin’. They’ll come lookin’. And when they do...”

Evryn looked away again.

“I’ll be ready.”

Later that morning, the streets of Grayridge were a patchwork of fog and filth.

The mist rolled in from the old subway tunnels, thick as smoke, curling around the half-dead buildings like fingers.

The city squatted on the edges of what most people would call reality—a forgotten pocket where the line between the human world and the Veil Dominion blurred like smeared ink.

Most folks didn’t know the Veil existed.

Not really.

They passed by rusted doorways, crumbling stairwells, subway stations sealed since the ‘80s with concrete and warning signs—and never questioned what lay beyond. To them, Grayridge was just a dying district with bad lighting and worse rumors.

But Evryn could see more.

The Veil wasn’t a wall or a gate—it was a skin , a shimmer overlaying the world like

heat over asphalt. It cloaked entire cities, buried forests, drowned coastlines.

The Veil Dominion hid within it—a sovereign realm of shifters, old bloodlines, and magic that hadn't seen sunlight in centuries.

Thresholds to it were everywhere, if you knew where to look: cracked mirrors that didn't reflect right, alleys that twisted back on themselves, elevator buttons with no labels.

And most importantly, most dangerously —the Veil could hide people too.

Evryn kept her hood up and her hands in her jacket pockets, one wrapped around the bone-carved charm Eamon had given her years ago.

“Keep this on you,” he'd told her when she was barely thirteen. “Keeps glamours off. Yours and theirs.”

Because out here, you never knew who—or what—you were really looking at.

Most people didn't notice her. The regulars didn't care. Junkies, drifters, witches selling charm-ink and shadow-potions in alley stalls, their wares glowing faint under the Veil's skin.

But Evryn felt it today.

A shift in the air. A pressure behind her ribs.

A weight. Not quite seen. Not quite there .

But watching.

She ducked into the open-air market, boots crunching over broken glass and crushed leaves. Vendors shouted over each other. One offered rat stew. Another sold something that looked like bottled lightning in tiny vials corked with wax and spells.

The colors here always looked just a little wrong to her. A touch too vivid. The shadows a little too deep. The way the fog rolled—it wasn't natural . It moved like it had a purpose.

That was the cost of the Sight.

Evryn could see through the Veil .

Not just the shimmer—past it.

She saw the hidden streets that didn't exist on any map. She saw cloaked figures walking too smoothly, too silently. She saw beasts in business suits and tattoos that pulsed with living magic. Sometimes she wished she didn't.

She made her way to the edge of the stall line, scanning the mist-drenched alley ahead.

There. A flicker.

A figure.

Too still. Too focused.

The shadows clung to him wrong, like they weren't covering him, but part of him .

She frowned, heart thudding once—hard.

She turned, pretending to browse a table of cracked crystal charms and dreamcatchers tangled with what might've been real teeth.

The sensation prickled the back of her neck.

He wasn't just hiding.

He was folded into the space.

And he wasn't human. She knew that with the same certainty she knew her own name.

She reached for the knife strapped to her thigh beneath her coat. Just in case.

But when she turned again, the figure was gone.

Not gone like they'd walked away.

Gone like they'd melted into the fog.

Or worse, become it.

"Eamon," she snapped as soon as she returned to the flat, slamming the door behind her. "We need to talk."

He was already waiting by the window, rifle propped on the sill, cigarette burning slow in the corner of his mouth.

"You were followed."

"You saw?"

“I felt ,” he said, exhaling smoke. “Didn’t see a damn thing.”

“That’s not possible,” she muttered, pacing. “Unless...”

Eamon stood slowly, grabbing the charm around his neck. “Unless they ain’t human.”

Evryn froze. Her heartbeat tripped.

“You think it’s... shifter?”

Eamon nodded grimly. “Either that, or worse.”

“I need to know what’s happening to me.”

He sighed. “I’ve told you all I know, girl.”

“You trained me.”

“To survive,” he barked. “Not to inherit a throne. Not to glow when you’re angry. Not to hear damn shadows talkin’ in your dreams.”

She flinched. Then steadied.

“I’m not crazy, Eamon.”

“Didn’t say you were.”

“Then stop acting like I should run every time the wind breathes funny.”

“I’m actin’ like someone who’s buried good people ‘cause they waited too long to leave.”

They stared at each other, years of grit and grief between them.

He looked away.

“We’ll leave at dawn,” he said.

Evryn’s hands curled into fists at her sides.

“No,” she whispered. “I’m done running.”

She stood by the window long after he’d gone to bed, watching the fog crawl down the streets like it had a mind of its own.

She could feel the eyes again.

Somewhere out there, something was watching. Something dark. Something beautiful in the way predators were beautiful—sharp and silent and endlessly patient.

She was always the one to see things others didn’t but tonight, she had been the one who felt seen.

She knew she should be scared, worried. But for some reason, she wasn’t. She felt ready.

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THREE

LUCIEN

She knew he was there.

Lucien stood half-submerged in the mist curling along the alley rooftop, one knee balanced on the rusted metal frame of a forgotten billboard.

The city below was all peeling paint and flickering lights—Grayridge, the last gutter before the Veil swallowed the map.

The place where the rules thinned out and the monsters got bold.

She walked like she belonged here. Like the cracked pavement recognized her tread. Like the ghosts in the fog had learned to step aside.

But she knew .

Lucien had seen it. In the way she'd paused yesterday—just a second too long at the vendor stall with the bone charms. How she'd shifted her weight subtly, not out of fear, but calculation. Her hand had slipped toward her coat like she was checking a weapon, and her eyes... Goddess, her eyes .

They didn't just glance. They searched .

And then, she looked right at the rooftop where he crouched, even though he was

wrapped in shadow, his breath stilled, his pulse dropped low like they taught him in the early years.

No glamour should've pierced that. No human should've known.

But she did. His mother had been right.

Evryn Hale had the old blood.

Lucien shifted his weight and leapt silently across the gap between buildings. The shadows followed him like obedient dogs, clinging to his heels, cloaking him from the waking world. He landed with the grace of a falling leaf on the edge of a brick outcropping, eyes locked on her moving form below.

She wasn't panicking.

She wasn't running.

That... intrigued him.

Most marks either fled, fought, or pissed themselves the moment they felt him near.

But this one?

This one simply kept walking.

Lucien's lips twisted into a grim smile.

Dangerous. Not just because of her bloodline—but because of what she stirred in him. A flicker of interest. A sliver of respect. A spark of... something warmer he wasn't accustomed to.

No.

He shut that thought down like a door slammed in the dark.

She was a target. An anomaly. A threat.

He was following her, not killing her. And that alone told a story he didn't want to examine too closely. For now, he told himself it was because she was too unpredictable to just pounce. But, he knew that that was a lie.

Lucien slid into a lower perch just as Evryn entered the fringe of the outer zone, where the market ended and the real wild began.

This close to the Veil, things got messy.

Rules bled like wounds here. Half-shifted things prowled the alleys.

Desperate people with dead eyes sold secrets for sips of glamoured wine.

And she walked through it like it didn't touch her.

He crouched near the edge of a half-collapsed fire escape, watching.

Then he heard it, the unmistakable click of blades.

Three shifters slunk out of the haze, their forms barely humanoid. Unmarked rogues, wearing their desperation like armor. Patchy fur, elongated limbs, teeth too long to be human but too dull to be panther. Failed turns, maybe. Castoffs.

Their eyes gleamed with feral intent.

Lucien tensed.

He didn't move. He was trained for this. To wait. To study.

Evryn stopped walking.

She said nothing. Didn't scream. Didn't shake.

One of them stepped closer.

Lucien shifted his position, ready to intervene if she faltered—but curious. So curious. And though, he knew that he should let them take care of her for him.

She moved. She was fast.

The first thug lunged, knife flashing. She spun, sidestepped, and drove her boot into his knee. The sound of cartilage crunching echoed in the narrow space. The second came from behind, but Evryn dropped low, sweeping his legs and sending him into the trash-strewn wall.

The third hesitated.

Lucien could see it—the flicker in Evryn's eyes, the way her head tilted just a degree to the left. She wasn't reacting. She was reading them.

She saw . She knew where the strikes would land before they even came.

That wasn't instinct. That was Sight.

Evryn Hale wasn't guessing her way through a back-alley brawl.

She was hunting.

The last rogue ran.

Lucien remained still.

Evryn stood over the downed shifter, breathing hard, her fists clenched. Blood trickled from a split on her lip, but her stance was proud. Defiant. Radiant with raw, untrained power.

She didn't finish the fight with a flourish or threat. She just looked up .

Straight at him.

He knew it.

She couldn't see him—not fully—but she felt him again.

And this time, her lips curled at the edges. Not a smile. Not quite. But close.

Lucien's chest burned in a place he didn't remember having left open.

She wasn't afraid.

And he ...he didn't want to kill her.

Lucien retreated into the upper reaches of Grayridge just as the sun began to bleed through the fog. The color didn't warm the streets. It just made the rust glow a little more.

He entered the hollow of a building long since gutted by fire, where ash still clung to

the walls like mourning shrouds. His breath was measured. Controlled.

He had decisions to make.

She was Sighted. Powerful. More than connected to a forgotten bloodline that shouldn't exist.

The Queen's orders were clear, kill her.

No trial. No questioning. No hesitation.

Lucien stared at his gloved hands. The same hands that had taken lives for less than whispers. He had slit the throat of a nobleman's daughter because she might have known too much. Poisoned a warlock child with tears still drying on his cheeks.

But this girl? Evryn Hale?

Something in him refused.

She didn't scream when she should've. Didn't run when she could've. Didn't break when blood was drawn.

Lucien felt it in the marrow of his bones—this wasn't just another assignment. This was the beginning of something. Something far more dangerous than rebellion or prophecy.

It was the beginning of choice.

And choice was the one thing he was never supposed to have.

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FOUR

EVRYN

The blood on her knuckles wasn't hers, but it felt personal.

Evryn stood still in the alley, her breath fogging in the early dawn air, hands shaking only slightly as she stared down at the crumpled shifter thug groaning in the dirt. She didn't know what was louder—her pulse in her ears or the silence that came after the violence.

Something had shifted in her tonight. Not just her body, fast and sharp like a dancer with a blade, but something deeper.

She looked up.

There, on the rooftop.

A shadow.

No, not a shadow.

A man.

Black-cloaked, crouched like a panther ready to strike, still as stone but watching .

Her breath caught. Their eyes locked. And it was like falling—quick and cold and

without bottom.

She couldn't see his face in detail. Not really. But his presence slammed into her like a memory she couldn't grasp. There was darkness in him, thick as tar and twice as dangerous. But it wasn't just that.

There was grief. Bone-deep and brutal. And something else.

Loneliness, maybe. That particular kind of hollow that didn't come from being alone, but from being empty.

She should've run. She didn't.

He didn't either.

They just... stared.

And in that stretch of silence, something unspoken passed between them—like matching scars held up to the light.

He vanished a breath later, swallowed by the mist, like the night exhaled and took him back. Evryn's heart still thundered, but it wasn't from fear.

Not entirely.

By the time she got back to the flat, Eamon was already pacing.

"Hell, Evryn!" he barked, nearly knocking over a chair. "Where the hell have you—? What happened to your face?"

"Calm down," she muttered, tossing her jacket over the railing. "I'm fine."

“You’re bleeding. ”

“Barely.”

Eamon crossed the room in two long strides and grabbed her chin gently but firmly, turning her head to inspect the gash on her lip. “Who?”

“Three shifter thugs. Cornered me off Market.”

His eyes darkened. “You killed ’em?”

“Two. One ran.”

He grunted, stepping back. “You shift?”

“What? No.”

“You use the Sight?”

“I didn’t mean to.”

He gave her a long look, arms crossed, expression tight. “It’s happening more often, isn’t it?”

She didn’t answer, but her silence was a confession.

“I told you we need to go,” he said softly.

Evryn slumped onto the couch. It groaned under her weight, one leg shorter than the others. “There was someone else there.”

Eamon turned sharply. “Shifter?”

She shook her head slowly. “No. I don’t know. He was just... there. Watching.”

“And you didn’t run?”

“I should’ve. But...”

“But?”

She met his gaze. “I wasn’t afraid.”

That stopped him cold.

“Ev, fear’s not a weakness,” he said quietly. “It’s what keeps you breathing.”

She leaned her head back against the wall, staring at the cracks in the ceiling. “He didn’t feel like the others. Not like those rogues.”

“And how exactly did he feel?”

“Like a storm in a cage. Like the world gave up on him, but he’s still standing anyway.”

Eamon didn’t speak.

Evryn closed her eyes. “He saw me, Eamon. Like really saw me. Not like I’m broken or dangerous or weird. Just... me. I could feel it.”

Silence stretched between them.

“Girl,” Eamon said after a long while, “ain’t nothing scarier than someone who sees you.”

That night, the dreams returned. Only this time, the shadow wasn’t a monster.

It had silver eyes.

And when it reached for her, she didn’t flinch. She reached back.

Morning came with a sickly light, the kind that made everything look older and more tired than it already was. Evryn stood on the rusted fire escape, sipping lukewarm tea, watching the fog slither through the alley like it was hunting something.

She felt him again.

Not close. But not far. Like a cord tied between them, stretching just tight enough to notice.

“Still watching, huh?” she whispered.

She didn’t know who he was. Didn’t know what he was. But she knew he was out there.

Since she could remember, she didn’t feel like prey.

She felt like something else.

Evryn went out again that afternoon.

Eamon argued, of course.

“You got a death wish?”

“I’ve got groceries to get.”

“You’ve got me for that.”

“I’ve got legs. ” She smirked. “And trust issues.”

He grumbled the whole time but didn’t stop her.

She took the long way around the market. Avoided the alley where the rogues had cornered her. But she kept her senses sharp, shoulders loose, jaw set.

She caught no scent of him. No movement above. But the feeling remained.

That invisible tether. Tension in the air like before a thunderclap.

She didn’t speak to it. Didn’t look up. Just kept moving.

But every so often, her fingers would brush the bone charm at her neck, and her heart would whisper, I know you’re there.

That night, she dreamed again.

This time, he stood beside her in a garden overrun with shadow-roses. The sky above bled ink and ash, and still, she reached for him.

And this time he didn’t vanish. He took her hand and it burned like the truth.

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FIVE

LUCIEN

Lucien stood against the balcony's edge where the ivy hadn't yet strangled the stone. Aethermoor's twilight light cast the palace in dusky violet, painting everything in hues of secrets. This was the only place in the Court that still felt remotely honest. Forgotten. Quiet. Hidden.

He felt him before he heard him.

Cassian moved like a whisper in silk, all loose limbs and barely-suppressed mockery. If Lucien was a knife, Cassian was poison in a wineglass—just as lethal, but prettier when it killed you.

“You're getting slow, brother,” Cassian drawled from the shadows. “I've been watching you for a solid five minutes and not once did you try to gut me.”

Lucien didn't look at him. “Maybe I'm losing my energy.”

“Or maybe the girl's got you twisted up worse than a blood oath.”

Now he turned.

Cassian stood in the archway, leaning one shoulder against the stone, arms crossed over a velvet jacket that looked like it cost more than most commoners made in a year. His eyes were cat-slit and ice-pale, gleaming with the same cruel amusement he

wore like cologne.

Lucien's lip curled. "Did you come here to gloat or just to piss me off?"

"Neither." Cassian clicked his tongue, sauntering forward with lazy elegance. "I came because Mother asked for an update. And I—being the dutiful second son—am here to deliver."

Lucien said nothing.

Cassian exhaled a mock sigh. "So moody. All this brooding—anyone ever tell you it's exhausting to witness? You're like a statue someone spilled sadness on."

"What's the intel, Cassian?"

His brother grinned, all sharp teeth and charm. "Fine. Straight to it, then." He leaned in slightly. "The rebels are moving. Faster than we thought. Thalia's gathering numbers in the Wyrldlands. She's met with Grimhart emissaries. Rumor says she's looking for a queen to crown."

Lucien's jaw tensed. "Evryn."

Cassian tilted his head. "She fits the prophecy. Mostly. And the rebels like shiny symbols."

"She's more than a symbol," Lucien muttered.

Cassian's grin faltered. "What was that?"

Lucien turned away again, bracing his palms against the cool stone. "She's not what the Queen thinks she is. She's not just some stray with a bloodline. She can see me,

Cassian.”

A beat of silence. Then, laughter.

“Oh, she saw you? You mean the great shadowmancer, assassin of the Crown, feared blade of the Throne? Seen by a little Borderlands nobody?” Cassian chuckled. “Do go on. This is better than Court theater.”

Lucien’s voice was low. Flat. Deadly.

“I vanished into the Veil, cloaked in layered shadow, slowed my pulse. She looked straight at me.”

Cassian blinked. The laughter dimmed, but the smirk stayed. “So she’s Sighted.”

“She’s stronger than Sighted. She fought three rogue shifters without shifting, without flinching. Her instincts are tuned to magic like she was born to walk the Veil.”

Cassian made a face. “We were all born to walk the Veil.”

“Not like this.”

He didn’t know how to explain it. Not really. But when Evryn had looked at him—through him—it had sliced deeper than any knife. She hadn’t seen the weapon, the monster, the name whispered in nightmares.

She’d seen him .

Cassian sauntered over, perched lazily on the balcony ledge. “So why haven’t you killed her?”

Lucien's fingers tightened on the stone.

"Because every instinct I've spent my life sharpening is telling me she's not just important—she's necessary. She's not a threat to the throne. She is the throne."

Cassian raised a brow. "Sounds like prophecy talk. Mother will love that."

Lucien shook his head. "No. It's not prophecy. It's... real. Tangible. Like she's a key to something older than the Accords. Older than the bloodline war."

Cassian's gaze narrowed, calculating. "You think she's First Blood."

"I know she is."

"And if she is, that means she can either end us—or save us."

Lucien nodded slowly.

Cassian exhaled through his teeth. "You're protecting her."

"I'm studying her."

"Sure you are."

Lucien turned to him, silver eyes cold. "Don't start."

"Too late," Cassian said, hopping down. "You think you're better than the rest of us 'cause you wear guilt like armor. But you're still a killer. So the longer you keep her breathing, the more people you're gonna have to cut down when she doesn't pick your side."

“I don’t have a side,” Lucien muttered.

Cassian’s voice dropped to a low murmur, razor-sharp. “Then she’s going to die on someone else’s.”

They stared at each other.

“She’s not ready,” he said. “And if I don’t figure out what she is before Mother wants her—she’s dead either way.”

Cassian shrugged. “Then you better move fast, brother. Because the Queen’s patience runs thinner than her mercy.”

He turned, cloak flaring behind him as he walked back into the shadows.

“Oh,” he added, glancing back with a wicked smile. “Tell her I said hello next time you watch her sleep.”

Lucien didn’t respond.

He just watched the mist roll over the balcony and wondered how long he had before he had to choose what he was fighting for .

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SIX

EVRYN

The Veil didn't part like a curtain.

It pulled .

It hummed in her blood, in her bones. Like a song written just for her, played so low it made her teeth ache.

Evryn stood at the edge of Grayridge, the world behind her turning to rot and static. Before her, the alley shimmered—barely. Just a flicker to the left of reality, a stutter in the corner of her eye. Most people would pass by without a second glance, just chalk it up to smog or bad lighting.

But Evryn had the Sight. She saw it for what it was: a Threshold.

Not a place, exactly. More like an invitation.

Beyond the shimmer lay the Veil Dominion—the other world, the hidden one.

The realm of shifters, of Houses and Thrones and shadows that moved on their own.

She didn't know the names of all the places inside it, but she'd glimpsed pieces: cities blooming underground, temples grown from obsidian and whispering moss, old cathedrals tucked into cliffs where the sun never touched.

It didn't belong to humans.

But she had never really felt like one, had she?

The dream had led her here. That same silver-eyed figure, waiting in a garden made of ash and memory, whispering without words. This time, he hadn't disappeared. This time, his hand had reached back for hers.

So here she was, fingers trembling at her sides, the markless charm pulsing faintly against her chest.

Behind her, boots crunched gravel.

"Evryn, don't," Eamon called out.

She turned to him slowly. His coat flapped in the wind like something alive, and his jaw was tight, eyes darker than she'd ever seen them.

"I have to," she said softly.

"No, you think you have to. That's not the same."

"Eamon, I felt it. The dream. The place. This... pull."

His voice dropped. "And you think it's leading you to answers?"

Her jaw tightened. "Yeah. I do."

He took a step toward her, hands out. "Girl, you don't know what's past that line. You think Grayridge's bad? The Veil's worse. There are laws over there older than god, and none of 'em are kind."

“I see it. I’ve always seen it. This was never just about hiding from them. It’s about knowing who I am. ”

“Ev—”

Then it happened.

A blur. A rustle. Too fast. Too wrong.

A figure dropped from the rooftop behind Eamon—glamoured, sharp-edged, shifting like oil over glass.

Evryn’s scream ripped out before her brain caught up.

“ EAMON! ”

He spun too late. A blow landed, something hard and electric that dropped him to one knee. His hand went for his weapon, but another figure materialized behind him—two more, teeth flashing in the half-light, not human, not right.

Veil mercs.

House-branded ghosts.

She recognized the flash of House Sablewing colors—black and blood-red. Messengers. Memory thieves. Hitmen in ceremonial armor disguised as leather jackets and shadows. She remembers Eamon teaching her about them.

They grabbed Eamon too fast. One pressed a hand to his temple and whispered a word. Eamon’s eyes rolled back.

“No—NO!”

Evryn ran forward, the Threshold humming behind her like a warning.

The lead merc looked up. His gaze skimmed over her face—then paused.

His head tilted. Recognition flickered in his eyes.

Evryn didn't think. She turned and ran .

Straight into the shimmer.

Crossing the Veil wasn't like stepping through a door.

It was like being turned inside out.

Her bones went weightless. Her skin burned. Her thoughts felt slippery, like she was trying to hold onto water.

And then she dropped. Hard.

Her knees slammed into soft, moss-covered ground. Air rushed into her lungs like she'd been drowning.

The sky was wrong here—bruised lavender with black clouds curling at the edges. Trees stretched tall and skeletal, their trunks glowing faintly, covered in silver lichen that pulsed in time with no rhythm she could name.

