



# BONDED TO THE DRAGON

LICK OF FIRE SERIES

KARA LOCKHARTE

# BONDED TO THE DRAGON

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THE LICK OF FIRE COLLECTION: DRAGON LOVERS

KARA LOCKHARTE

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## ABOUT BONDED TO THE DRAGON

**Only the dragon can grant my freedom...  
But the price he demands — is everything.**

I'm not supposed to be alive.

But I am. Living and breathing.

I thought it would be the worst thing that could happen to me.

I was wrong.

Now I'm immortally bound to serve the whims of a fairy queen.

When a white dragon lays siege to the fairy queen, I know he's my chance to escape, but this insanely sculpted rock of a man – I mean dragonshifter – has other plans for me.

If I help him get his revenge, he'll grant me what I want; an end to this life of servitude.

But his smoldering eyes, his heated touch, and the curve of his dangerous smile, makes me question...

No, there are some things I know, I was never ever meant to have.

Even if I wish it were otherwise.

*Note: This book is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to real life dragon shifter billionaires or anything else is purely coincidental.*



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LIGHT FLARED ABOVE US. A FIREBALL THE SIZE OF A BUS SHOT TOWARD me.

I folded my arms. I knew better than to get my hopes up. Life, Part Two, was turning out to be an awful lot like Life, Part One.

The fireball splashed against an invisible bubble barrier, surrounding us with light.

“We’re all going to die!” a woman screamed in panic. “Get back!”

I tried to respond, but my legs wouldn’t move—not out of fear, but because I was still fucking bound to this bitch fairy queen.

Residual memories of cold dark tentacles slithered into my ears, stabbing cold needles of possession into my mind.

I squeezed my eyes shut, determined not to let the stupid fear take me. The Devourer wasn’t in this place, I reminded myself. There was nothing left to be afraid of. I had already died. I had even come to terms with never being able to make things right, being betrayed by the man I’d thought I loved, and you know what? I was okay with all that unfinished business. But Titania, the fucking bitch, had decided that of all the recently deceased human souls in the existence, she wanted mine to be her slave.

A monstrous roar ripped through my thoughts; instinctively, my flesh body tried to cower, needing a place to run and hide, even as I realized that this could be the solution to all my problems.

“... I had nothing to do with it!” Titania said, her voice echoing with magic.

A massive scaled white claw scraped against the protective bubble arcing over us. The black talons broke through the bubble. The

resulting blast of air, stinking of smoke, ignited the leaves and trees nearest the break.

A thickly muscled black man, with only a hint of salt and pepper in his hair to betray his age, leaned toward the queen. "You have to get him to stop, Your Majesty."

Titania gritted her teeth, and for a moment, it looked as if the flowers in her hair had turned into thorns. "What. Does. It. Look. Like. I'm. Doing? None of your human weaponry will work on this one. This is why I needed that *thing*," she said, glaring at me, as if I could do something.

He kissed her hand. "Do the right thing, please, Your Majesty."

Titania sighed.

The fire tornado outside swirled and coalesced around a pillar of white fire reaching skyward.

Out of the inferno walked a man in a white suit.

The man placed a glowing hand on Titania's bubble. Electric sparks crackled blue, and the air grew heavy with the scent of ozone and ash. There was an intense pressure as if my ears were going to pop.

Then without further fanfare, sound, or fury, Titania's shield was gone. There was nothing left to stop him.

What the hell? He wasn't just wearing white but a formal white suit. Were we being sieged by a wedding party?

It was pristine, as if he had just put it on, rather than having spent the last hour or so launching bolts of acidic fire at Titania's magic shield. The formal jacket was open, revealing a white shirt underneath that was unbuttoned at the throat. The only bits of color were the strip of black belt at his waist and what looked like spotless black Italian leather shoes.

"He's not in dragon form. He's not even wearing his armor," gasped one of Titania's flower-covered lady/maidens/whatever the fuck they were.

Though his clothing was far from serious, his shockingly handsome face was flat and emotionless. His shoulders were back, his head held high, his gaze trained in on Titania, with only one thing clear on his mind.

If I were lucky, he really would have a death gaze and kill her for me right there and I'd be free.

No such luck, of course.

He strode across the carefully manicured grass with the stance of a conqueror.

Titania sat on her throne, the expression on her face unimpressed, but the stiffness of her posture betrayed her underlying emotion. I had been eavesdropping as her harem guard reported the dragon's progress. They had begged her to let them go up against the dragon, but she had forbidden every one of them, choosing instead to rely on her own magic.

And now, we were all likely to die.

I smiled.

The dragon stood beneath Titania on the dais, looking up at her, yet it was clear that he had all the power.