The ground beneath her hands whispered.

Not with words, but with memory.

Welcome home.

She staggered to her feet, breathing hard.

Eamon was gone. Taken.

Her only tether to the world she knew had just been ripped from her life.

And here she was, alone in a forest that hadn't seen sunlight in centuries, her Sight flashing on instinct, making everything look too clear.

Branches curled like claws. A cathedral's spire jutted from the hilltop like a broken fang in the distance.

The Veil didn't want her here. But something else did .

She stumbled down a slope, following a flicker in the fog—a light that didn't flicker like fire, but pulsed with intent. Her charm glowed faintly against her chest.

She didn't know how long she walked. Time was thin here. Warped.

At some point, her legs gave out and she collapsed near a stream that whispered names she didn't recognize.

Her breath caught.

There was someone up ahead.

A figure. Standing at the water's edge. Not the one from her dream. A stranger. Hooded. Tall. Still.

Evryn didn't move. Her hand crept to her knife.

The figure turned slowly.

A woman—storm-gray eyes, silver hair woven into a long braid. Her face was lined with age and power, her presence immediate and full.

“Daughter of shadow,” the woman said, voice like cracked ice. “You should not be here.”

Evryn's voice was raw. “I didn't have a choice.”

“There is always a choice.”

Evryn stood. Shaky. Bruised. Gutted with fear. But not broken.

“They took someone from me.”

The woman looked her over. Not cruelly. Just... measuring.

“Then you will need allies. Come. There are worse things in these woods than me.”

“Who are you?”

The woman smiled without warmth.

“Once, I was called Thalia Shadeborn. Now? I suppose you can call me your last option.”

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SEVEN

LUCIEN

He watched her from the tree line.

She stood alone in the ruins of the train station, just past where the Threshold spat her out.

The fog clung to her boots. Her shoulders curled slightly, not in weakness—but in weariness.

She looked like a blade dulled by too many cuts, still sharp enough to bleed someone if they tried to touch her.

Lucien didn't move.

She was waiting. For Thalia, no doubt. The rebel queen with silver hair and a voice made of fire and honey. She'd left only moments before, murmuring soft promises—stay here, I'll be back soon, like the forest wouldn't try to swallow her up before she returned.

Lucien didn't trust soft voices. Especially ones that came dressed like saviors.

Thalia didn't want to save Evryn. She wanted to use her.

He knew the way Thalia operated. She spun loyalty like silk—wrapped you in it,

warm and tight—until you didn't realize you were choking.

Lucien moved. One step. Then two.

Evryn heard him before he reached her. Her head snapped toward the sound, fingers twitching at her side where a blade might be hidden. She didn't speak. Not yet.

She didn't have to. Her eyes said everything.

Who the hell are you?

And why does it feel like I already know you?

Lucien stepped from the fog, slowly. No shadow tricks. No glamours. Just him. Bare. Steady.

"I'm not here to hurt you," he said.

She didn't relax.

Smart girl.

"No one ever is," she replied, voice rough but steady.

He stopped a few feet away. Far enough not to threaten. Close enough to be heard.

"You're waiting for her to come back," he said. "Thalia."

Evryn's brows pulled together. "How do you know her name?"

Lucien tilted his head. "Because I've known her a long time. Long enough to know

she doesn't do anything without a reason.”

“She said she’d help me.”

“She said a lot of things.”

Evryn’s eyes narrowed. “You think I should just trust you instead?”

“No,” he said. “I think you should trust yourself. ”

The wind picked up then, catching the hem of her coat. Her curls whipped into her face. She didn’t flinch. Just stared at him.

Measured. Mistrusting. But not afraid.

That quiet courage again. The kind that didn’t brag.

“You’re the one I saw before,” she said softly. “In the market.”

Lucien nodded once. “You saw me when you shouldn’t have.”

“Because of the Sight?”

“Because of who you are.”

That made her hesitate.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean the blood running through your veins hasn’t walked the world in centuries,” he said. “I mean there are Houses that would kill to control you—or kill just to stop

you. Thalia's one of them. She just hides it better."

Evryn looked down then. Her hands curled at her sides. Her voice was quieter now.

"She told me she'd help me find Eamon."

She didn't know. Of course she didn't. And he couldn't say it.

Not yet.

"She might try," he said carefully. "But it won't be for you. It'll be for her cause. Her rebellion. She'll make you into a flag before you understand what it costs."

Evryn's throat bobbed with a hard swallow. "And you won't?"

Lucien stepped closer. The space between them thinned like paper.

"I don't need you to be anything."

She blinked, searching his face. For what, he didn't know.

A lie? A weakness? Something she could believe in?

Her voice dropped to a whisper. "Why are you helping me?"

He didn't answer right away. Because the truth didn't fit into clean sentences. Because he didn't know how to explain it.

How her eyes haunted his dreams. How every assassin's instinct screamed kill her, but his soul—what tattered pieces remained—refused. And that's why he stood here now trying to save her instead of end her. So, he settled with the only truth he knew

for certain.

“Because you’re not ready for the war Thalia’s dragging you into,” he said. “And I’ve seen what happens to people used as pawns in her game.”

Evryn looked toward the trees where Thalia had disappeared. Then back at him.

There was a flicker in her gaze—uncertainty, yes. But also something stronger. Something solid. Trust? Not quite. But something like it.

“I don’t know you,” she said. “I don’t even know your name.”

“Lucien.”

She blinked again. “Lucien... what?”

“Umbracław.”

She stiffened.

He expected that.

“The Queen’s son,” she said.

He was surprised at her knowledge, but then again, she hadn’t lived this long by being kept in complete darkness.

“I didn’t say I liked her,” he replied.

A pause.

To his quiet astonishment, she laughed.

It was a small sound. Tired. Almost bitter. But it was real .

“I must be losing it,” she murmured. “Following some prince through a haunted forest.”

“You haven’t said yes yet.”

She looked at him, the weight of her choice dancing in her eyes. Then she nodded once. Tight. Final.

“I want answers. If you lie to me...”

“I won’t.”

Evryn looked toward the dark, where Thalia had gone. Then she stepped forward, past the shattered stones, toward him.

“I’m not yours,” she said.

Lucien’s expression didn’t change. But something inside him did.

“I know.” He turned.

And she followed.

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EIGHT

EVRYN

They didn't talk for a while.

The forest shifted around them as they walked, swallowing the silence like it was just another ghost with teeth.

The trees here were tall and skeletal, gnarled roots curling up through broken stone like claws trying to remember how to grab.

The air smelled of ash and rain. Every now and then, distant howls echoed from nowhere—a chorus of things that used to be human but had forgotten how to act like it.

This was the Shatterroads.

Veil-born trails that twisted logic and space, paths that followed memory instead of maps. They ran between crumbled kingdoms and half-buried temples, laid atop bones of wars older than memory.

Lucien didn't offer direction. He just moved like he knew the way.

Always ten steps ahead. Always watching the shadows. And always saying nothing.

Evryn followed.

Because where else could she go?

Her boots crunched quietly over dead leaves and shattered charms scattered along the path—bits of old wards and broken glamours, cast off like snake skin. She clutched her coat tighter and eyed the jagged sky overhead, a mix of mauve and storm-brewing silver.

After what felt like an hour, Lucien finally spoke.

“How did you know who I was?”

His voice was low and even. Still sharp, though—like he kept it honed out of habit.

Evryn glanced at him. He hadn’t turned his head. Just kept walking.

“You said your name,” she replied.

“You didn’t just recognize my name. You knew it. You knew the House. The Queen.”

She hesitated. Then sighed. “Eamon.”

Lucien slowed slightly, but didn’t stop.

Evryn continued. “He raised me. My whole life, pretty much. He wasn’t just some guy with a shotgun and a grudge. He was—” her voice caught, and she took a breath, steadying herself, “—he was part of something. Before me. He never said what, not really. But he taught me things.”

“Like shifter bloodlines?”

“And the Houses. How they ruled. What they controlled. Who to avoid.” She shrugged. “He made me memorize the lineage of the Court of Claws like it was bedtime stories.”

Lucien let out a low sound. Not a laugh. Not quite.

“So he raised you for war.”

Evryn’s mouth pulled into a tight line. “He raised me to survive one.”

That shut Lucien up for a bit.

The wind picked up. Cold and curling through the branches like it had claws.

Evryn’s fingers fiddled with the bone charm around her neck.

“I didn’t understand it, not back then,” she said, softer now. “Why he made me learn all that stuff. Why I had to train when other girls my age were... I don’t know, dating. Watching trashy shows. Living.”

Lucien didn’t comment. But she could feel him listening.

“He said I had something in me. Something dangerous. Something that needed protecting. From others... and from myself.” She looked down, voice falling quieter. “He was scared of what I might become.”

Lucien’s steps slowed again.

“And you?” he asked, voice unreadable.

She glanced at him, unsure. “What about me?”

“Are you scared of what you might become?”

Evryn didn't answer right away.

She thought about the fight in the alley. The way her body had moved without thinking. The raw instinct. The precision. She thought about how the shadows sometimes whispered, like they knew her name before she did.

“I don't know,” she said finally.

Lucien nodded once, like that was the only honest answer.

They made camp near a split in the trail, beneath the ruins of what might've once been a shrine. Vines had claimed most of it, but a few worn carvings remained—panther sigils faded into the stone, eyes gouged out by time.

Lucien didn't build a fire. Just tossed down his cloak and sat cross-legged, quiet as always. Watching.

Evryn didn't ask questions.

She curled into herself against the roots of an old tree, wrapping her arms around her knees, heart heavy and eyes dry.

She didn't trust him. But she didn't fear him either.

And that was almost worse.

She remembered how his eyes had looked back at the train station—silver bright and full of some twisted cocktail of guilt and loyalty. She didn't understand him, but she felt something in him that echoed in her.

Like they were both waiting for the other to make a move neither of them could take back.

That night, she dreamed of fire. And a panther crowned in silver.

Its body was sleek, glowing faintly under a blood-red moon. It paced a crumbling marble throne, eyes burning like molten steel, tail flicking in rhythm with a heartbeat she didn't realize was her own.

In the dream, the throne cracked beneath her feet. Flames licked up through the floor. And something inside her stirred—ancient and aching, hungry and holy all at once.

She woke with a start.

Lucien was already standing, back to her, facing the horizon.

The sky had lightened to a hazy indigo.

Evryn didn't speak. But part of her knew the dream hadn't been a warning.

It was a beginning.

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NINE

LUCIEN

The girl didn't ask questions right away.

She just looked at him like she could peel him open with her eyes alone.

Lucien had felt stares like hers before—from generals, assassins, and monsters in men's skin. But never like this. Never wrapped in exhaustion and raw nerve, with the kind of steady focus that said I don't trust you, but I need to understand you anyway.

She rose from the moss-covered tree root where she'd slept, brushing her hands down her pants. Her dark auburn curls were tangled. Her voice was scratchy with sleep.

"You knew where I was."

He didn't flinch.

"So how?"

Lucien adjusted his cloak and didn't answer. He didn't lie. But silence was its own kind of evasion.

Evryn folded her arms.

"Don't feed me mystery-boy nonsense about instincts or 'the wind told you.' I want a

real answer.”

Lucien looked away, toward the skyline cracking open with thin gray light. “The Veil’s not just geography,” he said. “It’s... layered. Certain threads echo louder. You were one of them.”

Evryn blinked slowly. “So that’s a fancy way of saying you followed my scent ?”

Lucien’s lips twitched, just barely. “Something like that.”

She wasn’t satisfied. But she let it go, for now.

They walked in silence for another mile, following the trail deeper into the Shatterroads. The trees thinned into ancient ruins—collapsed archways, toppled columns. A forgotten cathedral loomed ahead, half-swallowed by the forest, its windows shattered and spires leaning like drunks in a storm.

Lucien led her inside without a word. The wind sang through the broken rafters like a mourning song. He tossed down his cloak on the stone altar steps.

Evryn didn’t sit.

She was staring at him again.

“When are we going to find Eamon?” she asked.

Lucien’s jaw tightened.

“That’s not your biggest problem right now.”

Her brows lifted. “Excuse me?”

“You’re being hunted.”

“Yeah. I figured that part out. Fangs and claws gave it away.”

Lucien stepped toward the stained-glass shadow of a forgotten saint. His voice dropped low, cold. “You have no idea what’s coming. The moment my mother finds out you’re alive?—”

Evryn cut in. “She’ll kill me.”

“Yes.”

“And you’re just gonna wait until she does?”

“No,” he said sharply. “That’s why I haven’t taken you anywhere specific yet.

If I go to any known safehold, someone will talk.

Word gets out. And then Thalia will want her prize back, and my mother will want your head mounted in her throne room.

” He left out the part where he was supposed to be the one to give it to her.

“So instead,” she said, voice climbing, “you drag me through cursed ruins with no plan and no food?”

Lucien turned to face her fully.

“I’m trying to keep you hidden. Until I figure out what the hell to do with you.”

Evryn stared at him for a beat.

Then: “Do with me?”

He opened his mouth. Closed it. A muscle ticked in his jaw.

“I didn’t mean it like that.”

“No?” she snapped. “Because it kinda sounded like I’m your problem to solve.”

“You are.”

“Oh, good. Glad we cleared that up.”

Lucien’s hand raked through his hair. “I mean—dammit, Evryn—I’m not supposed to be doing this.”

She stepped closer now, fire rising in her. “Then why are you doing it? Why are you saving me from your own mother?”

He didn’t answer. Because the truth, that he’d been sent to kill her and couldn’t—was the kind of thing that unraveled both of them.

Instead, he just said, “Because I couldn’t let them have you.”

She fell quiet.

Lucien turned away, tension bleeding from his shoulders like slow poison.

Evryn’s voice was soft this time. Careful.

“I want to find Eamon. That’s not going to change.”

Lucien nodded once, but didn't face her.

"So," she said, "we help each other. I stay off the grid. You keep your little rebellion secret. But we look for him. Deal?"

"Deal."

Later, when she was asleep curled under a fractured stained-glass window, Lucien sat a few feet away—back against a column, shadows coiling lazily around his boots like old friends.

He watched her chest rise and fall.

Her lips were parted slightly. One hand tucked beneath her cheek.

Even here, smudged with dirt, wild hair tangled, dried blood on her collar—she looked untouchable. Sacred. Not in the way the Court defined royalty, with crowns and rituals and bone-deep arrogance. She was sacred like survival. Like fire refusing to go out.

Lucien leaned his head back, shutting his eyes.

He'd killed for less than she'd already seen. But he'd never protected anything before.

Not really.

He didn't know what she was to him yet. A threat? A symbol? Or maybe a mirror. A girl molded by ghosts.

Like him.

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TEN

EVRYN

The smell of something warm and barely edible tugged her from sleep.

Evryn blinked against the filtered light bleeding through the stained-glass remnants above her. The colors danced weakly across the cracked stone floor, fractured reds and golds shimmering like blood-streaked sunbeams.

She sat up slowly, muscles aching from the last so many sleeps on stone and root. Her throat felt dry, her mind fogged with remnants of the dream—of the panther, of the crown, of fire licking up through shadow.

Lucien sat near the broken altar, back leaned against a half-toppled column, tossing something small and round in his hand. He caught it mid-air and held it out to her.

“Eat.”

She took it reluctantly. A hard biscuit, slightly warm. Stale but not inedible.

Her stomach growled before she could decide if it was gratitude or suspicion she felt more of.

He hadn’t said good morning. Of course he hadn’t. Lucien Umbraclaw didn’t seem to do soft .

“You bake this yourself?” she muttered, dry.

“Stole it from a Wyrdling trader two valleys back,” he replied. “She was too busy trying to sell me a dream-worm.”

Evryn raised a brow as she chewed. “A what ?”

“Exactly.”

She snorted under her breath. “Charming place, the Veil.”

Lucien didn’t smile, but something in his shoulders eased—fractionally.

Evryn noticed the way the shadows curled around him even in the broken daylight. They weren’t just shadows the way most people saw them. They moved. They watched.

They whispered in the edges of her Sight.

And they were always near him.

Like pets. Or sentries. Or maybe something darker.

She swallowed the last bite of the biscuit and nodded toward the tendrils curling near his boots.

“They follow you.”

Lucien’s silver gaze flicked to the shadows. “Yes.”

She waited, but he didn’t elaborate.

She leaned forward slightly. “So... are you going to tell me why you’re trailed by creeping night-mist, or is that another one of your royal secrets?”

He exhaled through his nose. “It’s called shadowmancy .”

“Sounds made up.”

“It’s not.”

His voice was calm, but clipped. Like explaining this wasn’t something he liked doing.

“They’re not just illusions. I can manipulate shadow—shape it, move through it, cloak myself in it. And if I want... I can use it to silence people. Permanently.”

Evryn froze. “So you’re a walking execution order.”

Lucien looked at her, face unreadable. “I was.”

Something in that was made her pause.

The shadows seemed to settle closer to him, like they were listening too.

“So they’re alive?” she asked quietly.

“They respond to emotion. Intent. Bloodline.” He hesitated. “Pain, mostly.”

Evryn’s eyes narrowed. “And they follow you because of how much you’ve felt ... or how much you’ve done ?”

Lucien didn’t answer.

Evryn stood and paced a slow circle around the fallen pillar, letting the air between them charge with all the things they weren't saying.

"I don't get you," she said. "You say you're protecting me. But every time I look at you, you look like you're trying not to be that guy."

Lucien arched a brow. "What guy?"

"The one who wants to help."

His mouth twitched. "Maybe I'm not that guy."

"Maybe you're lying to yourself."

Her voice didn't shake, but her hands did. Just a little.

"I think you're hiding more than just where Eamon is. I think you're playing me."

Lucien's eyes flared. "I'm not."

"No? You're the Queen's son. Her weapon. You stalk me through the human border, you don't kill me, and now I'm supposed to believe you're just doing this out of... what? Guilt? Curiosity? You won't even look me in the eye when I ask where he is."

Lucien stood slowly.

Tall. Controlled.

Dangerous.

"I told you—Eamon's not your biggest problem right now."

“But he’s mine, ” she snapped, voice cracking. “He’s the only family I’ve got. And I’ve trusted you more than I should. I’ve been letting my gut guide me, but maybe I shouldn’t. Because right now? My gut’s saying you’re still deciding whether I’m worth saving.”

Lucien stepped forward, shadow trailing behind him like a cloak made of regret.

Their faces were inches apart.

His voice dropped to something ragged. “You have no idea how much I’ve already done to keep you alive.”

“I didn’t ask you to,” she whispered.

“You didn’t have to.”

The silence trembled between them, full of breath and heat and questions with no safe answers.

Her eyes flicked to his mouth.

His to hers.

Suddenly, a rush of cold. A snap of pressure in the Veil.

They both turned too late.

The shadows behind them twisted .

Evryn’s scream tore from her throat just as something lunged from the edge of the cathedral, all fangs and bone and black-glass eyes. A shadowbeast—one of the

corrupted things that slipped through Veil rifts when the thresholds weren't sealed tight enough.

Lucien shoved her behind him. His shadows reacted .

They struck like snakes, lashing forward, slicing across the beast's hide. It screamed, high and wrong, as Lucien moved with deadly fluidity, cloak flaring.

Evryn recovered fast.

She grabbed the blade from her boot and circled around to flank, adrenaline burning the doubt from her limbs.

"On your left!" she shouted.

Lucien ducked just as a second creature leapt from the shattered arch above, claws whistling through air where his head had been.

Evryn struck the first with a clean slash across its throat.

Black ichor hissed into the air. The beast fell, writhing.

Lucien turned, shadows coiling like whips from his hands, slamming the second into a wall hard enough to shatter bone.

It collapsed in a twitching heap.

Silence returned. Except for the thunder of their breath.

Evryn wiped her blade on her sleeve, hands shaking. "What the hell were those?"

“Veil spawns,” Lucien said, still watching the shadows. “Drawn to raw bloodlines. Old power.”

He looked at her.

“You’re starting to call to them.”

Evryn felt her spine stiffen.

“Is that a bad thing?”

Lucien’s gaze darkened. “It means you’re awakening. And that means we’re running out of time.”

She met his eyes. Still panting. Still pulsing with adrenaline. Still angry.

But under it all, something unspoken passed between them.

She had almost kissed him. He had almost let her.

Instead, they turned from the corpses and gathered what little they had because survival didn’t wait for emotions to catch up.

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ELEVEN

LUCIEN

The old outpost stank of dust and rusted iron.

Lucien moved through it first—always first—pushing open the warped doors of the long-abandoned waystation carved into Hollowreach's ridge wall.

It used to belong to Thalia's people, back when rebellion had teeth instead of whispers.

You could still see the faded sigils of House Shadeborn branded into the floor tiles—white ink, worn with age and ash.

Evryn stepped inside slowly behind him.

She said nothing, but he felt her eyes on his back.

Still shaken from the shadowbeast ambush. Still coiled tight from what she'd done to survive.

She'd killed one of them.

And the way the shadows had responded to her—flinching back, then circling like they knew her—it wasn't subtle.

Lucien watched her settle against a bench half-collapsed by mold and rot. She rubbed at the side of her neck, eyes unfocused, chest still rising and falling like she hadn't fully come back from the fight.

The silence stretched, brittle as old glass.

He broke it first. "You fought like someone born in the Veil."

Her gaze lifted slowly to meet his. "I wasn't."

"I know."

Lucien crouched by one of the broken crates, rummaging until he found a sealed bottle of bloodroot tonic. He tossed it to her gently.

She caught it without flinching.

"What did you see?" he asked, low.

"During the fight?"

"No. After. The way the shadows reacted... that doesn't happen for most Sighted."

She hesitated.

"I don't know what it was," she said honestly. "They looked at me like I was... familiar. Like I reminded them of something they forgot."

Lucien nodded slowly, letting her words settle.

That was exactly the problem.

He stood and crossed the room, leaning against a stone pillar near her, arms folded. The fractured light from a broken window caught on the silver in his eyes, making him look too sharp. Too focused.

“Evryn,” he said. “What do you actually know about your parents?”

Her breath caught, almost imperceptibly.

She didn’t answer at first. Just gripped the tonic tighter.

“I was told they died in a fire,” she said. “When I was two. Eamon never told me more.”

“And you never asked?”

“I asked,” she said, voice tight. “He wouldn’t answer. Said it was better not to know.”

Lucien exhaled slowly. Shadows pulsed faintly behind him.

He dropped into a crouch in front of her, meeting her eye level.

“You bear a mark on your shoulder,” he said. “Left side. Just beneath the collar.”

Evryn froze.

He saw it, her whole body reacting, like someone had pulled a memory from under her skin.

“How do you know that?” she whispered.

“I’ve seen it before,” Lucien said. “But not in this century.”

Her throat worked on a swallow.

“What is it?”

He held her gaze.

“It’s called the First Mark.”

She blinked. “That doesn’t mean anything to me.”

“It should. It belonged to the direct descendants of the original Panther queens. The ones born before the Accorded Bloodlines even existed. It’s a mark of royal inheritance. Not political—divine.”

Evryn stared at him, something flickering in her deep violet-looking eyes—fear, maybe. But also something deeper. A desperate kind of hope she didn’t want to believe.

“No one’s had that in generations,” Lucien said quietly. “Not since the bloodline culling after the First War. My mother made sure of that.”

Evryn’s voice dropped to a whisper. “So what does that make me?”

Lucien stood slowly.

“It makes you the one person who could challenge her.”

The silence was deafening.

Evryn set the tonic down, arms wrapping around herself.

“But I don’t know anything. I didn’t grow up in this world. I didn’t even know who you were until I saw your face in a book Eamon made me read like it was homework. I don’t know the laws. I don’t know the lines. I don’t know what the mark does , if it even means anything anymore.”

Lucien moved toward the broken hearth. He needed to be doing something. The truth tasted too raw in the air.

“She doesn’t care what you know,” he said over his shoulder. “Thalia wants your blood for power. My mother wants your head for silence.”

Evryn stood now too. She stepped closer. Not angry. Not afraid.

Just... exposed.

“You said I’m not ready for war.”

“You’re not.”

“But it’s coming anyway, isn’t it?”

He turned.

The way she looked in that moment, dusty, scuffed, eyes burning with a dozen emotions she didn’t have names for—it made something break loose in him. Something dangerous.

She reached for the hem of her shirt and lifted it slightly, revealing her shoulder.

There it was.

The First Mark. Faint, but there. Like ink pressed into her soul, not her skin.

Lucien stepped closer.

She didn't flinch.

"I don't know what I'm supposed to be," she said softly.

He stared at the mark. At her.

"You're not supposed to be anything," he replied. "You are ."

Evryn's voice dropped.

"And what if that's not enough?"

Lucien hesitated. Then, voice lower still. "It already is."

TWELVE

EVRYN

The wind shifted just before Thalia arrived.

It carried something unnatural with it—too sharp, too still. The hairs on the back of Evryn’s neck lifted, and the air around her thickened.

Lucien noticed it too.

He stepped forward, jaw tightening, hand twitching instinctively toward his hip even though he wasn't carrying a blade openly. He didn’t speak, didn’t warn—but Evryn had started learning the language of his silence.

She rose from the bench, brushing dust from her jeans. Her gaze cut toward the broken window just as the shadows bent and opened .

And there she was.

Lady Thalia Shadeborn.

She stepped through the breach with the ease of someone who had walked into many places she didn’t belong and made them hers anyway.

Silver hair fell like liquid silk over her shoulder, her deep-gray coat lined with layered leather and metallic accents that shimmered faintly with spell-borne

enchantment. She moved like she was weightless and rooted at once—graceful, dangerous, elegant as frost forming over stone.

Her gaze landed first on Evryn.

Not Lucien.

Evryn stood straighter, biting down on the strange spike of nerves in her gut.

“Found you,” Thalia said, voice warm but edged. “Took me long enough.”

Lucien didn’t speak.

Evryn did.

“You said you’d be back.”

Thalia smiled slightly. “I didn’t lie.”

Lucien stepped in between them before she could get any closer.

“You weren’t invited,” he said flatly.

“Neither were you,” she answered, brushing past him like he was just another shadow. “But I’m not here to fight. I’m here to talk.”

Evryn folded her arms. “Talk about what?”

Thalia didn’t hesitate. “You.”

Evryn blinked.

Thalia gestured toward the cracked sigil beneath their feet. “This place belonged to the beginning of the rebellion. We’ve fallen quiet in recent years—outnumbered, outmaneuvered. But now?” She stepped closer, gaze piercing. “You’ve returned. With the First Mark. With the fire in your blood.”

Evryn shifted uncomfortably. “I didn’t return. I’m only here looking for Eamon.”

“Ah, but your search has brought your return. The Veil, the Dominion has felt it. You are the heir of a line long thought extinct,” Thalia said softly. “You carry a legacy that terrifies the throne. The people remember stories of a queen born under both moon and shadow. They need someone like you.”

Evryn glanced at Lucien, then back to Thalia.

“I’m not a story,” she said. “I’m not a symbol.”

“But you could be,” Thalia countered. “You should be. You have power, Evryn—real power. And the Veil is waking because of it. Selyne is stirring her armies. If we don’t rally now—if we don’t strike with something they can believe in—we lose.”

Evryn’s breath came fast. “You want me as a banner.”

“I want you as a beginning.”

She looked at Lucien again.

His expression didn’t change, but his stance shifted slightly—closer to her. Guarded. Tense.

“Say something,” she muttered to him.

Lucien spoke quietly, but without hesitation. “Don’t trust her.”

Thalia’s lips thinned. “Still loyal to your mother, are you?”

“No,” Lucien said. “But I know how you operate, Thalia. You use people until they break. Then you dress the ruins in silk and call it revolution.”

Thalia looked at Evryn. “That’s rich, coming from the Queen’s favorite knife.”

“I haven’t killed her yet,” he said. “Which makes me unreliable. You, on the other hand...”

Evryn’s voice broke through before they could spiral.

“Stop.”

Both turned toward her.

She rubbed her temple. “I didn’t ask for any of this.”

“I know,” Thalia said gently.

“Do you?” Evryn snapped. “Because it sure as hell doesn’t feel like it. You didn’t tell me what I was. You let me walk into the Veil like I had any idea what the cost would be. You let them take Eamon?—”

“I didn’t order that,” Thalia cut in, just a little too fast. “If they did, it was rogue action.”

Lucien scoffed.

Evryn clenched her fists. Her voice lowered. “You told me I had a choice. You made me believe I could trust you.”

“You can ,” Thalia insisted.

Evryn stepped back. “Then why do I feel like you’re already planning how to use me?”

The silence after that was long. Heavy.

Finally, Thalia exhaled. “I will return with an offer. You deserve time. But don’t wait too long.”

And just like that, she was gone.

The air felt colder after she left.

Evryn sat again, slower this time, like her body was catching up to the weight of it all. The choice Thalia had dropped in her lap pressed into her bones—heavy, aching.

Lucien remained a few feet away. Still. Watching her with that unreadable face he wore like armor.

She looked up at him. “Were you serious?”

He nodded once. “She’s dangerous.”

Evryn narrowed her eyes. “And you’re not?”

His gaze didn’t flinch. “I’ve never promised to be anything else.”

She snorted, sharp and bitter. “So my choices are to be a banner or a bargaining chip.”

“No.” His voice was steady. “Your choice is whether you become what they say you are, or stay who you know you are.”

Evryn studied him. “And what if I don’t know that either?”

He stepped closer. Not a threat. Not exactly. But there was something coiled in him, something that never stopped watching the exits.

“Then we figure it out together.”

Before the moment could settle, her mind replayed something else. Something he’d said earlier.

Evryn’s brows furrowed. She tilted her head just slightly. “What did you mean back there?”

Lucien stilled.

She didn’t blink. “You said you hadn’t killed me yet.”

Silence. Cold. Crackling.

“You said it like it was a decision you’d already weighed.”

Lucien’s jaw flexed.

“Did the Queen send you?” she asked quietly.

Still no answer.

Her voice dropped further. “Were you following me back then because you were meant to...?”

He turned away, shadows curling tight around his boots.

Evryn stood, heart pounding. “Lucien.”

He looked over his shoulder, face shadowed, voice low.

“I didn’t know what you were. Only what I was told.”

Evryn felt something twist in her stomach—rage and betrayal and fear colliding.

“So you were supposed to kill me.”

He didn’t answer. He didn’t have to.

Her arms wrapped around herself like armor. “And now?”

Lucien stepped forward, voice like a fracture.

“Now I’d kill anyone who tried.”

She didn’t move. Didn’t speak. But she didn’t run, either.

And Lucien, for the first time, looked afraid. Not of her, but of what she might say next.

THIRTEEN

LUCIEN

She hadn't spoken to him in hours.

Not since the truth slipped out of his mouth like a blade.

Lucien walked ahead on the narrow ridge trail, the mist curling low around their boots, boots crunching through brittle leaves and dead wards left behind by rebels who hadn't survived the Queen's last purge.

Evryn kept her distance.

Just out of reach.

Not far enough to be gone. But far enough to remind him he'd lost something—again.

And the worst part?

He felt it. The silence. The absence of her voice with endless questions.

The way her steps no longer unconsciously matched his, the way she didn't look to him when the wind shifted or the shadows thickened. She hadn't asked him anything. No snide comments. No biting humor. Just quiet.

And that silence gutted him more than her anger ever could've.

Because she still walked with him.

Which meant some part of her still wanted to believe he wouldn't fail her again .

Lucien gritted his teeth, eyes flicking up toward the sky where the Veil shimmered faintly—always watching, always listening.

She knows.

The Queen always knew.

Lucien didn't flinch when the wind delivered the familiar flicker of shadow that materialized beside him—a crow made of smoke and violet thread, its wings beating soundlessly until it dropped a parchment-wrapped scroll into his hand.

It vanished just as fast.

He didn't stop walking.

Just unrolled the letter with the same practiced tension he always did when Cassian sent him something.

The script inside was neat, elegant, and unmistakably mocking in tone.

“She knows you haven't carried out the order. Orders to follow. Delay if you must. But prepare. —C”

Lucien's fingers curled around the parchment until it crackled.

He didn't burn it.

Not yet.

He slid it into his coat, behind his blade.

His mind raced.

She knows I haven't killed her.

He should've expected it. His mother was ruthless but not stupid. Every breath Evryn took was another insult to the throne. Another risk.

Another reason to send someone worse than him. And since Lucien was always the first and last resort, he could only imagine which mercenary she would choose next.

Behind him, Evryn's voice cut through the air. "That thing. The crow. What was it?"

Lucien didn't turn around. "Messenger."

"That much I got," she said. "From who?"

He finally looked over his shoulder. "Cassian."

Evryn's brow furrowed. "Your brother?"

Lucien nodded once. Neutral. Controlled.

"What did it say?"

He didn't blink.

"Just that the Queen is moving resources near the border. Might get messy soon."

Evryn stared at him for a moment too long, her jaw slightly tight.

“You sure that’s all it said?”

Lucien kept his voice even. “If it were worse, we wouldn’t be walking.”

She didn’t reply.

Didn’t press.

But something in her expression cooled again. Not out of fear. Not quite.

Like she could feel the shape of the truth beneath the surface and didn’t know whether to dig or let it lie.

Lucien turned back to the path, keeping his pace.

If she found out the Queen already knew...

She’d be gone by nightfall. Possibly back into Thalia’s lies.

And worse, she might think he was still playing his part.

That he was still leading her to her death.

So he stayed quiet.

His silence was his second betrayal.

They reached the edge of the Shatterroads near dusk.

The land opened into a wide, broken valley where trees grew like bone-pikes and old ruins jutted from the ground like teeth from a dying god's mouth. Lucien knew the place. Had used it before.

There were still pockets of shifter enclaves hidden in these ridges—people who hadn't bent the knee to any House. They were hostile. Suspicious. But they didn't answer to Selyne or Thalia.

And right now, that made them the safest people he could find.

Evryn broke the silence first.

Her voice was calm, but clipped. "Where are you taking me?"

He slowed, glancing back.

"To a place where people won't want you dead quite as badly."

"Comforting."

He almost smirked. Almost.

Lucien adjusted the strap of his pack. "They're Veilborn. Unaligned to either side that wants you. Don't deal with the Crown, don't deal with Thalia. But they honor power and their own kind. And right now, you've got more of that than you know what to do with."

She raised a brow. "So you think if I flash the Mark around they won't slit my throat?"

He met her eyes. "No. I think if I do it, they'll listen long enough to keep it in their

pants.”

That earned him the faintest twitch at the corner of her mouth.

Not a smile. But it wasn't hate. Progress. Still, her expression turned cold again.

“And what then?” she asked. “When they realize who I am?”

Lucien paused.

When the Queen sends someone else.

“When that happens,” he said, “you'll be ready.”

Evryn studied him like she wanted to read his blood through his skin.

“You keep saying I'll be something.”

“I don't know what you'll be.”

“Then why do you keep protecting me?”

Lucien looked at her. The truth curled on his tongue.

Because you remind me what I used to be.

He didn't say it.

Instead, he said, “Because I don't want anyone else deciding it for you.”

They stared at each other.

For a moment, it felt like maybe there was still something unbroken between them.

She turned and didn't look back.

FOURTEEN

EVRYN

E vryn kept her hand near her knife the entire walk through the pass.

The world had narrowed to tension and terrain—her bootfalls, the occasional grunt from Lucien ahead, and the creeping certainty that she was being led into something much bigger than him.

She didn't trust him. Not fully. Not anymore.

Not after the messenger crow.

Not after that little slip— I haven't killed her yet.

And especially not after the way he avoided her eyes every time she looked too close.

He knew more than he was saying. About her. About the Queen. About this place they were headed. He walked like a man who had memorized every turn of the road and every trap along it. That made him valuable.

It didn't make him safe.

She didn't bother asking again where they were going. The answers came slow with Lucien. Half-truths braided with silence.

But when they passed the veil-marked rock—a shard of onyx etched with sigils older than either of them—she felt it ripple through her.

Something ancient and watching had just noticed her.

And it didn't blink.

They crossed a bend, the mountain split open ahead, and there it was.

A ring of blackstone columns buried in silver ash, glowing faintly with residual ward magic.

The summit.

She hadn't known what she expected.

Definitely not the two people waiting for them.

One leaned against a stone archway with the kind of stillness that came from long wars and longer regrets.

He was massive—towering, broad as a damn wall, arms crossed over his chest like he didn't know what to do with them if they weren't ready to crush something.

His skin bore the sheen of battle and time.

Storm-gray eyes, ringed faintly with gold, stared her down like she was a weapon being weighed in a warrior's hand.

Calder Grimhart.

Eamon had showed her pictures and legends of the bear shifters, and he matched the prince's description to a T.

The other presence was fire coiled into grace.

A woman stood at the center of the circle, poised like a blade.

Her ember-black hair was braided in looping knots that whispered discipline, control.

Her skin shimmered faintly with an undercurrent of bronze-scale beneath flesh.

Eyes gold-flecked and sharp as whitefire caught Evryn's immediately and did not look away .

Seraphine Drakar. The Dragon-blooded heir from her books.

So this was what royalty looked like.

Power. Poise. Calculated intensity that made Evryn's skin itch.

"Didn't think you'd show, Umbracław," Seraphine said, arms folded. Her voice was velvet dipped in steel.

Lucien didn't react. "Didn't think you'd still be standing in one place this long."

Seraphine's lip twitched, just once.

"And this," she said, eyes drifting to Evryn, "must be the reason you're pissing off your mother?"

Evryn bristled.

She wasn't anyone's reason .

Lucien didn't speak.

So Evryn did.

“Evryn. Not ‘this.’”

Seraphine's gaze flicked back to hers. “Evryn. Right. The girl with the mark. Yes, Lucien sent word about you a few day or so back.”

“And teeth,” Evryn said, voice cool.

Seraphine's smile was faint, but it reached her eyes. “Good.”

Calder shifted slightly, finally stepping forward. His voice was deep. Slow. Measured.

“Show us.”

Evryn blinked. “What?”

“The Mark,” he clarified. “If you're going to walk into the summit with our blood, we need to know it's real. ”

Lucien moved before she could speak, stepping between them. “You're not branding her like a prize mare.”

“She can speak for herself,” Seraphine said mildly.

Evryn exhaled, stepping around Lucien.

She tugged her collar wide enough to expose the left curve of her shoulder.

The Mark shimmered faintly, like light through smoked glass—then pulsed once, alive.

Calder's brow twitched. Not in surprise. Recognition.

Seraphine inhaled slowly. "So it's true."

Evryn lowered her shirt again. "Apparently."

Neither heir bowed. But both took a beat.

"Now what?" Evryn asked.

"That depends," Seraphine said. "On how long you intend to keep dancing between two thrones that want you gutted."

"I haven't danced," Evryn said. "I've run. There's a difference."

Calder tilted his head. "And you're done running?"

She looked at him.

Then at Lucien.

Then at the veil-carved sky overhead.

"Yes and no," she said quietly. "I want to know what I'm running toward."

Something shifted in Seraphine's expression. Approval, maybe. Or respect.

“Then listen,” she said. “Because there’s more coming than just blades and banners. The Veil is thinning. Things that were sealed are waking. Bloodlines are calling each other across planes.”

“Something’s stirring,” Calder added. “Old forces. Magic that doesn’t answer to any House.”

Evryn’s chest tightened.

She could feel it. Like thunder still hidden in the clouds.

“Then why am I here?” she asked. “Why not let me disappear?”

Lucien’s voice broke through, quiet but firm.

“Because if you vanish, everything you are gets twisted into legend. And legends become lies. Manipulation.”

Evryn turned toward him, heart pulsing hard behind her ribs.

“Better a lie than a corpse.”

Lucien stepped closer. “You’re not either.”

Their eyes locked.

The others faded just for a moment.

“Well, how about we get you some real food and you tell us how your trip through the Veil has been so far,” Seraphine remarked, catching the tension between the two.

Everyn took a breath and let her lead her away. She would try to figure out Lucien later, when she wasn't so exhausted.

FIFTEEN

LUCIEN

The tension that swept through the ruins after the wind shifted didn't fully break.

But nothing came, not yet.

No monsters. No spies.

Just the sharp silence of four predators testing each other's teeth in a room built for war.

Lucien stood slightly behind Evryn, watching her back, watching the heirs. Watching the shadows shift like they might speak if he stood still long enough.

Seraphine's eyes narrowed toward the horizon, then back to Lucien. "We'll move at dawn."

Calder didn't move at all, but his voice was solid. "This valley isn't safe for long."

Lucien nodded. "I'll keep her out of sight."

Seraphine looked at Evryn again, studying her like a general mapping out terrain. "You're raw. Untrained. But not untested."

Evryn raised a brow. "Was that a compliment?"

“It was an observation.”

Evryn smirked.

Lucien hated how much he noticed that smirk.

Calder finally turned fully toward Lucien, slow and deliberate. “We’ll be in touch.”

It wasn’t a threat. Not quite. But Grimhart didn’t do casual farewells.

Lucien inclined his head once.

Seraphine said nothing else. She simply stepped back into the veil-carved arch where the sky thinned, Calder flanking her. One blink, and they were gone—faded into mist like ghost-kissed shadows.

Silence dropped like stone.

Evryn sat again near the edge of the circle, rubbing her thumb along a weather-smoothed shard of obsidian.

Lucien didn’t sit. He watched her. He didn’t like what the summit had awakened.

Not in them.

In him.

She fell asleep before the fire finished dying.

Exhaustion. Or escape.

He stood above her, jaw tight, shadows coiling in lazy arcs around his boots. His body begged for rest, but his mind wouldn't quiet.

She was safer here. For now.

And he could leave.

He could walk away. Let the heirs take over. Let her fate fall into other hands. She wanted to lead, didn't she? Wanted truth? Then let her find it without him screwing it up further.

He turned to leave. But before he crossed the threshold, her voice cut through the quiet.

"You were really going to go?"

Lucien turned.

Evryn was already sitting up, curls wild, one hand reaching instinctively toward her blade.

She looked hurt.

And not the kind he was trained to cause.

Her voice trembled with fury. "You thought I'd just be fine with that? After everything?"

Lucien exhaled, trying to stay cold. "You'd be safer here."

"You don't get to decide that!"

“I was trying to protect you.”

“No, you were trying to get rid of me before you had to make another choice. ”

Lucien flinched.

Evryn rose fully now, fire under her skin. “First you stalk me. Then you save me. Then you nearly kill me. Then you lie. Again. And now what? Just gonna disappear and let me wake up alone in some ruin with strangers?”

“You were never mine to keep, Evryn!”

The words hit like a slap between them.

Silence.

Cracked and raw.

Lucien stepped forward, eyes blazing. “You think this is easy for me? You think I’m built for this? I’ve spent my whole life doing what I was told—no questions, no guilt, no mercy. Then you come along. You with your eyes and your fire and your damn belief that people like me can change.”

Evryn’s chest rose and fell. “Maybe I was wrong.”

“I can’t protect you from what I am,” he said, voice hoarse.

Evryn’s eyes glistened, but her jaw was set. “I never asked you to.”

Lucien stared at her.

Something shattered behind his ribs.

And before he could stop himself, he crossed the space between them in two strides.

His hand found her waist. Hers curled into his collar.

Their mouths crashed together, heat and fury and something broken needing to bleed.

It wasn't gentle. It wasn't sweet. It was war.

Lucien forced himself to back away. "Get some sleep," he said roughly. "We have a lot to cover tomorrow."

Lucien couldn't even look at her. He didn't trust himself to. All he knew was that he had to train her to be ready. For war, his mother, Thalia... possibly even himself.

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SIXTEEN

EVRYN

E vryn hadn't slept.

Her body had curled up by the cold hearth, her eyes shut tight, but rest never came. Not really. Not after that.

The kiss still lingered on her lips like smoke—hot, stolen, reckless. She hadn't expected it. Hadn't planned it. But she hadn't pulled away either.

And Lucien... he'd touched her like he hated that he needed it. Like wanting her was a war he was already losing.

And then he'd stepped back. Like he regretted it. Like she was a mistake.

Evryn didn't know what made her more raw, the kiss itself or the silence after.

She sat up slowly in the pale morning light, pulling her coat tighter around herself. The fire had burned to ash and frost had kissed the edges of the stone floor. The summit circle was quiet, the wind softer than the night before.

Lucien stood across the clearing, arms crossed, his back to her. Watching the horizon. Always watching. Always calculating.

Evryn ran a hand through her tangled curls and pushed herself to her feet, the ache in

her chest more stubborn than the bruises along her ribs from the last fight.

She walked over. She didn't speak.

Neither did he for a beat.

Lucien broke the silence with, "I can show you."

Evryn blinked. "Show me what?"

He turned, just enough for her to see the glint in his silver eyes.

"Your shadows."

Lucien led her to the edge of the summit where the stone formed a smooth basin, half-swallowed by moss and old war carvings. It smelled faintly of iron and wet smoke.

"Shadowmancy isn't something you force ," he said, his voice quieter now. More teacher than killer. "It's not muscle. It's instinct. Breath. Fear."

Evryn arched a brow. "Great. Fear's my specialty."

Lucien's mouth quirked—not quite a smile, but the edge of one. "It listens to the parts of you you try to bury."

She stepped into the basin. "And what if I don't know what those are?"

"You do," he said. "You just don't want to."

Evryn closed her eyes.

She felt it, just like in the alley weeks ago, the pulse beneath her skin, the flicker just outside her vision. It was like trying to cup smoke in her hands.

But then she let go. And something moved.

Shadows slipped from the edges of her boots, slow at first, like startled deer in the underbrush. Then faster. Bolder.

They curled around her arms, her legs, reaching— testing.

Lucien stepped forward slowly, cautious but impressed.

“They’re responding to you.”

“I don’t know what I’m doing.”

“You don’t need to.”

She looked at him, panic creeping in. “What if I lose control?”

His voice dropped low. “Then I’ll catch you.”

She didn’t expect that. Didn’t expect how much she wanted to believe it.

The shadows surged then—tall, rising behind her like wings unfurling.

She gasped. “Lucien?—”

He moved fast, stepping in close, his hands catching hers.

“Breathe. Look at me.”

She did.

And the darkness settled. Not disappeared. Just... calmed.

Because of him.

Because he wasn't afraid of her.

It had taken a lot out of her, reaching into herself like that, so the training had been short, but well worth it.

They sat later by the fire again, both drained but oddly settled. Evryn nursed a cracked mug of dried berry tea Lucien had found hidden in the back cellars.

Lucien tossed a stone toward the flames, watching it skip once before landing near the edge of the coals.

"You remind me of someone," he said after a while.

Evryn tilted her head. "Who?"

"My brother's wife. Before she died."

Evryn's expression softened. "What was she like?"

"Braver than me," he said. "Smarter too. She used to tell Cassian I was the Queen's leash dog and that someday I'd snap the chain."

Evryn smiled faintly. "Sounds like she had good instincts."

"She died for them."

Silence stretched between them again, gentler this time.

Evryn looked at him through the firelight, at the way the orange glow played off the edge of his sharp cheekbones, the faint scar by his jaw.

“I used to think Eamon was the only one who could understand what I was,” she said.

Lucien looked up, meeting her gaze.

“And now?”

Evryn hesitated, then whispered, “Now I’m not sure if that terrifies me or makes me want to stay.”

Lucien’s throat bobbed with a swallow.

He didn’t answer because he didn’t have to.

Because this time, they both stayed.

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SEVENTEEN

LUCIEN

He stabbed her in the dream.

Watched the blade sink between her ribs, slow and sure. Watched her eyes go wide.
Not with pain. With peace. And she smiled.

Not sweet.

Not cruel.

Just... accepted it. Like she always knew it would end this way.

Lucien woke with a strangled breath, lungs burning, hand reaching for a blade that wasn't there.

The fire had died. Only embers left.

Evryn was asleep a few feet away, curled against her coat, a faint shadow ripple still curling around her shoulder like it wanted to protect her even while she dreamed.

Lucien sat up and moved away.

Quietly. Carefully.

He needed air. He needed distance. Because that dream—it wasn't just fear. It was a warning. A prophecy he didn't want to believe in. Because what if that was what she wanted from him? To be the weapon? The executioner? The final rite of a bloodline too old to survive?

What if she was already resigned to being destroyed? What if he was already halfway in love with someone he was destined to break?

He didn't speak to her the next morning.

Just short commands and observations during her training, trying to bury the terror under discipline. He handed her a blade. Then a charm. Then shadow-threaded bone to test her reflexes.

Evryn didn't question it.

She noticed, though. He could tell.

She always noticed.

"You're tense today," she said after her third controlled shadow projection shimmered to life beside her. "Brooding harder than usual. Didn't think that was possible."

Lucien arched a brow, but didn't look directly at her. "You're improving."

"That's not a denial."

He said nothing.

She huffed and rolled her shoulders, shaking off a flicker of darkness that hadn't

listened to her command. “So are we going to talk about what’s got your jaw locked like a bear trap, or are you gonna keep pretending your shadows aren’t flicking like they’re in a mood?”

Lucien sighed and finally faced her. “You’re not like other Sighted.”

Evryn blinked. “Okay... that’s a pivot.”

“You’re not just shadow-sensitive. You don’t read the Veil. You move with it. You respond to it. It doesn’t treat you like an outsider.”

Evryn frowned. “Because of the mark?”

He shook his head. “Because of what it came from.”

She stepped closer, arms crossed. “You said before I had old blood. First Mark. What does that mean, really? ”

Lucien’s gaze dropped to the ground. He didn’t want to say it. Not again. Not aloud.

But she deserved it.

“Your line predates the Court of Claws,” he said softly. “Before the blood was divided by beast or clan or House. You don’t just descend from royalty, Evryn. You descend from something the Houses fear. ”

He continued. “Your shadowmancy doesn’t behave like mine. It doesn’t come when called. It chooses. And it’s chosen you. That means something.”

She looked at her hands.

“Then why does it feel like something that wants to consume me?”

Lucien stepped closer, carefully. “Because you’re afraid of it.”

She met his eyes. “Shouldn’t I be?”

He didn’t answer. He couldn’t.

Not when he was just as scared of what she was becoming. Not because he feared her power, but because he feared what that power would demand—and how far he’d go to keep her alive.

Even if it meant betraying everyone who had ever trusted him.

Again.

Later, as the light shifted and they shared bread and salt-slick fruit from Lucien’s satchel, she sat beside him on the broken steps, her shoulder just barely brushing his.

“You ever think about running?” she asked softly.

“From what?”

“From all of it. Your House. The throne. The war.”

Lucien stared at the mist curling along the treetops.

“Every damn day. What do you think I’m doing now?”

Evryn smiled, tired. “You don’t seem like the running type.”

“That’s ‘cause I’m not fast enough to escape the things I’ve done.”

She looked at him, really looked.

“You’ve done things,” she said gently, “but I don’t think they’re who you are.”

Lucien’s jaw tightened. “You don’t know me.”

“I’m starting to.”

He turned, eyes catching hers, silver and warm and terrified of what that kind of knowing could mean.

“Stop that,” he said softly.

“Stop what?”

“Looking at me like I’m not a monster.”

Evryn didn’t blink. “If you were a monster, Lucien... I wouldn’t still be here.”

He looked away before she could see the truth cracking through him.

He was falling for her. Harder than he wanted. Faster than he could control.

And it was going to destroy them both, especially if his dreams were the signs he assumed they were.

EIGHTEEN

EVRYN

The shadows didn't feel right.

Evryn had learned, in the short few weeks since falling into the Veil's cracked-open heart, how to read them—not with her eyes, but with something under her skin. A second heartbeat. A hum.

Right now, that hum was shrieking.

Lucien stood across from her in the basin, circling slowly, his silver gaze narrowed in focus as they worked through another round of shadow training.

He was trying not to look at her too long.

Ever since the night of the kiss. Ever since the dream he wouldn't talk about but couldn't hide from his expression.

She pretended not to notice.

Pretended it didn't cut her a little more each time he stepped away before something real could surface.

But her shadows noticed.

They coiled tighter around her legs, flickering with tension.

Lucien raised a hand. “Good. But don’t tighten your shoulders like that?—”

A sound tore through the basin.

A whistle, fast and sharp—then a crack.

Lucien moved fast, yanking her down behind a toppled pillar just as a bolt of darksteel shattered the stone where she’d stood.

Evryn hit the ground hard, shoulder slamming into packed earth.

Lucien was already drawing blades, his voice a harsh whisper. “Stay down?—”

Figures dropped from the cliff’s edge, five, no six, maybe more. Veil rebels, no House insignia. Burned-black leather, masks covering mouths, eyes wild with zeal.

“Hunters,” Lucien hissed.

Evryn knew that they were here for her.

Lucien struck the first before he touched the ground, shadow lashing out like a whip across the attacker’s throat.

Evryn scrambled to her feet, adrenaline cutting through confusion. “How did they find us?!”

Lucien parried a second blow, growling, “We’ve stayed too long.”

Another bolt whistled by her ear. Evryn ducked, instinct flaring.

Her shadows pulsed out in a wall, but they weren't fast enough to stop the third hunter crashing into Lucien from behind.

Lucien staggered, caught off guard.

The blade in the hunter's hand gleamed red.

Evryn's vision tunneled. She didn't think. Didn't breathe. Just reached. Her shadows screamed.

A burst of light exploded from her chest—not flame, not shadow, but something older. Silver and black, lined with veins of deep gold. It ripped through the air, straight into the hunter pinning Lucien.

He was thrown back like a rag doll, landing yards away—unmoving.

Silence.

Every shadow stilled.

Lucien knelt where he'd been, breathing hard, staring at her with something between awe and terror.

Evryn's knees buckled.

He was there in two strides, arms catching her before she hit the ground.

"I've got you," he said, voice low and rough.

She couldn't stop shaking. Her hands trembled so hard she couldn't unclench her fists. Her pulse pounded in her ears.

“Evryn,” he said, gripping her face, forcing her to look at him. “Breathe. With me.”

She tried and failed. Tried again.

“Count it,” he whispered. “Four in. Four out.”

She matched him. One breath. Then another.

Her body finally listened.

“What the hell was that?” she gasped.

Lucien didn’t answer immediately. His eyes were scanning the brush, tracking movements, reading danger as the other shadows dissipated.

He pulled her tighter.

“I don’t know. But if anyone else saw it, we need to move. Now.”

They didn’t stop until the sky had deepened into twilight, and the summit was two ridges behind them.

Lucien didn’t speak much as they climbed, shadows flaring around him like smoke with teeth. Evryn followed without complaint, her legs screaming but her head too full of what had just happened to slow down.

They finally ducked beneath a twisted arc of thick vines and brush, into an overgrown grove buried beneath the ridge line. It was small, concealed, silent but for the rustle of leaves and a trickle of water nearby.

Lucien knelt, scanning the perimeter with sharp, practiced glances.

He pulled a scroll from his coat, a second shadow-crow already forming near his shoulder.

“What’s that?” Evryn asked, throat still raw.

“I’m sending word to Seraphine and Calder,” he said. “They need to know we were found.”

Evryn dropped onto a patch of moss, groaning. “Do I want to know how they’re going to react?”

“They’ll be furious.” He didn’t sugarcoat it. “But they won’t be going there again.”

Lucien handed the crow the message. It vanished into the trees with a soft whisper.

He finally turned to her. And for a moment, he just looked. No training. No orders. Just breathing the same breath.

“Thank you,” he said softly.

Evryn blinked. “For what?”

“For saving my life.”

She snorted. “You’d have done the same.”

“I wouldn’t have done it like that. ”

Evryn’s smile faded. “What was that?”

Lucien sat beside her. “An inheritance. A buried one. You shouldn’t be able to call

that kind of force. Not without years of training, anchors, focus. But it responded to your need.”

Evryn curled her knees to her chest, staring at her hands.

“I didn’t want to hurt anyone. I just... didn’t want to lose you.”

Lucien froze. After a moment, he reached out slowly. His fingers brushed hers, hesitant at first. Then steadier.

Evryn looked at their hands.

“Are you going to tell me to be careful with it?”

Lucien’s voice was low. “No. I’m going to tell you that you’re terrifying in the best way.”

She laughed, barely. Then leaned against him, forehead resting on his shoulder.

He didn’t move. Didn’t pull away.

For once, she let herself believe she wasn’t alone in this war.

NINETEEN

LUCIEN

He shouldn't have brought her here.

Not to this place.

But Evryn needed safety—and he needed distance from everything else long enough to not run from what was clawing through his chest.

The Lost Gardens lay tucked beyond a rise of blackroot and bone-pines, hidden by old glamour sigils only those with Shadowline blood could pass through without being torn apart. It was a place of memory. Of mourning. And magic.

No one had tended it in over a century. But the shadows still remembered.

Lucien guided her through the last of the mist, their boots crunching over ancient petals turned to dust. The silver-glow vines curled from the stone walls, pulsing faintly with life, and the trees grew in winding, impossible spirals, their trunks inked in twilight bloom.

Evryn stared, breath caught between awe and reverence. “What is this place?”

Lucien stopped at the heart of the garden, beneath an arching veil-tree whose leaves shimmered like moonstone.

“It was where my great-grandmother courted her mate,” he said quietly. “And where my mother buried his bones.”

Evryn blinked. “It’s beautiful. And sad.”

“Like most things born from love in this realm.”

She didn’t speak. Just stepped further into the clearing, brushing her hand along the curling vines.

Lucien watched her.

Watched the way the garden responded to her, flowers unfurling slightly as she passed, the shadows bending toward her, not in threat but in recognition.

She didn’t know what she was. But the world did. And maybe that was why he struggled with who he was when he looked at her.

Not because she was terrifying. Because she was becoming . And it made him want things he’d buried long ago.

They sat beneath the tree, the moon a broken coin overhead, casting their silhouettes in violet and silver.

Evryn leaned her back against the trunk, her head tilted toward him.

“You never talk about her,” she said.

Lucien blinked. “Who?”

“Your mother. Not really.”

Lucien exhaled. “What is there to say? She taught me to kill before I could read. Told me mercy was weakness. Made me a weapon sharp enough to carve her enemies in half and silent enough to pretend it didn’t cost me anything.”

Evryn was quiet. Then she whispered, “But it did.”

Lucien’s throat closed.

She reached for his hand.

He let her.

“Do you ever wish you could be someone else?” she asked.

Lucien met her eyes. He scoffed. “Every damn day.”

She leaned forward then and he let himself fall into it.

Their lips brushed, soft at first. Then again, deeper. More certain.

Lucien’s hand slid to Evryn’s jaw, the other anchoring against her waist. Her breath hitched as he pulled her close, their bodies aligning like they’d been made in tandem and only just remembered it.

The air between them hummed—not with the jagged heat of survival, but the slow burn of something older.

Deeper. Her fingers tangled in his shirt, not tearing but unraveling it, as if the fabric itself had forgotten how to cling to him.

He let her. Let the night breeze kiss his skin as she peeled the layers away, her palms

skimming the scars he'd never explained.

She didn't ask. Just traced the ridge of one with her thumb, her gaze flicking up to his. "You carry so many stories."

"And you're the only one who doesn't flinch at them."

Her laugh was a low, fractured thing. "Maybe I like the way they feel."

Cloth pooled around them, ink-black wool against petals turned to ash.

The veil-tree's leaves trembled above, scattering light like shattered glass over her shoulders.

He kissed the hollow of her throat, the pulse there wild and insistent.

Her back arched, a silent plea, and he obliged—lowering her to the moss with a reverence that made her snort.

"Since when do you move like I'll break?"

"Since never." His teeth grazed her hip, blunt and punishing. "But this isn't a battlefield."

"Could've fooled me." Her nails scored his spine as he dragged his tongue up the slope of her ribs. "Feels like surrender."

"Then lose louder."

She did.

When he finally sheathed himself inside her, it wasn't with the desperation she'd come to expect from him.

Slow. Deliberate. A blade finding its scabbard after centuries apart.

Her gasp fractured into a moan as he stilled, forehead pressed to hers, their breaths mingling.

The garden held its own breath around them—vines curling tighter, shadows pooling like liquid consent.

“Still think this is surrender?” His voice roughened, fraying at the edges.

Her hips rolled, taking him deeper in response.

He laughed, a dark, ragged sound—and let her set the rhythm. Let her nails carve half-moons into his shoulders as she climbed.

Her legs locked around him, heels digging into the small of his back with the ruthlessness of a siege engine.

When she came, it wasn't quiet—it was a thunderclap.

A raw cry tore from her throat, savaging the garden's mournful silence, her body clamping around him like a blade being forged.

The veil-tree shuddered, moonstone leaves cascading over them like frozen tears as her hips bucked.

She arched, her sweat-slicked chest dragging against his, peaked nipples tracing searing paths across his skin with each ragged breath.

“Again,” she snarled, half prayer, half command, fingers knotting in his hair.

He obeyed. His thrusts turned brutal, each snap of his hips a controlled eclipse—darkness meeting radiant hunger.

Her eyes blazed silver, pupils swallowing the violet whole, a mirror to the fractured moonlight above.

The scent of crushed night-blooms rose thick around them, the air itself vibrating as she clawed at his shoulders.

“Not— fuck —not the noble restraint act now.” Her nails gouged fresh wounds into the old scars along his spine.

His laughter came out a growl, the panther in him reveling in her ferocity. “You want heat?” He dragged her hips higher, angling deeper, his voice gravel and embers. “Then burn with me.”

She did.

Her second crest hit like a landslide. The garden seemed to bend —vines snapping taut around stone, shadows braiding through her hair as her back bowed off the moss.

Her cry fractured into a guttural sob, her body a vice of pulsating heat.

Lucien’s control splintered. Three more strokes—each one a rebellion against the end, her name a profane hymn on her lips—and he surrendered.

His release slammed through him, a silent quake that locked his jaw against the groan threatening to escape. Teeth found the juncture of her neck and shoulder, biting down as if he could fuse them there. Shadows writhed against the ground, alive and hungry,

as he spilled into her.

When the tremors subsided, her fingers uncurled from his hair, trailing down to splay over his racing heart.

The garden exhaled.

Above them, the tree's branches knit back together, blooms unfurling in their wake.

The leaves kept falling. The shadows kept coiling. And the garden—the damned, traitorous garden—bloomed where her sweat dripped onto the bones beneath the moss.

He rolled onto his back, pulling her with him. Her head settled on his chest, ear pressed to the drumbeat of his heart.

After, they lay curled beneath his cloak, her breath soft against his chest, his heartbeat steady beneath her ear.

Lucien ran his fingers through her hair, silent.

Evryn shifted slightly. “You okay?”

Lucien nodded, voice rough. “More than.”

She smiled against him. “Good.”

He kissed her temple. Held her closer. Lucien didn't feel like a weapon anymore, the first time since he could remember. He felt like a person, His own.

He felt like hers.

TWENTY

EVRYN

E vryn woke warm.

It was a strange thing to notice first—not the ache in her muscles from training or the ever-present weight of danger humming in the world around her. Just warmth. The kind that wasn't from a fire or a cloak, but from being held. From knowing, if only for a moment, that someone saw her. Chose her.

Lucien's scent still lingered on the air, cypress and smoke and something darker, like steel right before it sings in the forge.

But when she stretched a hand out beside her on the mossy ground beneath the arching moonleaf tree, there was nothing but cold.

Her eyes opened fully.

He was gone.

The remnants of last night still ghosted her skin—his hands, his mouth, his voice in the dark—but the emptiness beside her sharpened fast into suspicion.

This wasn't like when he kept watch. This felt different.

She sat up, breath steadying, eyes narrowing as she reached for the power humming

low in her chest. Her Sight. It had grown stronger in the past days, more precise. Eamon had once told her it would bloom under pressure, under pain. He hadn't been wrong.

She inhaled slow, let herself fall inward, and when her eyes reopened, the world shimmered.

Footprints, energy trails, not physical—shimmered faintly across the garden floor. A pulse of motion, heading east, cloaked in familiar shadows.

Lucien.

And not alone.

She followed the thread.

The veil around the perimeter was thin here, Lucien had probably believed she wouldn't sense him leaving through it. But she had trained under his hand now. She knew how he walked when he was lying.

The wind shifted. Voices, hushed, filtered through the trees. Evryn crouched behind a curtain of silverfern, pushing her Sight just far enough to catch every word.

Thalia's voice, smooth as ever, like silk hiding thorns.

"You're wasting time, Lucien. She's clouding your judgment."

"I know what I'm doing," Lucien muttered.

Thalia asked, her tone feather-light and cutting.

“Do you? Because as far as I can see, you’re playing the Queen’s orders fast and loose.

Selyne won’t be patient forever. In fact, I think the only reason she has given you this time is because of your obedience and loyalty to her tasks in the past. But this—”

Lucien’s reply came like a crack of cold thunder. “I still serve the Queen if that’s what you’re asking. My loyalty has never shifted so don’t think you can use your words against me.”

The word echoed like a punch to the ribs.

Thalia’s next words dripped like honey laced with poison.

“And what happens when the girl finds out? When she realizes you’ve been keeping her alive only until you decide it’s time to finish out your mother’s orders, being her perfect executioner and all?

Because if that’s not the case, you may as well hand her over to me.

You know I don’t plan to have her head on a silver platter as your mother does. The girl is no threat to me.”

Lucien didn’t answer. Didn’t deny it.

Evryn’s fingers curled into fists against the dirt. Her heart was pounding so hard it felt like it might tear through her ribs.

Thalia’s voice again, lower this time. “You’re not the first assassin to get too close to a mark. But you will be the last, if you don’t remember what side you’re on. We all know your mother is paranoid enough to make sure of it.”

Evryn didn't stay to hear more.

She stumbled back through the trees, shadows blurring with her vision. Her skin felt too tight. Her pulse a war drum in her ears.

Last night had meant something to her.

Everything .

And to him?

A lie. A delay tactic. An obligation.

Her thoughts spiraled as she returned to the garden, her breath hitching in silent fury. He still worked for the Queen. The woman who wanted her dead. The woman who wanted nothing more than to see her bloodline cease to exist.

And Lucien, who had kissed her like she was the only thing keeping him human—hadn't even tried to deny it.

He returned not long after, the veil brushing shut behind him like it didn't want to carry the weight of what had been said.

Evryn was waiting.

Lucien paused when he saw her. His face unreadable, but his shoulders already tensed—like he'd known .

“Where were you?” she asked. Her voice was sharp, but quiet.

Lucien hesitated. “Scouting.”

“Try again.”

He swallowed. “Evryn?—”

“I heard you,” she snapped. “You and Thalia. Every word.”

Lucien went still. The air between them cracked wide open.

“You still serve the Queen,” she said, stepping forward. “You lied to me.”

“I didn’t—” he began, but the look in her eyes cut him off.

“Don’t you dare say you didn’t mean to. You’ve been lying since the day we met. Since the Borderlands. Since the market. All of it.”

Lucien stepped closer, hands raised, voice softer now. “I was trying to protect you.”

“You were following orders!”

“I was ,” he said, sharp now. “But things changed.”

She laughed, harsh and broken. “Because we slept together?”

“No. Because I saw who you are.”

“Then why couldn’t you tell me the truth?!”

Lucien’s voice dropped, raw. “Because I knew you’d run. And because I didn’t want to lose you before I figured out how to fix the damn mess I was born into.”

Evryn stared at him. Her hands trembled, not with fear—but with rage. With

heartbreak. She shook her head, slowly.

“I can’t believe I let myself get distracted. I should’ve been looking for Eamon. He’s the only one I can trust.”

“Evryn—”

She turned, shadows already curling at her heels.

“Don’t follow me.”

And before he could try again, before the apology he hadn’t yet found could leave his lips, she vanished into the trees.

Gone like the first time they met. Gone like a blade he hadn’t seen coming.

And Lucien stood alone in the garden that bloomed for her.

TWENTY-ONE

LUCIEN

Lucien didn't chase her.

Not at first.

He told himself it was for the best.

She needed space. Time. The truth had gutted her—cut clean through whatever fragile, fierce thing they'd started to build between them. And maybe he deserved that.

No, he did deserve it.

He'd lied. Not just once. Not in passing. Repeatedly.

He'd let her believe she was safe with him, while still playing both sides of a throne that wanted her bleeding. And even if his reasons had changed, the deception remained.

So when her silhouette vanished through the moonlit ferns, when her shadow slipped into the dark without a backward glance, Lucien didn't follow.

He stood there. Cold. Still. Convincing himself it was mercy.

But then the sun started to rise, casting long, dappled streaks through the half-bloomed canopy. Birds began their low, lilting song. The garden awakened in all its cursed beauty though something in Lucien had withered.

He still hadn't moved. Not until his shadows, usually coiled and silent, stirred restlessly around his boots. They were uneasy. Like they knew something had shifted. Like they could sense what he hadn't yet let himself believe.

"Damn it," Lucien whispered, already moving.

He didn't call for her. Didn't shout.

She was too smart for that, she wouldn't answer.

But she had left a thread behind. Not deliberately, not visibly. But her shadow signature still lingered in the air like smoke after lightning. And Lucien knew how to follow what others couldn't even see.

The trail cut through the far side of the garden. Through another veil-door. And straight into Thalia's territory.

His blood turned to ice.

He found them at the edge of the Hollowmark crossroads, near an old stone arch long forgotten by most of the Veil-born.

Evryn stood with her back to him.

She was speaking to Thalia, something quiet, something unsure. Her shoulders were tense, her arms crossed. The wind blew her hair across her face, and even from the distance, Lucien could see she'd been crying.

She didn't see him.

But Thalia did.

The moment her eyes locked on Lucien's, her mouth curled into a slow, deliberate smile. Not warm. Not mocking. Triumphant.

Then she reached out. And Evryn—hesitant but not resisting—let her.

Thalia's shadows swept around them, swirling in a practiced, sweeping motion. The portal closed. They were gone.

Gone.

She was gone. And he had let her go.

The forest around him cracked, soundless but splitting.

Lucien turned, ready to summon the storm in his blood, ready to break whatever had twisted this fate into a sick joke.

But instead of an enemy, it was Cassian who stepped from the shadows.

"Late to your own heartbreak," Cassian said lightly, brushing a piece of lint from his silver-trimmed shoulder cloak.

Lucien's jaw clenched. "You knew."

Cassian cocked his head. "Knew what?"

"That she'd go to Thalia. That she'd leave. "

“I helped it along, actually.”

“You what?”

Cassian strolled a lazy half-circle around him. “Saw you in the gardens last night. Both of you. All tangled up in emotion and skin and hope. ” His lip curled in distaste. “It was nauseating.”

Lucien’s fists clenched at his sides. “You had no right?—”

“I have every right,” Cassian cut in, voice sharpened now. “You’re the Queen’s blade. You don’t love. You don’t choose sides unless it’s the one that keeps the crown upright.”

Lucien stared at him, fury and disbelief warring in his chest. “So you sided with Thalia instead? She’s manipulating her.”

“Of course she is,” Cassian said simply. “That’s what we do.”

“You could’ve told Mother?—”

“And what?” Cassian scoffed. “She’d have killed the girl. You’d have fallen apart. And the Dominion would lose its only weapon who still has a conscience left to exploit.”

Lucien felt like the ground under him was splitting.

“You destroyed her trust in me,” he whispered. “And for what? A lesson?”

Cassian leaned in, voice low. “To remind you who you are.”

Lucien didn't move.

Cassian's smile was cold. "You were never meant to love anyone, brother. You were meant to be feared. You've let that girl make you soft. That's dangerous—for all of us."

"You arrogant, manipulative?—"

Cassian stepped back into shadow, already fading. "Careful. That softness might spread." And then he was gone.

Like fog retreating at first light.

Lucien stood alone at the archway, throat tight, chest hollow. He wanted to burn it all down. Wanted to chase after her and fall to his knees. But most of all, he wanted to know why she hadn't looked back.

And maybe, deep down, feared the answer.

He looked up at the sky, the veil-thinned clouds bleeding violet light through morning mist.

"Cassian thinks I'm soft," he murmured.

His shadows stirred in response, slow and rising like a tide coming for blood.

"Let's prove him wrong."

TWENTY-TWO

EVRYN

The sky above Crimson Hollow bled rust.

It wasn't the color of dusk or even the haze from the alchemical mines threading the cliffs around the rebel stronghold. No, this red sky was ritual. Painted by intent. Summoned by power.

Evryn stood beneath it, cloaked in deep charcoal robes lined with silver thread. The high collar scratched against her throat, but she didn't flinch. The wind tugged at her curls, the hem of her robe. Her hands were steady at her sides.

A symbolic heir. A daughter of the forgotten bloodline.

She was becoming what Thalia had said she would be. What Lucien once feared she could be.

The courtyard before her was ringed with the devout—witches and Veilborn from every forgotten clan. Old warriors in rusted armor. Hollow-eyed assassins marked with ritual scars. Some knelt. Some watched.

All of them waiting.

Thalia stood to her right. Regal, serene, deadly.

“This is what survival looks like,” she whispered, voice just loud enough for Evryn alone. “When the world writes you off, you rewrite the language they used to erase you.”

Evryn nodded once, cold. Inside her chest, her power curled. It wasn't a flicker anymore. It was steady . Coiled. Listening.

She stepped forward into the circle. The blood rite began.

The blade was obsidian-veined bone, passed from Thalia's hand to hers.

“Do you claim your blood?” the gathered voices asked in unison.

Evryn's voice didn't shake. “I do.”

“Do you claim your shadows?”

“I do.”

“And do you carry the right of flame and void, of panther and Veil?”

Evryn pressed the blade to her palm, sliced deep and clean. The blood that hit the earth sizzled against the rune-carved stone.

“I do,” she whispered.

The sky howled. The wind rose.

Power surged into her chest like a floodgate torn open.

She staggered. But she didn't fall. And when she looked up again, the entire circle

was bowing.

Later, in her chambers, stone walls laced with shadowglass, the scent of nightthorn incense thick in the air—Evryn stood in silence, watching the silver wound on her palm knit closed.

She didn't feel stronger , not exactly.

She felt emptier . Lighter in all the wrong ways.

The kind of cold that settled under your ribs and made a home there.

Thalia entered without knocking.

She didn't speak right away, just walked to the window and looked out at the Hollow. The trees beyond were still aflame with light from the rite. Even the shadows seemed quieter, holding their breath.

“You did well.”

Evryn didn't answer.

Thalia looked over her shoulder. “You feel it, don't you? The change.”

“I feel... like I lost something.”

Thalia stepped closer. “You gave something. There's a difference.”

Evryn studied her. “Eamon.”

Thalia's expression didn't shift, but something in her eyes flickered. “He's alive.”

Evryn clenched her fists. “Where?”

“I’ve told you—safe. And you’ll see him when you’re ready.”

Her voice was even, but Evryn could hear the thread beneath it.

“You mean when I’m trained enough.”

Thalia didn’t deny it. “Where he is... it’s not a place one walks into unprepared. Or uninvited.”

Evryn’s heart thudded. “He’s with her, isn’t he?”

The pause was telling.

“I’ve ensured he’s untouched. But yes. He’s in the Queen’s custody.”

Evryn’s stomach twisted.

“He raised me.”

Thalia nodded. “And he’s why you’ll survive this. Why you must.”

Evryn turned to the window, jaw tight. Her power stirred again. Her shadows coiled at the edge of her thoughts.

The silence between them grew heavy.

And then Evryn spoke.

Low. Sharp. “Why me?”

Thalia tilted her head.

Evryn didn't look at her. "Don't feed me the bloodline answer again. I know I've got power. I know I've got the mark. But so what? That's not enough to make people bow. Not enough to make you risk open war with the Queen."

She turned to face Thalia fully. "Why do you want me? What do I give your rebellion that no one else can?"

Thalia's lips parted in a small, unreadable smile.

"Because you're the fracture point."

Evryn's brows knit. "What?"

"You're not just a symbol, Evryn. You're a wound. A truth that never got buried deep enough. The Houses built peace on the lie that your bloodline was gone—that the oldest power in the Veil had been extinguished. But you're proof it wasn't. Your existence cracks the foundation."

She began to circle slowly, her voice like silk unraveling in the dark.

"Do you know how many factions in the Veil have been waiting for something? Anything? A spark, a thread, a reason to believe that change isn't just some dead poet's dream?"

You're that reason. You bear the Old Flame.

The Mark. You move shadows without command.

You see through Veil-warp and glamour like it's air.

You're what the Queen fears—not because you can kill her, but because you could replace her. ”

Evryn's throat tightened.

Thalia stopped in front of her. “We don't want a soldier. We want a storm. A reckoning that no court or House can contain.”

“But I'm not ready,” Evryn said. “I don't know what I'm doing. I still feel like I'm faking every step.”

“That's what makes you dangerous,” Thalia said, softer now. “You haven't been molded by them. Not completely. Your instincts are your own. Untamed. And once they're honed, once that old magic in your veins stops flickering and starts burning—you won't need anyone's permission to take your place.”

Evryn looked down at her hands. The faint shimmer of power pulsed beneath her skin.

She wasn't just a girl caught in a war anymore. She was the war.

And Thalia? She didn't want to save her. She wanted to unleash her.

Evryn swallowed hard, the window's reflection catching her eyes—eyes that no longer looked like a stranger's, but something ancient clawing its way to the surface.

She didn't say it, but she felt it.

The longer she stayed here, the more that coldness took root.

She wasn't the girl from the Borderlands anymore.

Not the frightened runaway. Not even the girl who had loved Lucien Umbraclaw like a fool.

She was something else now.

And whatever that was... it wanted blood.

TWENTY-THREE

LUCIEN

Lucien had infiltrated worse places.

But none of them had felt like this.

The air inside Crimson Hollow was thick with reverence, soaked in smoke and bone-flame. The rebels had gathered in mass—hooded, silent, faces painted in iron-dust, eyes locked on the ceremony happening in the high courtyard.

And at the center of it all, bathed in red firelight, her skin kissed by moonstone shimmer and the glow of her own damn legend—stood Evryn.

Lucien's shadows curled tighter around his ankles, every step deliberate. The glamour woven into his coat let him blend, let him move through the perimeter like mist. But even cloaked in magic, even trained by silence itself, his chest still pounded too loud.

She looked changed. Not lost. Not broken.

Hardened.

And she still didn't know.

He'd come in through the lower crypts, the part of Crimson Hollow even Thalia's

loyalists rarely visited. The tunnels smelled of wet iron and old spell residue. And deeper still—beneath the ceremonial sanctum where the rebels praised her name—Lucien had found him.

Eamon.

Cold. Still. Dead. Not recently. Not even close.

The man who raised Evryn had been left here like a secret, a relic buried in spell-silence and cloaked stasis. A charm over the chamber to keep his scent hidden, to keep the rot from spreading. A lie wrapped in sorcery.

Lucien had knelt beside him, shadows hissing in grief.

He looked peaceful. Like he'd gone protecting her.

And she didn't even know.

She still believed he was alive, just waiting. Just somewhere.

That's why she stayed with Thalia. That's why she was letting her heart turn cold and her power run wild.

Because of hope.

Lucien left the crypt and didn't look back.

He didn't know what would break more—Evryn's heart or her rage when she realized the truth. But she had to know. And he couldn't let her find out from them.

He waited until the fire rites started. Until her hands were lifted high and the circle of

blood-born rebels began to chant her name like prophecy.

Then he moved.

Shadows and blades. No sound. No pause.

Through the back of the temple platform, through the narrow servant corridor that twisted behind the altar. He found her there, momentarily alone, her breath visible in the sacred chill, eyes closed as if steadying herself before the final part of the ritual.

She didn't see him coming.

Not until his hand was on her wrist.

Not until she turned and her shadows reared like beasts.

“Lucien?” Her voice cracked like frost. Then fire. “What the hell are you?—”

“We need to go,” he growled. “Now.”

She yanked back, summoning power. “You don't get to show up ?—”

He caught her hand again, more force than finesse, and pinned her against the carved wall.

“You want to hit me? Do it later. Right now, I'm getting you out of here.”

“ Why?! ” she snapped, writhing, shoving. “So you can betray me again ?”

He leaned in close, voice a razor. “Because he's gone.”

She froze.

Her whole body. Her breath.

“What?”

Lucien’s chest heaved. “Eamon. He’s dead.”

Evryn’s lips parted, but no sound came.

Lucien let her go. Stepped back. Let the truth hit like a blade.

“I found him,” he said. “In the crypts. Not hurt. Not tortured. Just... dead. And not recently. They kept him like some talisman , cloaked in stasis magic.”

She staggered against the wall. “No... no, she said...”

“She lied,” he said, softer now. “She’s been using you.”

Evryn shook her head like she could shake it off, but her hands were trembling. “No. He can’t—he wouldn’t just—Thalia said I wasn’t ready, that she was keeping me safe?—”

“Keeping you useful ,” Lucien bit. “As long as you believed he was alive, you’d keep playing her game.”

Tears gathered in her eyes, but she blinked them back, furious.

“I trusted her.”

“I know.”

Evryn looked at him, voice raw. “And I trusted you.”

Lucien didn’t look away.

He let her see it—all the pain, the guilt, the rage. The part of him that had crawled through blood and ash to reach her. The part that hadn’t stopped wanting to protect her even after she’d walked away.

“You can be furious with me. You can hate me. But right now, you’ve got to choose— her , and a lie that keeps breaking you... or me. And the truth.”

She shook. From grief, from fury, from fear.

She nodded. Once. Barely more than a breath.

Lucien took her hand. And together, they vanished.

TWENTY-FOUR

EVRYN

She didn't cry.

Not when they escaped Crimson Hollow.

Not when the veil closed behind them like a dying breath.

Not even when Lucien helped her down the last moss-slick stone stair into the crypt where her nightmares had been waiting.

She didn't cry when she saw Eamon. She didn't scream. She just knelt, one hand over her mouth, the other reaching out—not to touch him, but to feel .

To make sure the shadow of his presence wasn't just buried beneath the stasis spell.

But he was gone. Truly gone.

She had felt it the moment Lucien said it, deep in her bones. Her Sight had known what her heart refused to accept.

Now, on the winding forest path past the Hollow, with the scent of wet bark and smoke thick in the air, Evryn still didn't cry.

But gods, she wanted to.

Lucien walked ahead, close enough to reach her if danger stirred but far enough to give her silence. His coat was pulled high, shadows flickering at his shoulders like restless hounds.

Evryn stared at the trail underfoot. Everything blurred together. Leaves. Dust. The sharp rhythm of her own too-steady breath.

“I didn’t even get to say goodbye,” she said finally, voice rough.

Lucien slowed. Turned. “You did. He just wasn’t breathing when he heard it.”

Her throat tightened. “Don’t.”

He didn’t push.

They walked a few more paces in silence before she spoke again.

“I should’ve known. I did know. Part of me did. I just... didn’t want it to be true.”

“That’s what grief is,” Lucien murmured. “Wanting things to make sense when the world’s already moved on.”

She laughed—bitter, hollow. “You’re full of inspirational speeches now?”

Lucien gave her a look. “Hard to dodge emotional landmines with sarcasm when you’ve already set them off.”

She almost smiled. Almost.

Then the cold crept back in.

Later, by the bank of a stream hidden under old vinefalls, they made camp. It wasn't safe, not really, but it was quiet. The kind of place you could pretend the world was just dirt and sky and the sound of water.

Evryn sat beside the fire, arms wrapped tight around her knees.

"I'm changing," she said, barely louder than the stream.

Lucien was across from her, sharpening one of his daggers on a piece of onyx stone. He looked up.

"I feel it," she continued. "There's this... coldness. Not just from grief. From power. Every time I use it, it wraps tighter. Like it's waiting."

Lucien nodded slowly. "It is."

Evryn blinked. "You're not gonna lie and say I'm imagining it?"

"I wouldn't insult you like that."

She studied him for a long beat. "You're not afraid of what I'm becoming?"

He slid the dagger away and leaned forward, elbows on his knees. "No. I'm afraid of what people will do because of it."

She bit her lip. "Thalia wanted to use me to start a war. What does your mother want?"

Lucien's jaw clenched. "I'm not sure yet. But I know it has to be more than your death."

The world had gone quiet again.

Too quiet.

The kind of silence that came after something irrevocable broke inside you, but your body was too tired to make a sound.

Evryn sat with her knees pulled tight to her chest beneath the arching roots of a moss-covered tree. They'd made camp just off a ghost road in the hills north of Crimson Hollow, far from any scouts or thorns the Queen might send.

But distance meant nothing to grief.

It lived in her.

Her fingers brushed the charm at her throat—bone-carved, worn smooth by years of nervous fidgeting. Eamon had given it to her the day they fled the Borderlands.

It was cold.

Just like the look on his face when she found him.

Still. Peaceful. Empty.

The image burned behind her eyes like frostbite.

“I should’ve come sooner,” she whispered into the wind. “I should’ve found you. I should’ve?—”

A branch cracked nearby.

She didn't flinch.

Lucien emerged from the trees, breathless, his shadows twitching around him like they were stirred by something worse than mere adrenaline.

Evryn stood before he could speak.

"Where were you?"

"I went back to the outskirts of Hollow," he said, voice low and ragged. "I needed... confirmation."

Evryn frowned. "Of what?"

Lucien met her eyes.

And this time, he didn't blink.

"I was wrong," he said. "It's not just that she wants you dead. It's how she wants it done."

Evryn's gut twisted. "Lucien?—"

"She doesn't want to destroy your bloodline," he said. "She wants to absorb it."

The words dropped like iron.

"What?"

Lucien stepped closer, voice tight with urgency.

“There’s a law buried in the Old Veil records, pre-Ascension.

If a dominant Veil-marked heir is killed in ritual combat—by another heir of opposing blood—their power doesn’t fade.

It transfers . Especially if the bloodlines trace back to the first dominions. ”

Evryn stared at him. “And she thinks... killing me would give her that?”

“No.” His voice dropped lower. “She thinks if one of her sons does it, the power binds to her bloodline. Permanently. She doesn't just erase you. She inherits you. ”

Evryn’s stomach turned.

“That’s why she sent you,” she whispered.

Lucien flinched. “Yes. It’s why Cassian’s been circling this war like a vulture. He thinks this is his chance. To prove he can do what I wouldn’t.”

Evryn stepped back, throat tight. “He’s going to try to kill me.”

Lucien’s voice was like flint. “He’s going to want you to trust him first. Make it look clean. Righteous. This was always my mother’s endgame.”

Evryn’s hands curled into fists.

“I’m not a legacy to be passed around like a cursed crown,” she spat.

“You’re not,” Lucien said softly.

She looked at him, shadows flickering around her like they wanted blood.

“They want me as a weapon. Or a grave.”

Lucien stepped into her space, firm and steady. “They don’t get either.”

She searched his face—torn between fury and heartbreak, grief and the ghost of trust trying to be reborn.

“I’m tired, Lucien.”

“I know.”

“I don’t know who I am anymore.”

“You’re the one person in this realm who scares the hell out of every ruling bloodline. That’s who you are.”

She stared at him. Then leaned her forehead into his chest, and this time, when the tears came, she didn’t fight them.

Lucien held her as if she were only truth left.

Because maybe she was.

TWENTY-FIVE

LUCIEN

The night was thick with fog and tension.

Lucien stood beside the dying fire, fingers stained with ink and ash, watching as the shadow raven pulsed to life in his palm. A twisted thing of smoke and intent, its wings unfurled in the shape of darkness stitched with silver threads—an Umbraclaw signature.

Evryn sat nearby, her back to the stone outcrop, knees tucked close. Her eyes hadn't left the flame, but he could feel her watching him through it. Since the truth—since the unraveling—they hadn't spoken much.

But nothing between them had stayed silent either.

Lucien held the tiny scroll of ciphered warning between two fingers. One for Seraphine. One for Calder. One for Malrik Sablewing—the bat shifter whose allegiance was murkier than most, but whose name still held weight in ancient courts.

He tied the threads tight.

“This won't reach them immediately,” he murmured.

Evryn glanced up. “But it will reach them.”

Lucien nodded. “And when it does, they’ll know the stakes. That it’s not just your bloodline in danger. That if my mother gets her hands on this power, the throne won’t be the only thing she rewrites.”

Evryn swallowed. “They might not believe you.”

“They’ll believe you .”

He let the raven go.

It beat upward, scattering shadow-sparks in its wake, before vanishing into the mist.

Lucien turned back toward her, the emptiness in his chest no longer hollow, but dense—like it was being filled with something too sharp to keep carrying.

They ate in silence, half-burnt bread and dried fruit; neither of them touched much. The wind had quieted. The trees stood still. Somewhere in the distance, a nightwolf howled low and long across the fen.

Evryn lay back, arms folded behind her head, eyes on the stars.

“I never thought I’d want something after this,” she said softly.

Lucien lay beside her, close enough to feel the heat of her shoulder. “Want what?”

“A future. A life. I always thought surviving would be enough.”

Lucien stared up with her. “And now?”

She didn’t answer right away.

“Now it feels like surviving isn’t enough if it’s just me at the end of it.”

Lucien turned to look at her. She met his gaze, slow and certain.

“I tried to fight it. Lie to myself, but... You make me want something more,” she whispered.

Lucien’s chest tightened.

He reached out, brushing her fingers, slow and unsure. She curled them around his.

They moved at the same time, drawn like magnets, like tides. Their mouths met—not rushed, not furious like the last time—but steady, needing.

Lucien kissed with a need that he couldn’t hide.

Evryn kissed him like she was afraid they’d never have another night.

The stars burned cold overhead, but her skin was fever-warm under his palms. Lucien’s shadows coiled around them like living silk, insulating their makeshift bed of cloaks and pine needles.

His thumb caught on the raised scar bisecting her ribcage—a relic from her first altercation at sixteen, she’d told him a week ago, voice casual as if recounting a tavern brawl. Now, her breath stuttered.

“Still think I’m going to vanish?” Her teeth grazed his collarbone, hands sliding under his tunic. “Or are you waiting for me to sprout fangs?”

He huffed a laugh against her throat. “You already bite.”

“Only when provoked.” She nipped his earlobe to prove it, then stilled when his fingers found the knot of her leathers. A beat too long. Her pulse thrummed against his lips.

He pulled back just enough to catch her gaze. “Evryn.”

“Don’t.” Her palm pressed over his heart, steadying them both. “I’m not glass, Lucien. You won’t break me.”

“That’s not what I’m afraid of.”

Her laugh frayed at the edges. “Right. Because the assassin prince is terrified of a half-starved orphan.”

He trapped her wrist, guiding her hand lower, past the scar beneath his ribs where his mother’s blade had once slipped, past the ink sigils binding him to a throne he loathed—until her fingers splayed over the hammering truth beneath his navel. “Terrified,” he repeated, raw.

She went very still at his hardness. Then her free hand yanked him closer by the hair. “Good.”

Their foreheads collided. Clumsy. Human. Her next kiss tasted like recklessness, her hips arching into his. The laces of her trousers gave way under his shaking fingers.

“Wait.” She shoved at his shoulder, sudden enough that his shadows lashed out, gouging the earth.

He froze. “What is it?”

Her grin flashed wicked in the dark. “Boots. Unless you want to explain why your

shadow-walking ass got kicked by a buckle.”

He blinked. Then barked a laugh, sharp and startled. “You’re insufferable .”

“And you’re still wearing yours.” She hooked a heel around his calf, toppling him onto his back. Pine needles clung to his hair as she straddled him, yanking at his bootlaces with theatrical fury. “Gods, do you armor your feet for battle or just to vex me?”

“Both.” He tangled a hand in her curls, tugging her mouth back to his. “Hurry up.”

She bit his lower lip. “Make me.”

The boot hit a tree trunk with a hollow thud. Her laugh dissolved into a gasp as his shadows swarmed up her bare thighs, liquid and hungry. Later, he’d map every scar. Later, she’d trace the tattoos he’d earned in service to a crown that wanted them both dead.

Her voice splintered as he slid into her, their shared breath frosting the air between desperate kisses.

“Lucien.”

His name cracked like a prayer as her hips rolled, taking him deeper.

Every ridge and scar of him pressed against her inner walls—a map of violence she traced with her body.

He’d memorized the hitch in her breath when he angled upward, the way her thighs tensed when he hit the spot that made her curse the gods.

“Look at me.” His command frayed at the edges, silver eyes burning through the dark.

Her violet gaze locked onto his, unblinking even as tears blurred her vision.

Not pain— recognition . The same raw terror that had clawed his throat when he’d found her bleeding in the fen, when he’d believed the silence of her pulse.

Her fingernails carved into his shoulders. “Harder.” A challenge, not a plea.

He obliged, hands gripping her hips as she rode him, shadows coiling around her thighs to pull her down each time she rose. Her laugh broke into a gasp. “Cheating bastard.”

“Adapting.” He thrust upward, swallowing her moan with his mouth. She tasted like stolen wine and recklessness, her skin salt and wildfire under his tongue. Her legs cinched around him, heels digging into the small of his back as if she could fuse their skeletons.

Enveloped in the heat of their passion, Evryn moved with a sinuous grace that belied the raw power coiling within her.

Each undulation of her hips drew Lucien deeper into the abyss of desire, the friction between them stoking a fire that threatened to consume them both.

He could feel the rigid length of his arousal, a testament to the exquisite torment she evoked with every roll of her body.

The knowledge that he was the architect of her undoing, the one pushing her to the precipice of ecstasy, only served to harden him further.

Her wetness, a slick sheath that enveloped him with each thrust, was a potent elixir, headier than the most potent spirits of the realm.

It was a tangible manifestation of her desire, a silken proof of her body's eager response to his touch.

Lucien's hands, ever restless, roamed the contours of her form, torn between the allure of her full, pert breasts and the temptation of her round, firm ass.

Each option presented its own temptation; her breasts, a perfect handful, beckoned his palms with the promise of her pebbled nipples grazing his skin.

Her ass, with its inviting curve, seemed to demand the firm grip of his fingers, guiding her rhythm and drawing her closer with each surge of his hips.

In the end, his hands settled on the swell of her hips, fingers digging into her soft skin as he matched her fervor, thrust for thrust. The shadows at his command danced along their entwined bodies, a dark ballet that accentuated the contrast between his pale skin and her honey-toned flesh.

The night air, cool and crisp, was a stark contrast to the furnace of their passion, yet it did nothing to douse the flames that raged between them.

Evryn's breath came in short, sharp gasps, each one a silent plea for more.

Her violet eyes, darkened with desire, locked onto his, and in their depths, he saw the reflection of his own need.

She was close, so deliciously close, to the edge he had so meticulously coaxed her toward.

And as her body began to tremble with the onset of her release, Lucien knew that he would follow her into the abyss, willingly lost in the maelstrom of their shared desire.

When her release hit, it wasn't quiet. She threw her head back, a scream tearing loose as her body clenched around him.

He followed, spilling into her with a growl that shook the pine needles beneath them.

For a heartbeat, the world narrowed to her trembling heat, the pulse fluttering in her throat, the way her fingers tangled in his hair like an anchor.

She collapsed against his chest, breath ragged.

The fire had dwindled to embers, the night air sharp enough to sting. Yet her warmth seeped into him, a live wire humming against his skin. He shifted, tucking his cloak around her bare shoulders.

Her laughter vibrated against his chest. "Since when do assassins play nursemaid?"

"Since you're terrible at staying clothed in freezing fens."

Her breath evened, limbs heavy against him. The stars blurred above, indifferent witnesses. He counted her heartbeats, each thud a rebellion against the silence he'd once called peace.

Evryn traced a scar on his ribs. "When did you get this one?"

"Witchblade. Grimhart skirmish."

"This one?"

“Training. I was fifteen. Cassian broke the rules.”

She was quiet a long moment.

Then, “He’s not going to stop, is he?”

Lucien shook his head. “No. He wants to prove I failed. That I went soft.”

Her voice was a whisper. “Did you?”

Lucien turned to face her, hand cupping her cheek saying what he’d been denying since he let himself know her. “If loving you is soft... then yeah. I did.”

She leaned into the touch, her fingers curling into the fabric at his chest.

“But if loving you means you live ,” he said, “I’d do it again.”

TWENTY-SIX

EVRYN

The morning mist clung to the marsh like memory.

Evryn moved through it in silence, boots sinking into soft moss, her breath fogging in the cool air. Lucien trailed just behind her—close, not crowding. He hadn't spoken much since they broke camp.

Neither had she.

Not because she was angry. Not even because she was grieving.

Because something inside her was stirring. Not power. Not quite. It was older than that.

Older than the shadows, older than her dreams. Like a thread had pulled taut inside her chest, humming with recognition.

She hadn't told Lucien yet. That she felt watched. Not by enemies. By something that remembered her name before she was born.

They crossed into the crumbled ruins of a watchtower long swallowed by the marsh trees. It was the place Seraphine's raven had told them to meet. But Seraphine hadn't come.

Someone else had.

He stepped from the shadows with wings tucked like blades— Malrik Sablewing .

Evryn had never met a Sablewing before. She wasn't sure anyone had in generations. But he looked exactly as whispered: tall, pale bronze skin, with black dragon wings laced with veins of silver. His eyes were obsidian. Not black. Obsidian . Ancient. Sharp.

“You're late,” he said, voice like gravel soaked in wind.

Evryn tilted her chin. “We weren't expected.”

“Doesn't matter,” Malrik said, stepping forward. “She sent you to me for a reason.”

Lucien tensed beside her. “Why?”

“Because the blood in her veins just shifted the balance of the realm,” Malrik said, eyes never leaving Evryn. “And someone has to help her survive what comes next.”

Evryn's throat dried. “What are you talking about?”

Malrik stopped three feet from her. “You aren't just Veil-born. You aren't just royal. You're not a scion of a house. You are legacy made flesh.”

He stepped closer.

Evryn's hands trembled. “So what does that make me? A target? A weapon?”

Malrik's expression didn't change. “A queen—if you survive long enough to claim it.”

The air stilled.

Lucien stepped beside her, tension radiating from every inch of him. “Why you?”

Malrik finally turned to him, wings rustling like leather scraping stone.

“Because there are only a handful of us left who remember what the First Queen was capable of. Who were trained to sense the root lines buried in blood and shadow. The magic in her name wasn’t just tied to power—it was identity .

Memory woven into bone and soul. And I..

. was sworn to protect the last of her line if it ever surfaced. ”

Evryn’s voice dropped. “You’re a memory-weaver.”

Malrik nodded once. “I don’t just erase or restore memories. I read them. I thread through bloodlines. I see the echoes of who someone was before they were told who to become.”

He took a slow step toward her, his voice almost reverent.

“You carry ancestral dominion—power tied not to a House, but to the source of shifter royalty. Before the Houses fractured. Before the treaties. When one line ruled, not with council, but with right.”

Evryn’s breath caught. “Why now? Why me?”

“Because you were hidden well. Too well. Buried beneath lesser lineage, cloaked by stasis and secrecy. Whoever left you with Eamon didn’t want you found .

But when you crossed the Veil, when you bled into the stones during the Hollow rite—that power woke.

And when it woke, it called to everything old enough to remember. ”

Lucien looked at Malrik sharply. “And Seraphine sent you because she couldn’t afford to ignore that call.”

Malrik smiled faintly. “She doesn’t like prophecy. But she respects it .”

Evryn swallowed. “What does this mean? What do I do now?”

Malrik’s gaze was piercing. “The Houses will come for you. The Queen will escalate. Cassian will move soon. But more than that... you’ll begin to feel it.”

“Feel what?”

“The pull,” he said. “To reclaim what was lost. Your dreams will shift. Your shadows will grow bolder. And the Sight... it will show you more than you want to see.”

He hesitated then. And that was what chilled her the most—because Malrik didn’t strike her as a man who hesitated for anything.

“You’ll remember things that never happened to you,” he said softly. “Because you’re not just her heir. You’re her echo. ”

Evryn’s mouth went dry.

Lucien reached for her hand. She didn’t realize she’d reached for his too until their fingers found each other.

“Why me?” she whispered again.

Malrik’s obsidian eyes glittered. “Because fate doesn’t choose who’s ready. Just who’s needed. ”

They made camp again hours later, further from the ruins, under the arched roots of a dead tree curled like a crown of claws. Lucien had barely spoken since Malrik left them.

Evryn sat beside the fire, staring into it like it might give her answers.

“I’m not ready for this,” she whispered.

Lucien stirred. “No one ever is.”

Evryn looked at him, eyes too tired for anger.

“They’re going to come for me now, aren’t they? Not just the Queen. Everyone. Every House. Every loyalist who thinks power belongs to them.”

Lucien nodded. “Yeah.”

She swallowed. “What if I don’t want it?”

Lucien leaned toward her, brushing his knuckles along her jaw. “Then we burn anyone who tries to take it.”

In the firelight, as her world shifted again, she knew something else for certain: She wasn’t just becoming the girl fate tried to erase.

She was becoming the reason they’d never forget her name again.

TWENTY-SEVEN

LUCIEN

The message came by shadow.

A raven made of smoke and ink, its wings silent as the dead, perched beside their fire at first light. Lucien didn't need to open the scroll tucked in its beak to guess who it was from.

Only one person sent crows with edges that sharp.

Cassian's handwriting was as precise as ever. Too neat. Too deliberate.

She would like to meet the girl. She is curious what kind of wildfire could twist her favorite blade against her. No threats. No demands. Just tea and truth. – C

Lucien crumpled the note in his fist.

The paper cracked like bone between his fingers. It wasn't just the message—it was the handwriting. Precise. Elegant. The kind of control that made his skin crawl.

Cassian never wrote in haste. Every curl of ink was calculated. A blade shaped in calligraphy.

The shadow raven that had delivered it dissolved into mist behind him, leaving only the stench of ink and rot. Lucien stared at the scroll, then tossed it into the fire.

It flared violet once, then disappeared.

Evryn looked up from the stream nearby, sleeves rolled past her elbows, bare forearms dusted with river silt. Her hair was pulled back from her face, damp strands clinging to her neck from the humid air.

She was stronger now. Quieter, too—but not from fear. From clarity.

Her eyes had changed. No longer wide with wondering. They narrowed, read, understood.

The Veil wasn't a stranger to her anymore.

It saw her , and she saw it right back.

“Something wrong?” she asked, drying her hands slowly against the edge of her coat.

Lucien didn't answer right away. His jaw tensed, teeth grinding against the words he didn't want to speak.

Finally, he said, “My mother wants a meeting.”

Evryn stilled. Not startled. Just watchful .

“The Queen?” she said.

He nodded, voice low. “She's not asking for a parley. She wants a performance. A puppet show where I bring the girl who made me disobey.”

Evryn raised an eyebrow. “So she's feeling theatrical.”

“She always does before a kill.”

Evryn’s mouth tilted—not quite a smile. “You think it’s a trap?”

Lucien met her gaze. “I know it is.”

But she didn’t look away. Didn’t flinch. She stepped forward until they stood face-to-face in the fading golden light of early dusk, her boots crunching softly on the moss-carpeted stone.

Her voice was quiet, calm. “Then maybe we spring it first.”

Lucien stared at her.

He barely recognized the girl he’d followed through the misty alleys of Grayridge. That girl was still there, buried under the soot and sorrow and too much power—but now, she stood like she had nothing left to fear.

And it scared him more than anything. Because people like that didn’t stop until they won. Or burned out trying.

He exhaled, steadying himself. “Evryn?—”

“I’m not doing this to prove anything,” she said, eyes locking with his. “I just... I need to see her. See what the monster behind the masks looks like.”

Lucien’s chest tightened. “She’s not going to offer you kindness.”

Evryn’s jaw flexed, her posture straightening with something colder than defiance. “I’m not looking for it.”

Lucien swore softly under his breath, dragging a hand down his face. His shadows curled around his boots, agitated.

“She’s dangerous, Evryn. Not just because of what she can do—but because of what she knows . She’ll find every crack in your armor and smile while she breaks it wider.”

There was a long pause.

Evryn tilted her head. Her voice was like steel wrapped in velvet.

“Then it’s a good thing I stopped wearing armor.”

They left that evening.

The roads toward Umbracław Keep were narrow veins of stone and memory, cutting through ashwood forests and ridgelines carved with sigils older than any House. Lucien hadn’t walked this path in years.

Not since the last time he bled for her throne.

The wind grew colder the closer they got.

The trees more silent.

Evryn rode beside him on foot, her presence a calm shadow in the corner of his vision. She didn’t ask questions. But he knew she had them.

“You’ve been quiet,” she said eventually.

Lucien kept his gaze on the horizon. “Just remembering.”

“Good or bad?”

He hesitated. “Both. Mostly bad.”

She didn’t press.

That was something he’d come to crave about her. She didn’t demand pieces of him. She waited. And somehow, that made him want to give them more.

They stopped at the edge of a clearing near the final hill before the castle.

The sky above Umbracław Keep was always darker than it should’ve been. Not just weather—magic. The throne here bled shadow into the air, into the trees, into you.

The castle stood tall and cruel against the skyline. Blackstone towers. Curved archways. Balconies made for archers, not guests. And at the very top—a glass-steeped chamber where the Queen often sat, watching.

Waiting.

Lucien stared up at it, gut twisting.

Evryn stepped beside him.

“I won’t let her win,” she said softly.

Lucien turned to her, brushing a lock of hair from her face.

“She’s been winning for a long time,” he murmured.

“Then let’s change the game.”

A bitter smile tugged at his lips.

She reached for his hand. Laced her fingers through his making Lucien not just feel like a weapon walking into a war, but a man standing beside the only person who might actually survive it.

TWENTY-EIGHT

EVRYN

The walls of Umbracław Keep breathed shadow.

Not literally, not in the way living things did. But the stone remembered. Every step she took down those vaulted, echoing halls, the ancient dark pressed closer—silent and watching.

Evryn followed Lucien through the towering entryway, her boots brushing the velvet runner that led to the inner court.

The torches burned with violet flame, casting strange, shifting shadows.

The ceilings arched so high they disappeared into smoke and spellbound gloom.

And always, that chill in her chest. That hum of something ancient curling tighter around her bones.

This place wasn't just built for royalty.

It was built for power.

And it was hungry.

Lucien walked beside her, his expression carved from stone, but his hand never left

the hilt of his blade.

They'd said yes to the meeting.

But neither of them had ever believed it would be safe.

A servant in a rust-red robe led them to the antechamber outside the throne hall. The Queen hadn't arrived yet. Of course she hadn't. She wanted them to wait . To sit in silence while her presence settled like a curse in the air.

Evryn's heart thudded with every breath. She wore no armor—only a traveling cloak and leather, her knives hidden at the small of her back and in the lining of her boots. Lucien had made her leave her shadowband behind. Said it might provoke something too soon.

Now, she wished she hadn't listened.

"I hate waiting," she murmured.

Lucien didn't look at her. "That's the point."

Before she could respond, the doors at the far end opened.

But it wasn't the Queen.

It was another servant—older, with gray-streaked braids and a smile that didn't quite reach her eyes.

"My lady," the servant said with a slight bow, "Her Majesty asks that you refresh yourself in the guest wing while she speaks privately with her son."

Evryn frowned, glancing toward Lucien immediately. Her instincts sharpened like drawn steel. The servant's voice was too smooth. Too rehearsed. Even her smile was wrong—too controlled, too expectant. It was a performance meant to put her at ease, and that was the most suspicious thing of all.

Lucien moved without hesitation, stepping forward, his voice sharp. “She stays with me.”

The servant didn’t flinch. She merely tilted her head with the patience of someone who knew her place in the game and wasn’t afraid to play it. “The Queen insists. She only wishes to speak mother to son.”

Evryn’s stomach twisted. The room felt heavier. Not with magic. Not yet.

But with intent.

She could feel it coiling just under the floorboards, rising from the stone like a scent only the blood-marked could sense. A quiet, creeping wrongness.

Her eyes flicked to Lucien—every line in his body a silent scream. He knew it, too.

“Evryn,” he said, and there was something different in his voice now. Something low and desperate. “Don’t.”

She hesitated.

The easy answer was no. Walk away. Stay beside the only person she trusted. But the truth was—this was exactly what she had come here to do.

To look into the face of the woman who haunted her name.

To see the Queen with her own eyes. Not through stories. Not filtered through Lucien's pain.

But face to face.

She needed to know the shape of her enemy. She needed to know what kind of monster Lucien had been carved by. And part of her—quiet and cruel—wanted to prove she wasn't afraid.

Still, her gut screamed.

The cold on her skin said it plainly.

This wasn't about politeness or hospitality.

It was a lure.

But if she backed down now, she wouldn't forgive herself later.

So she nodded, slow and sure. "I won't go far."

Lucien's jaw clenched. His hand twitched at his side like he wanted to grab her and run. "Evryn?—"

She met his eyes, voice steady. "I'll be fine."

And for a heartbeat, she almost believed it.

She wasn't.

The moment she passed the threshold into the east corridor, the servant dropped the

act.

The walls blurred. Her limbs weakened.

A spell—subtle, layered into the very stone of the Keep—snared her like a snare catching a wolf’s leg mid-step.

Evryn staggered, shadows rising instinctively around her, but the magic was old. Older than any ward she’d learned to fight. It didn’t blast or burn—it drained . It pulled.

The servant’s form twisted in the dark, her face warping into something hollow-eyed and sharp-toothed.

Evryn tried to scream. But the world tilted. And everything went black.

She woke in chains. Cold stone beneath her. A circle of blood etched into the floor.

The smell of iron and ash clung to the air.

Selyne stood above her.

Lucien’s mother looked nothing like she expected. No crown. No flowing gown. She wore simple black, tailored for movement, her hair braided tight and looped with silver thread. Her eyes were glacial green—and completely absent of empathy.

“Good morning, Your Majesty,” Evryn rasped.

Selyne crouched, fingers gliding over the rune-carved manacles at Evryn’s wrists.

“You bleed shadow like a natural,” she said. “But the throne-bond lies dormant.”

Evryn bared her teeth. “So you abducted me to play blood seer?”

“No,” Selyne said calmly. “I abducted you to crack you open.”

And with a flick of her hand, the blood magic flared.

Evryn screamed.

It wasn't pain like fire or blade—it was something deeper . Like her bones were being rewritten. Her blood unraveling. Every drop tugged, twisted, examined. Her veins burned cold, and her vision flooded with white light.

Selyne stepped into the circle.

“This power doesn't belong to you,” she murmured, eyes glowing. “It never did. It belongs to the line. To me .”

Evryn shook violently, her fingers twitching as blood soaked into the circle.

“You're wrong,” she choked.

Selyne tilted her head. “Am I? Your own people didn't know what you were. You stumbled into the Veil blind. And still... you pulled shadows like a Firstborn. Imagine what that could do if harnessed properly. ”

Evryn's head thrashed.

Her magic responded instinctively, flaring like a wounded animal—dark tendrils coiling up, striking at the Queen's wards. But the circle was too strong. Her power couldn't find purchase.

“I’ll rip it from you,” Selyne said, voice tightening. “Even if it kills you.”

Evryn’s laugh was broken glass. “Then you get nothing.”

Selyne didn’t smile. “Your blood remembers . All I need is enough to trace the bond. The throne doesn’t need a body—it needs a line . But still, you being alive will help. FOr the moment. BUt I can’t promise this won’t hurt,” the queen said with a cruel smile.

She raised her blade, tipped with obsidian and bone.

Evryn closed her eyes.

TWENTY-NINE

LUCIEN

The throne hall was empty.

Too empty.

Lucien stood beneath the black-glass skylight, arms folded, the weight of his own silence pressing in on him like iron.

They had been waiting twenty minutes.

That was ten minutes too long for Queen Selyne.

She never kept a blade waiting—unless she wanted it dulled.

The two guards at the entry flanked him like statues, but Lucien could feel their eyes. Watching him. Weighing him.

He was being studied. Not greeted.

He shifted his stance, scanning the subtle changes in the room. The sconces had been relit. A second wine glass waited beside the throne. A faint perfume hung in the air—lavender and bloodroot.

But no footsteps echoed down the blackstone hall.

No rustle of silk.

No voice laced with poison and authority.

His mother wasn't coming.

And Evryn was nowhere.

His blood went cold.

No. No, no, no...

He spun on his heel and stormed back toward the corridor they'd split from—where the servant had taken Evryn under the pretense of hospitality.

He should have stopped her.

He should have trusted his gut.

Instead, he'd let her go. Because she'd looked him in the eye and said, "I'll be fine."

And damn him—he'd wanted to believe it.

Fool.

"Going somewhere, brother?"

Cassian's voice dropped like a dagger behind him.

Lucien turned slowly, fists already clenched.

Cassian stood just inside the eastern archway, draped in court black, polished and unreadable as always. His smirk was too gentle.

Lucien moved in, teeth bared. “Where is she?”

Cassian lifted a brow. “Who?”

“Don’t play that game with me.”

Cassian sighed, long-suffering. “Mother said you’d come storming. And here you are. So predictable, Luce.”

Lucien grabbed the front of his coat. “Where is she.”

Cassian didn’t flinch. He just leaned forward, lips brushing Lucien’s ear with mockery. “She’s being... processed. ”

Lucien’s whole body flared cold and hot at once. Shadows spiraled down his arms, rising instinctively.

Cassian stepped back and raised his hands. “Ah ah—temper, brother. We wouldn’t want Mother to think you’ve gone completely rogue. Again.”

Lucien’s voice was gravel. “Let her go.”

“She’s not yours to protect. Never was.” Cassian’s tone darkened. “She’s power. And you’re just the fool who fell in love with a loaded weapon.”

Lucien struck.

Cassian didn’t dodge fast enough, Lucien’s fist caught his jaw, and the crack of bone

echoed down the hall.

The guards moved.

Cassian held up a hand, wiping the blood from his mouth. “Let him go. Let him burn out. ”

Lucien stared him down. Breathing hard. Heart splintering.

“You’ll regret this,” he hissed.

Cassian just smiled. “Oh, I already do.”

They escorted him out.

Not with chains. That would’ve been too crude.

But with expectation . Like a dismissed knight. Like a son who had outlived his usefulness.

They left him at the garden wall.

Alone.

Abandoned.

And that was their first mistake.

Lucien didn’t leave.

He knew this Keep better than anyone. Better than the guards. Better than the

servants. He had been born here. Bled here. Trained here. This wasn't just a fortress. It was his hunting ground. And now, they had taken her.

The woman he loved. The woman who had cracked his armor and carved herself into the hollow parts of him. Evryn was somewhere behind these walls.

And Lucien was going to burn through every one of them to find her.

THIRTY

EVRYN

The pain didn't stop.

It moved through her like a tide, relentless and cold. Not like fire, not like knives—worse. Selyne's magic wasn't designed to break bones. It was built to unravel truths.

Evryn had stopped screaming hours ago. Maybe days. She couldn't tell.

The light above her flickered with every pulse of blood from her veins to the runes etched in the floor. She was chained at wrist and ankle, body limp in the center of a circle soaked in her own pain. Every spell Selyne cast pulled deeper—ripping not just her power, but her identity .

“You bleed like a royal,” the Queen murmured again, circling her. “But still no bond. Still no throne key. It's there. I know it is.”

Evryn could barely lift her head. Her mouth was too dry to curse.

Selyne crouched, brushing a hand through her blood, bringing her stained fingers to her lips. “If you were anyone else, you'd have died hours ago. But you... you were made for this.”

Evryn's limbs shook. Something inside her cried out—not a scream. A roar.

Buried. Wild. Ancient.

Not fear. Instinct.

She couldn't die here. Not in this room. Not like this.

No.

A voice stirred in her bones—rough, feminine, familiar.

Get up.

Her eyes fluttered. “Wha...”

You were never prey. You were born a predator.

The Queen's voice echoed, more distant now. “Still conscious? Good. Let's try again?—”

Evryn's heart pounded louder than the spell.

They caged you in dreams, hid your teeth in silk. No more.

Her breath rattled. The pain blurred. But her blood sang louder than anything now.

Shadow rose. But not Selyne's.

Hers.

It coiled beneath her, slow and hungry. The rune circle hissed, reacting too late. Evryn felt something beneath her skin peel back—like her own magic had been

waiting , chained in slumber.

And it was done waiting.

Selyne stepped back. “What is this?—”

Evryn’s body arched.

Her bones didn’t crack, they shifted. Her muscles writhed under skin that shimmered with silver vein-light. Her scream turned guttural, then feral.

The chains snapped.

Not from brute force but from sheer will.

The runes on the floor lit up, then flickered, then shattered.

Queen Selyne stumbled backward, lips parting.

Evryn stood. No— rose.

Taller. Broader. Her shadow cast a shape it had never dared before.

A silhouette draped in feline grace.

Eyes gold-bright and pupil-slit.

Fangs bared.

The Panther Queen —not just born, but awakened.

Evryn stepped forward. The chains at her feet turned to smoke.

Selyne whispered something, casting a glyph in the air.

Evryn bared her teeth. “No more cages.” Her voice was not alone. It echoed. Like generations of forgotten queens had risen behind her.

The shadows exploded outward.

And Selyne for the first time— stumbled.

THIRTY-ONE

LUCIEN

Lucien knelt in the overgrown alcove behind the crumbling Hall of Ancients, his fingers stained with blood—none of it his own. Two guards lay crumpled in the corridor behind him, unconscious. He'd spared them.

Barely.

The message had to go now.

He dragged a dagger across the inside of his forearm, whispering the spell as the blood ran. His shadows responded instantly, curling around the wound like ink pulled to a quill.

A raven formed from the black mist, its feathers edged in pale flame— a call to Seraphine.

“To Seraphine Drakar,” Lucien said under his breath. “The Queen has taken her. Tell Calder. Tell Malrik. Tell the old rebels. It's time.”

He sealed the message with a slice of his will—no more secrecy, no more half-truths—and the shadow raven blinked once, then vanished into the stone like it had always been part of the Keep's bones.

Lucien didn't wait to see if it would reach her.

He turned and ran.

The tunnels beneath Umbracław were older than the throne. Dug when the House was first raised from blood and conquest. Most had been sealed, forgotten, or collapsed under time and spellcraft—but Lucien knew them all.

He'd trained in them. Bled in them.

And now, he hunted in them.

He moved without torchlight, trusting his sight, his shadow sense. The halls were damp, sweat-slick, echoing with the distant groan of stone.

“Evryn...”

He said her name like a prayer.

Like a promise.

He'd let her go. Again.

And now, she was somewhere in the Queen's grip, gods knew how deep beneath the Keep—and he could feel her like a knife at the edge of his ribs. Not just her power, not just the way the Veil hummed louder near her.

But her .

That part of his soul he didn't know he'd been missing until she breathed life into it.

“Come on,” he whispered, pressing a palm to one of the old spell-locked doors.

“Come on, show me.”

He forced his shadow into the lock. The sigils hissed and spat, protesting—but his bloodline still had sway. The stone groaned, and the door opened, stale air rushing past him.

He plunged into the dark.

The deeper he went, the stranger the magic felt.

It wasn't the Queen's anymore.

The Veil bent oddly here. Not hostile. Not welcoming.

Watching.

His boots struck the stone rhythmically as he dropped lower, past catacombs, past cursed chambers where the air didn't move.

Then he heard it.

Low at first. Like thunder. Like something breaking.

No, not breaking... a roar.

It wasn't human. And it wasn't animal either. It was older .

Lucien stopped mid-stride. The tunnel vibrated beneath his feet.

That sound— it carried something in it. Power. Rage. Grief. Memory. And something else.

“...Evryn.”

It wasn't just her voice carried in that roar. It was her blood.

The primal panther. The throne-bearer. The Queen that time had tried to forget.

She had awakened.

THIRTY-TWO

EVRYN

The Panther had teeth. And they were hers now.

Evryn stood in the ruined circle of runes, her breath coming in short, hot bursts, steam curling from her skin. The scent of scorched blood and broken magic filled the vault. The chains lay in molten heaps at her feet.

Queen Selyne had vanished through a shimmered ward the moment the power tore free of her. Coward.

But she'd left her monsters behind.

Let them try.

The first one charged—a brute in warplate etched with red-silver veins of bloodsteel, carrying a glaive longer than Evryn was tall. She didn't flinch.

She moved.

Shadow wrapped around her limbs as she ducked, rolled, then launched upward—claws bursting from her fingers mid-leap. She landed on his chest, weight snapping him backward. Her growl was low and ancient, vibrating from somewhere far older than her throat.

The panther within her knew how to fight.

She didn't hesitate. She ripped.

Steel groaned. Blood sprayed across her cheek. The soldier collapsed, choking.

Another was already behind her—quicker, meaner. The Queen's second: General Varrik.

Evryn spun just in time to catch the arc of his enchanted chainblade across her forearm. The pain jolted fire through her arm, but she didn't drop.

Varrik sneered, bloodlust in his eyes. "You're no queen. Just another beast."

Evryn bared her fangs. "And you're prey."

She lunged.

Varrik swung again, but she was faster now, her body low, graceful. The panther's rhythm moved through her bones, guiding every strike.

She ducked the blade and drove a fist into his ribs. The impact cracked through his armor like thunder. He grunted, staggered and then she pounced.

They went down hard.

He snarled, grabbing at her throat. "You think power makes you royal? It makes you a tool —just like the rest of us."

Evryn's eyes burned.

She saw Eamon's face.

Lucien's.

Every slice the Queen fed her.

Every chain.

"No," she growled, shadows spilling from her skin like smoke and storm. "I'm the end of tools."

She slammed her forehead into his, stunning him. Her claws found his heart. She drove them in.

Varrik choked, his breath catching in one final snarl.

Her hands trembled over his chest. Warmth spread across her skin, his life, his end, her choice .

She had killed before. But not like this. Not when she was fully herself.

Evryn staggered back from his corpse, gasping. Her fingers curled, sticky with blood, her chest aching with something that wasn't guilt. Not regret.

Grief, maybe.

The cost of rising.

Selyne's voice echoed faintly through the stone.

"Impressive. But still young. Still raw."

Evryn growled, her claws flexing. “Run. I’m coming for you.”

The wards ahead sparked as the Queen’s presence flickered away—retreating further into the Keep’s deeper chambers.

Evryn took a step forward and stopped.

The shadows behind her moved .

She turned fast, crouched, ready to strike again.

But it wasn’t another soldier.

It was him.

Lucien emerged from the dark like fury given shape, his eyes glowing silver-black, his breath ragged, a cut across his jaw dripping shadow instead of blood.

He was half-shifted, claws at his hands, his fangs bared, eyes wild. Shadow rippled across him like a second skin.

And his gaze locked on.

“Evryn.”

Her knees nearly buckled.

His voice was rough silk, torn with relief and rage.

She stared at him, her panther senses roaring with scent, sound, feeling.

He stepped closer.

“You found me,” she whispered.

They stood together over the blood of the Queen’s enforcers.

Evryn turned her face toward the deeper dark.

“She’s running.”

Lucien’s voice went low. “Then we hunt.”

THIRTY-THREE

LUCIEN

Lucien knew the Keep like he knew his own heartbeat.

But the corridors felt different now—twisted, breathing with the pulse of old magic. The stone whispered lies. The air hummed with spells laid centuries before either he or Evryn had drawn breath.

Still, he followed her scent.

Wild, charged. Laced with steel and blood.

And something else now.

Power.

She had changed and the world was changing with her.

They climbed the last set of stairs side by side, their shadows merging with the flickering sconces lining the path to the throne chamber. His fingers brushed hers once as they neared the towering obsidian doors.

She turned slightly.

“I’ll kill her,” Evryn said.

Lucien looked at her, his chest aching. “Not alone.”

Then they pushed the doors open.

The throne room was as dark as a starless sky.

Queen Selyne sat atop the onyx dais, her throne carved with a hundred runes no one living could read. Behind her, the Veil shimmered—a tear in reality rippling like water. Its edges pulsed with the color of nightmares.

She stood slowly.

Lucien felt the cold seep through his bones before she even moved.

“Lucien,” she said, voice velvet and venom. “Still loyal. Even now.”

He said nothing.

Selyne’s gaze shifted to Evryn.

“And you. The stray. The storm. Look what you’ve become.”

Evryn’s power stirred like a tide, wrapping around her like a cloak. But she said nothing either.

“You’ve always been too sentimental, my son,” Selyne murmured. “Too soft . I warned you.”

Lucien stepped forward. “You tortured her.”

“I prepared her,” she replied. “The throne demands suffering. Blood. You were never

strong enough to understand.”

“And Cassian is?” Lucien growled.

She smiled, cruel and slow. “Cassian is many things. But not what you are.”

She stepped down from the dais, the Veil hissing behind her.

“Kill her,” she said, almost gently. “And you will have everything. The throne. The bloodline. The dominion. She’s already cracked open. Her power would bleed straight into you.”

Lucien stared at her. Then at Evryn.

He didn’t speak. He just drew his blade and threw it down at her feet.

“No.”

Selyne’s expression didn’t change but her eyes blazed.

“I made you,” she said.

Lucien stepped between her and Evryn. “And I’ll unmake you.”

The shadows struck first.

Selyne raised her hand and the entire chamber buckled—stone groaning, air tearing. Lucien threw up his shield of shadow, catching the brunt of her magic, but it knocked him sideways, slamming him into a pillar with bone-jarring force.

He hit the ground hard, rolled, and launched back.

Evryn moved with him, fast, panther-smooth, her claws glinting with duskligh. But Selyne wasn't fighting like a Queen.

She was fighting like a god.

Dark tendrils of ancient spellwork whipped out from her hands, catching Lucien across the chest. His vision flared white with pain as blood sprayed. He dropped to one knee, panting.

"Lucien!" Evryn cried, stepping toward him.

"Stay back!" he roared, pushing to his feet.

Selyne laughed.

"You think love makes you strong?" she spat. "It makes you vulnerable. "

She rushed forward, a dagger of voidlight in her hand.

Lucien met her in the middle.

Their blades clashed, magic shattering around them like thunder. She drove into him with brutal precision, her speed unnatural. He matched her blow for blow—but her power was older. Wired into the Keep itself.

Her dagger plunged into his side.

Lucien gasped.

Evryn screamed.

Selyne whispered, “You could’ve been king.”

And with a brutal twist, she tore the blade through his ribs.

Lucien collapsed and darkness took him.

THIRTY-FOUR

EVRYN

Lucien fell.

And the world fell with him.

Evryn screamed, not a sound of fear, but of something ancient, something that cracked bone and soul in one breath. The moment he hit the stone, her shadow snapped, recoiling inward like it had been severed from its source.

He wasn't breathing.

No.

She was moving before she knew it. Her hands hit the floor beside him, fingers trembling, bloody. His eyes were still open, but unseeing. His mouth slack.

"Lucien," she whispered. "No. Don't you dare."

Queen Selyne stood behind them, blade dripping shadowlight, her smile hollow and gleaming.

"You chose weakness," she hissed. "And this is what it earns you."

Evryn didn't hear her.

There was only him.

And the sound—no, the feeling —of something old waking in her chest. Her fingers pressed to his chest, slick with blood, warm and thick and wrong .

“No,” she said again, louder now.

Something inside her cracked.

And power answered .

She didn’t know the words, but she didn’t need to.

They rose from her throat like memory, like instinct.

A low chant in a forgotten tongue, her voice laced with the shadows of queens long buried.

Blood to breath. Soul to shadow. Mine to yours. Return.

The runes carved into the throne room floor lit from beneath, one by one, crawling outward in a spiral that met beneath Lucien’s body.

Selyne stepped forward. “What are you doing?—”

But Evryn didn’t stop. She gave.

Blood pooled beneath her hands. Her own—cut clean from her palm, mixing with his.

And as her chant rose, the Veil split.

The air thickened with energy so old it burned to breathe.

Lucien's body arched. His eyes flew open. And for one suspended second, he looked right at her—like he remembered everything.

Then light burst from their joined hands, and both of them gasped.

They were bound. Not just by magic. Not just by touch. By soul.

He sat up fast, choking on his first breath back. His hand flew to hers. Their shadows braided together like roots, like lovers.

“What—Evryn—what did you do?” he rasped.

She smiled, tears tracking through ash on her cheeks. “I didn't let you go.”

Selyne shrieked.

“You broke the Balance?—”

Evryn stood.

And Lucien rose with her.

Back to back.

His shadows. Her fire.

Hers was primal. His was precision. Together, they became vengeance.

Selyne unleashed a torrent of spellfire, screeching in a voice not hers alone, Veil-

cursed and ancient.

But it met a wall of darkness and bloodlight.

Lucien's blade moved with deadly clarity. Evryn's claws glowed with rune-fire, her panther form flickering at her back like a goddess unmasked.

They struck as one.

Lucien disarmed her. Evryn drove her hand through the Queen's chest and whispered, "This throne never belonged to you."

Selyne gasped.

Without a scream, without a curse—she crumbled.

Ash.

Gone.

The throne room went still.

There was no thunder. No final spell. No echoing cry to mark the end of her rule.

Just dust, swirling in the violet-tinted light.

Only the sound of their breathing remained.

Lucien turned to her—his chest still rising like he couldn't believe he was alive. He pressed his forehead to hers, eyes dark and wide.

“You... you brought me back,” he whispered hoarsely. “You shouldn’t have.”

Evryn held him tighter. “I had to. And right now, I’d do it again, no matter the cost.”

Their shadows wrapped around them, bound now in more than magic.

In soul.

But even as her arms tightened around him, Evryn couldn’t stop her gaze from drifting back to the pile of dust where the Queen had once stood. Her body trembled— not with fear , but with power.

Surging. Coiling. Rooting deeper into her blood.

She felt it everywhere now.

Every heartbeat a roar. Every breath a warning.

Her vision wavered, the room shifting, and for a split second, she saw her own reflection in the glimmering shards of glass near the dais.

Her eyes—gold with slit pupils. Feral. Ancient.

Like hers.

Would that be her end, too?

Would she burn so bright she turned herself to ash?

A cry broke the air like glass shattering.

“Mother!”

Cassian stormed into the chamber, blade drawn, his coat torn, hair wild.

He saw the dust.

He saw Lucien.

And rage consumed him.

“You—” His voice cracked, pure hate. “You let her die!”

Lucien turned fully, standing in front of Evryn now, eyes hard. “She died trying to take what wasn’t hers.”

Cassian’s face contorted with grief and fury. “You were her son ! You could’ve saved her!”

“She needed to be stopped,” Lucien said, voice low and final. “And you knew it.”

Cassian’s eyes burned. “She loved you. Even at your worst. And you killed her for her ?” He pointed his sword at Evryn. “You betrayed your blood for a girl raised in the gutter.”

Lucien didn’t answer.

He just drew his blade.

Cassian lunged.

They clashed steel to steel, power to power.

Evryn moved to intervene, but Lucien raised a hand without looking.

“I have to do this.”

They fought like the brothers they were, trained under the same hand, taught by the same cruelty. But Lucien fought to protect.

Cassian fought to avenge.

Every strike was filled with raw pain. Blades sang against the stone floor, the clash echoing through the broken hall. Lucien’s shoulder was cut. Cassian’s thigh. Blood marked the floor, their shadows dancing like ghosts behind them.

“You were always the favorite,” Cassian spat, blade dragging sparks as it met Lucien’s again. “Always her precious dagger. And you threw it away! ”

Lucien met his eyes. “Because I finally saw what it turned me into.”

Cassian screamed and charged again, swinging wild.

Lucien ducked, pivoted, and disarmed him in a blur of motion—but Cassian didn’t stop. He kept coming, fists flying, blind with grief.

Lucien’s jaw clenched.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered—and then slashed.

The blade sang.

Cassian fell.

Blood pooled fast. He choked once, eyes wide, stunned more than afraid. His lips moved, but no words came.

Suddenly, silence.

Lucien stood over his brother's body, sword dripping, breath ragged. His face didn't twist in victory.

Only sorrow.

Only loss.

Evryn moved beside him, one hand on his back.

Lucien didn't look away from the fallen prince.

"I didn't want to kill him," he said.

Evryn's voice was quiet. "He wouldn't have stopped."

Lucien nodded once, shadows curling at his feet.

"No. He wouldn't."

Behind them, the broken throne room waited.

Their story wasn't done.

But the old one had finally ended.

THIRTY-FIVE

LUCIEN

The Court of Claws was a graveyard.

Not just in bodies—but in legacy.

The throne room lay in ruin, its stained-glass sigils shattered, the blackstone dais cracked clean through the center. Blood streaked the marble. The ancient runes once carved into the walls had dimmed, as if mourning their mistress—or perhaps relieved to be freed from her hold.

Lucien stood in the stillness of it, watching the dust dance through shafts of grey morning light.

His shoulders ached. His ribs throbbed from the wound that had stopped his heart.

But he was alive.

Because she had chosen him.

Evryn stood at the edge of the dais, not seated on the throne, but near it—hands wrapped around the hilt of Lucien's blade, now buried tip-first in the floor.

The others had come.

Seraphine.

Calder.

Malrik.

All flanking what remained of the royal house. All waiting.

A silence hung between them, heavy and expectant.

One of the older advisors—one who had survived the night and now smelled more of fear than loyalty—stepped forward.

“The Queen is dead,” he announced to the room.

No one corrected him.

No one said long live the Queen either.

He looked at Lucien. “You are her son. The bloodline falls to you.”

Lucien didn’t speak at first. He stepped forward slowly, the torn remains of his coat sweeping across the blood-soaked floor. He looked to Evryn, meeting her eyes. Her gaze was steady, gold-flecked and wild, full of fire and history.

She had become what they’d tried to kill her for.

He turned to the gathered court.

“I will not wear her crown.”

Murmurs rippled.

Lucien lifted a hand.

“I was raised as her weapon. Sharpened. Pointed. Used. That ends with me. This House does not need another tyrant masked in velvet and promises.”

He walked to the throne, then turned his back to it—facing Evryn.

“This throne was never meant for control,” he said. “It was forged by a Panther Queen. And now, by blood and battle, she has returned.”

He knelt.

To her .

“Evryn Hale,” he said, voice steady. “You are the Panther Queen reborn. Sovereign of shadow. Flame of the old blood. My heart. My ruler.”

The chamber held its breath.

Evryn didn’t answer with words. She walked to him, slow and sure and took his hand. Lifted him up. Then turned to the Court, power radiating from her skin like dusk and wildfire.

“I did not ask for this,” she said. “But I will bear it. And I will not rule with fear.”

She looked at Lucien again. Her voice broke soft.

“But I will never stand alone.”

He nodded once as the Court of Claws bowed.

THIRTY-SIX

EVRYN

The throne was colder than she'd imagined.

It wasn't the blackstone. It wasn't even the wind that snuck through the broken stained-glass windows and kissed her skin like ghosts of war.

It was the silence.

The hush of a court waiting for command. The stillness of the room where blood had been spilled in legacy's name.

Where mothers had turned into monsters.

Evryn sat tall on the throne, spine straight, crown heavy with history. Her panther instincts still murmured beneath her skin, watching every breath, every flicker of movement like a predator not ready to sheathe her claws.

Lucien stood at the base of the dais.

No longer the Queen's dagger. No longer a prince.

Just him. Her second. Her shadow. And her heartbreak.

He didn't speak. He hadn't since the last meeting broke an hour before. His jaw was

tight, his hands behind his back, posture stiff—waiting for the moment he'd be dismissed, or perhaps, something worse.

Evryn's voice broke the silence like a bell in fog.

"I need to speak with you. Alone."

The guards filed out. Malrik lingered, sensing the fracture forming, but said nothing.

When the chamber emptied, Evryn stood.

Lucien finally looked at her. "You've barely slept."

She ignored that. Walked slowly down the steps. Her boots echoed on stone that still bore scorch marks.

"I've made a decision," she said.

He said nothing. Just watched her with eyes too knowing, too gentle.

She hated how warm his gaze made her feel.

"I want you to remain as my commander," she said, voice sharp and official. "You'll oversee the shadows, vet every court whisper, manage the heir alliances."

He nodded once. "Of course."

"But," she added, quieter now, "you will do so as my second. Not... not as anything else."

Lucien flinched. A small thing. But it broke her.

He took a step forward. “Evryn?—”

“No,” she said, raising a hand. “Please. Don’t. Just... let me say it.”

He stopped.

She looked up at him, throat tight.

“I can feel it,” she said, her voice a low tremor barely carried by the vaulted chamber.

“Every day. It’s like... a second heartbeat beneath my own. A pull. A hunger.”

Lucien stayed quiet, but his eyes never left her.

She swallowed. “It whispers to me when I sit on that throne. When I pass judgment. When someone looks at me with fear in their eyes and I like it—because fear is easier than reason. Because silence is quicker than mercy. It tells me I can fix everything if I just stop caring. If I stop feeling.”

She looked down at her hands—small tremors twitching along her fingers. “That’s what lived in her. That cold thing. That poison that masquerades as power. And it’s in me now.”

Lucien’s brow furrowed. “You’re not Selyne.”

“Not yet,” she said softly. Her lips twitched like she wanted to smile, but couldn’t find the strength. “But what if I become her? What if I forget how to be anything else?”

He opened his mouth, but she stepped back and shook her head. “No. Let me finish.”

She paced a few steps, fingers curled into fists. “You see the best in me, Lucien. Even

when I'm at my worst. Even when I'm half-shadow, half-fire, and nothing human left. You look at me and I remember who I want to be."

She turned back toward him, her voice cracking. "But what happens when I don't want to anymore? When the throne demands something uglier? When choosing you means I don't make the hard call—because loving you feels more right than doing what's needed?"

He stood still, a statue made of restraint and grief.

"If I keep you close," she whispered, stepping in as if to break her own rule, "I won't be able to tell the difference. I'll choose you every time, Lucien. And I'll blind myself to the cost. I'll forget what the people need, and I'll think you are all that matters."

Tears threatened, sharp as blades behind her eyes.

"I can't afford to love you like that."

Lucien didn't move for a long moment. Slowly, he stepped forward. Close enough that she could feel the warmth of him, the heartbeat she'd once brought back from the edge of death.

But he didn't touch her.

"You think loving me is your weakness?"

"I think it might be your downfall," she said. "And I can't be the reason you fall."

Silence bloomed between them. Dense. Breathless.

Lucien looked at her, not as a warrior, not even as a man who'd bled for her.

But like someone being asked to carve out the best part of himself... and call it loyalty.

“I would’ve followed you anywhere,” he said.

Her voice cracked. “You still will. Just not into my heart.”

He bowed his head. Then, quietly left. The doors shut behind him like a tomb.

And Evryn, Panther Queen of a broken throne, sat back down—alone.

THIRTY-SEVEN

LUCIEN

The throne room looked different now.

Not in stone or structure—no one had touched the deep-cracked floors or replaced the shattered sigils in the glass. But in the way light moved through it.

It no longer felt like a tomb. It felt like something exhaled. Like a weight had been dragged off its bones.

Evryn stood at the top of the dais, not seated on the throne this time, but beside it. Hair braided with silver and shadow-thread. Panther eyes steady. Cloak trimmed in the colors of no single house—only dusk and light. Balance.

Lucien watched her from below.

Every step she took, every word she measured—he saw the cost of it.

How heavy the crown felt, even when it wasn't on her head.

She was doing what no queen before her had dared.

Breaking the Accords.

The words themselves felt like heresy.

They were older than the stone of the Court. A pact carved in magic and iron after the First Dominion War—when the Veil fractured and the Houses clawed for survival like starving beasts.

The Accords had kept the bloodlines separate.

Claws ruled the central dominion. The other Houses—Bearclan, Dragonflame, Sablewing—were granted territories, stripped of thrones, and warned never to challenge Umbraclaw again. In return, they were allowed autonomy. Trade. Shadows of influence. Never voice.

Never power.

Until now.

Evryn stood tall on the steps of the dais, her voice cutting through the heavy hush like a blade made of light and thunder.

“We are not just Claws anymore,” she said. “We are not a kingdom born of bloodlines and borders.”

A ripple of gasps. Frowns. One elder stumbled backward.

But Evryn pressed forward, her panther-marked eyes scanning the crowd.

“We will not rule by fear, nor isolation. The Veil belongs to all who bleed within it—and so, this throne will no longer silence the voices of the Dragonflame, the Bearclan, or the Sablewing.”

She turned her gaze deliberately to the pillars framing the hall—where Seraphine Drakar stood like fire incarnate, Calder Grimhart stood like a carved mountain, and

Malrik Sablewing shimmered with memory-shadow, eyes unreadable.

“You will have a voice,” Evryn said. “A seat. Equal say in law and future. The Accords are broken. The dominion is shared. ”

The silence shattered.

It wasn't applause.

It wasn't outrage.

It was a moment too stunned for reaction, shock hanging like stormclouds over the court's heart.

Lucien didn't move.

He couldn't.

He stood near the outer ring of the chamber, hands behind his back, jaw tight.

This was history breaking open.

And he'd followed her into it. Helped carve the path with blood and steel.

But now... she was standing alone.

Not because she wanted to.

But because she believed she had to.

Evryn's voice softened now, not in power but in intimacy.

“The old ways gave us war,” she said. “And monsters. And silence when we needed justice. That dies with the last queen.”

Her eyes, goddess-bright—swept the hall again.

“The new reign begins today. Not of blood. Not of shadow. But of truth. ”

And in that moment, Lucien thought, she was everything the Veil needed.

And still...she wasn't his.

Later, the crowd broke into clusters. Courtiers murmured in corners, voices tight with nerves and newfound hope. Envoys from the other Houses conferred in low tones, already negotiating the fragile beginnings of this new era.

Lucien slipped away from the dais.

He didn't go far—just far enough. Into the old courtyard beyond the pillars, where shadow blossoms bloomed in quiet defiance beneath moonlight. The garden had once been a place of war councils and whispered betrayals.

Tonight, it was still.

The stars didn't feel like eyes for once. Just witnesses.

He didn't hear her footsteps. He just knew .

“Lucien,” Evryn said softly behind him.

He didn't turn. “You don't have to explain.”

“But I want to.”

He closed his eyes. “I stood by you in battle. In shadow. In death. I followed you through flame. I will never stop protecting you.”

“I know that,” she said.

“But I can’t keep pretending I’m not breaking.”

Evryn was silent for too long.

Lucien turned slowly, pain etched across every line of him—shoulders tense, throat working hard to swallow what he couldn’t say aloud.

“Every time you look past me like I’m just your second,” he said, voice barely more than breath, “every time you speak like my heart’s not in your hand... it kills me.”

Her jaw trembled.

“I didn’t mean to?—”

He stepped in, closer than protocol should allow. Closer than someone who wasn’t her heart should dare.

“You say you’re scared of becoming her,” he said. “But, Evryn... you’ve already proved you’re nothing like Selyne.”

She flinched. And Lucien, gods help him, softened .

“You fight for peace,” he whispered. “She only ever fought for power. You give people voices. She took them. And you—you would rather cut out your own

happiness than risk hurting me.”

His hand hovered near hers.

Lucien’s voice cracked. “That’s not a monster. That’s a queen worth bleeding for.”

Evryn blinked fast. Her eyes shimmered—but she held herself back.

“You don’t understand,” she whispered. “If I let myself have this—have you—I won’t survive losing it again. I can’t subject you to what I could become. I have no idea—”

“But I do.” He stepped even closer. Their shadows touched first. Always their shadows.

“You think I haven’t already given you everything?” he said. “You think I haven’t already lost you every night you stand five feet away and call me commander instead of anything that means something?”

She looked at him then. Really looked.

His hands were curled into fists, like touching her would undo him completely.

“I love you,” he said. No hesitation. No flourish. No shields left. “I have. I still do. I will. Even if you send me away tomorrow.”

Evryn’s breath caught. She shook her head, barely.

“This can’t be real.”

Lucien smiled, broken and raw. “It’s the only real thing I’ve got left.”

And her walls finally cracked.

She surged forward, grabbed him by the front of his shirt, and kissed him like he was the last tether she had to herself.

It wasn't gentle. It wasn't clean. It was desperate. Real.

A queen and her blade. A girl and her storm.

No thrones. No court.

Just them.

And the stars, still watching.

THIRTY-EIGHT

LUCIEN

She was trembling.

Not from fear. Not from weakness.

From the weight of everything they'd held back for too long.

Evryn pulled away from the kiss just enough to rest her forehead against his, her breath ghosting over his lips. Her hands stayed fisted in the fabric of his shirt like if she let go, she might shatter. Or run.

"I love you too," she whispered.

He let the words settle into the cracks inside him like balm—raw and warm and healing in ways nothing else ever could be.

"I love you," she repeated, softer this time, like a confession given in a cathedral.
"And I'm terrified."

Lucien's hands rose, cradling her face gently, his thumbs brushing away the tears she hadn't let fall until now.

"So am I," he whispered. "But I'd rather be terrified with you than fearless alone."

Her eyes fluttered shut. And when they opened again, something had changed. The walls weren't just cracked now—they were gone.

She leaned into him fully.

And he caught her like he'd always been meant to.

Their mouths met again, this time slow, deep, searching. No longer a collision of desperation—but a surrender. A promise.

Lucien walked her back into the bloom-covered alcove beneath the stone archway, where moonlight pooled like silver water across old cobblestone. Vines brushed their shoulders, heavy with midnight blossoms.

The Veil shimmered faintly around them, not intruding—just watching .

Evryn's fingers moved to his belt. Slow. Deliberate.

Their hands moved with an urgency that spoke of a need long denied, each piece of clothing discarded a barrier torn down.

Lucien's shirt, a whisper of fabric against his marble skin, fell to the moss-covered ground, revealing the lean, deadly contours of his chest and abdomen.

Evryn's fingers, trembling with desire, fumbled with the clasp of her own garments, her violet eyes darkened to the color of twilight.

Lucien's breath hitched as Evryn's dress pooled at her feet, leaving her standing in the moon's glow, a vision of wild beauty with her dark auburn curls cascading over her honey-toned skin.

His gaze traced the freckles that dusted her shoulders, a constellation he ached to map with his tongue.

The chill of the night air did nothing to dampen the heat that flared between them, a fire stoked by the shadows that danced at the edge of the Veil's watchful gaze.

With a swift, fluid motion, Lucien divested himself of his remaining clothes, his movements a silent testament to the predator that lurked beneath his skin. The shadows seemed to cling to him, caressing his skin like old friends, as he stood before Evryn, a creature of the night in his element.

The garden breathed around them, blossoms shuddering in time with Evryn's trembling inhale as Lucien slid his thumb along her lower lip.

Moss cushioned her back, each thread of shadow beneath the ancient tree curling against her skin like living silk.

She arched when his mouth found the pulse beneath her ear, her hands raking through his hair hard enough to strain the roots.

Evryn reached out, her fingers tracing the line of his jaw, the sharp angle of his cheekbone, the soft fullness of his lower lip.

Her touch was both a benediction and a brand, searing through the layers of his carefully constructed defenses.

In the sanctuary of the bloom-covered alcove, Lucien allowed himself to be vulnerable, to be seen not as the heir to darkness or a weapon honed for war, but as a man.

"Freckles here," he murmured against her sternum, tongue tracing constellations

across her chest. "Like the night sky dared to touch you."

Her laugh fractured into a gasp as he dragged teeth over one peaked nipple. "You—ah—hate the stars."

"You outshine them." His palm skated down her stomach, callouses catching on the softness there. "Let me worship what's real."

In the shadowed embrace of the ancient tree, the night air thrummed with the electricity of their desire.

Lucien's lips were a scorching brand as they blazed a trail down Evryn's quivering abdomen, each kiss stoking the fire that simmered just beneath her skin.

The heat between her thighs became a molten inferno, an aching need that only he could quench.

His breath was a whisper against her most sensitive flesh, a teasing prelude to the exquisite torment that followed.

When his tongue, deft and demanding, flicked against her clit, it was as though a live wire had been pressed to her core.

Her body jolted, a strangled moan escaping her lips as her heel dug into the small of his back, urging him closer, deeper.

"Lucien—" His name was a plea, a prayer, torn from her throat as she surrendered to the waves of pleasure that threatened to overwhelm her.

"Say it again." His voice, dark and saturated with satisfaction, was a command that sent shivers down her spine. "Let the Veil hear whose name you scream tonight."

Her body was no longer her own, thrashing beneath the onslaught of sensation.

Her thighs clamped around his head like a vise, trapping him in the cradle of her hips as he lapped at her with relentless precision.

The shadows that clung to him like a lover's caress now obeyed his silent command, curling around her wrists and pinning them to the soft moss below.

It was a dual-edged embrace—half punishment for her futile attempts to escape the unbearable pressure building within her, half praise for her unbridled response to his touch.

The climax that tore through her was cataclysmic, a force that ripped through the carefully constructed walls of her control.

Her back arched, pressing her further into the mossy bed as her release cascaded over her in relentless waves.

Her voice, ragged and raw, echoed through the garden as she chanted his name to the stars hidden behind the leafy canopy—a testament to the power he held over her.

As the last tremors of her orgasm faded, leaving her boneless and sated, Lucien rose over her, his eyes gleaming with a predatory triumph that made her heart stutter.

The shadows, once her bindings, now retreated, leaving her free to touch him, to pull him down into a kiss that was all teeth and tongue and desperate need.

“Wait.” His hand clamped her hip, tendons standing rigid. Every breath sawed through him like broken glass. “If I start... I can’t stop.”

Her teeth grazed his jaw, fingers tightening around his shaft. “Who said I want you

to?"

Lucien's control, already hanging by a thread, finally snapped.

With a feral growl that resonated deep within his chest, he surged forward, sheathing himself inside Evryn's welcoming heat in one brutal, possessive thrust. Her cry of his name mingled with his groan, the sound reverberating through the shadow-draped garden like a carnal symphony.

The initial stretch and burn of their union quickly dissolved into pure liquid fire, searing through every nerve as he stilled within her, his body trembling with the effort to maintain some semblance of restraint.

"Open those eyes," he demanded, his voice a ragged edge that threatened to unravel completely.

Violet eyes, ringed with the silver glow of her Sight, locked onto his, wide and unguarded, reflecting the raw vulnerability of the moment.

They were magnificent, those eyes, a testament to the strength and resilience of the woman who lay beneath him, surrendering yet unbroken.

He began to move with an exacting slowness that bordered on exquisite torture, each deliberate withdrawal an agony of anticipation, each powerful plunge deeper than the last. Evryn met him stroke for stroke, her nails carving crescent moons into the taut muscles of his shoulders, marking him as hers just as he claimed her.

When her legs hooked around his waist, pulling him impossibly closer, he seated himself to the hilt, grinding against her sensitive clit with a precision that bordered on cruelty, stealing her breath and reason in one fell swoop.

"Mine," he snarled against her swollen lips, the word a primal declaration that resonated with the ancient magic of his bloodline.

"Yours," she gasped in return, dragging his hips harder against her own, urging him on with a fervor that matched his own. "Always— fuck , Lucien?— "

Her words dissolved into a keening cry as her second climax tore through her, muscles fluttering around him in rhythmic waves that milked his own release from the depths of his being.

With a broken shout that echoed through the garden, he followed her over the edge, spilling himself inside her with a force that left him shaken to his core.

As the last of their mingled cries faded into the night, the shadows that Lucien commanded with such ease surged forward, responding to the intensity of their joining.

They twined around their joined hands like ethereal bindings, sealing their vow in a tapestry of ink and starlight.

In that moment, there was no past, no future, only the here and now—a testament to the unbreakable bond that had been forged between them, a connection that transcended the physical realm and delved into the very essence of their souls.

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Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 8:14 am

The Veil had never been so quiet.

Not silent—no, that would be impossible. It still pulsed beneath her skin, hummed in her breath, coiled in the corners of the court like a wild thing finally at peace.

But it had gone still in reverence.

As if it too knew what this moment meant.

Evryn stood at the top of the polished obsidian steps, moonlight drenching the dais in silver. The hall had been cleared of its debris, but the cracks in the stone remained—left unfilled, as she'd ordered.

They were reminders. Not of weakness. But of truth .

They were what she stood on now.

Not lies. Not bloodline or fear. Truth.

And the Veil acknowledged it.

The Court was gathered below her. Every House.

Every whisper of rebellion turned to pledge.

The Bearclan wore their battle-scars like banners.

The Dragonflame shone like molten justice.

The Sablewing shifted like shadow and wind, half-present in every way that still made her blink twice to confirm they were real.

Seraphine, Calder, and Malrik stood at the front, heads bowed—not in submission.

In unity. And with them stood the king and queen of the wolf shifters; Selene and Kael of House Fenrir.

Evryn's heart thundered.

Beside her, Lucien stood in midnight black, shadow-thread glinting at his cuffs, a dagger at his side—not hidden.

Not needed. But still there. Always.

He looked straight ahead, jaw firm. But his hand was waiting—slightly open.

Waiting for hers.

The Archbinder stepped forward, voice clear and strong with ceremonial weight.

“By the will of the Veil and the voice of the people, do you, Evryn Vale, claim your right as Queen of the Shattered Claws, Sovereign of the Prime Blood, and Keeper of the True Throne?”

She didn't hesitate. “I do.”

The crown came forward—not the old spiked monstrosity of tyranny, but one reborn from the metals of all Houses, forged with the fire of the rebellion and cooled in blood and shadow.

It shimmered as it was placed upon her head. And the Court exhaled. A sound like storm breaking. Like war ending. Like hope returning.

Then the Archbinder turned to Lucien. “And do you, Lucien Umbracław, chosen Consort, sworn blade and shadow, accept this bond—not as weapon, but as witness, not as heir, but as heart?”

Lucien didn’t look away from her. “I do.”

Evryn turned, fingers sliding into his—tight. Certain.

Their hands bound not just by ceremony, but by what had survived fire and betrayal and death.

Panther and Assassin.

Queen and Consort.

Evryn stepped forward and raised her joined hand with Lucien’s.

“I do not promise peace,” she said, voice strong and low. “But I promise truth.”

The Veil stirred. The people bowed. And when the crown caught the light just right, it gleamed not with gold, but with dawn of a new beginning.