Titania sneered. "How long have you been searching for the Angel of Death? Attempt it, dragon, and you'll never find him, or your sister, Aurora."

Rory was his sister?

I realized why Titania had ordered me here. I had been there that night, when Aurora—or Rory, as she insisted, I call her—a visitor to Titania's court, had been abducted from the library by a winged man.

Of all the people in Titania's court, only Rory had shown me kindness, had been the only one to tell me what I was to help me adjust to my new situation of being brought back from the dead and enslaved to a fairy queen.

What had happened that night?

I closed my eyes, trying to remember. Heat, smoke, the lack of breath.

Something shattering. A snarl. And then darkness.

A needle shoved its way into my skull.

I opened my eyes and saw Titania glancing at me with her calculating eyes.

Had she planned this?

That fucking bitch.

I touched my head. This time she let me.

Had she been interfering with my memories too?

I turned back to the man in white. Dragonfire was what I needed, Aurora had said, to get what I needed.

An end to this fucking imprisonment disguised as a second life.

And any chance of getting what I wanted would be far better with him than being stuck for eternity in this perfumed bitch's playland as her slave.

"Dragon!" I said, my voice as loud as I could make it. My words sounded terribly squeaky, not at all like I had intended. Wait, Titania was letting me move? Fuck. This *was* a part of some plan of hers. It was too late for me to back down now. "I was there the night the Angel of Death came for your sister. I can help you—"

The invisible hand of Titania's magic clamped over my mouth.

I tried to kick out and scream, but Titania's magic locked down on my limbs like iron chains.

Sense memories tickled in the back of my mind. Once they would have driven me to despair and more drugs, but now, with the distance of death, my old life was more like a movie I had been forced to watch and remember.

"Let her speak," the dragon said.

"Do it," said Titania.

A hard shove made me stumble closer.

"Take me! And I will help you find her!" I yelled, as if the volume of my voice could hide the fact that I was lying. I had no idea how to find her. I just wanted him to blow his dragonfire on me and end my useless existence. I had to think of him as a mark, only he didn't want sex. He wanted vengeance. I could work with that.

The dragon stared at me with his golden eyes, evaluating, measuring, contemplating.

My chances were slipping.

Desperate words spurted out of me like arterial blood. "Your sister told me I was a vengeance demon, a wronged human resurrected to wreck revenge. If you are hunting the Angel of Death, you need me."

"That's enough," said Titania, chopping at the air. Strong arms yanked me back.

"This spirit is bound to me, dragon," said Titania. "The time and effort in the making of her was dear."

"Give her to me, and I will go," said the dragon.

Titania's eyes narrowed. An odd pressure filled my ears. Magic surged from her, the scent of flowers intensifying. "You think to take my vengeance from me?"

Something odd stirred inside me. Something I had never felt before, something startlingly alive, and yet...

"Tanya," said the dark-skinned man, placing his hand on her arm. "Balance. His sister was taken from your protection. You owe him something."

The strange pressure welled up inside me, with a buzzing prickle I had learned to recognize was magic.

Did I have magic?

It moved again inside me.

Titania frowned.

It was magic. I *had* magic.

The whole world went still at that moment.

She took something off her finger and flicked it to the dragon.

My freedom!

I pulled at the magic inside me, trying to take hold of it, use it, make it obey me somehow, but I didn't have the faintest clue how. It was like discovering newly attached wings that you didn't even know how to flap.

I struggled with my magic, trying to get to the sliver of metal that was my fate, my future, my freedom.

Titania's invisible shackles twisted, and in a blink my potential freedom was gone.

No, not again!

The dragon closed a large fist around it in midair, capturing the ring that bound me to life.

Instantly, I was covered with heat, with his scent and fire.

Before I realized it, I could smell the ash in my chest, feel the weight of gravity in my flesh.

Flesh? I was back in the flesh!

"She's an onryo," said Titania.

His gaze slid over me, and my skin flushed hot. It must have been the magic because I was used to being looked over like a piece of meat. "She doesn't look Japanese."

Titania waved condescendingly and sneered. "It's a human word for a human thing, I can't be expected to keep all the different languages of Man straight. The need for vengeance is universal. Beware of what you ask for, dragon. This one has not quite adjusted to her situation." Titania chuckled, reminding me of the cheerleading bitch-

es in high school who laughed at me behind my back and turned my mother's country into an epithet with the words "Mexico girl."

"How do I know that this isn't one of those double-edged fairy gifts?" asked the dragon.

"This isn't a gift," said Titania. "It's balance."

I should have been angry. But instead, I was just cold. Life was slavery. Death was the only true escape.

Fire licked and curled around his suit. The air became strangely hard to breathe as a strange pressure filled the air and the scent of burnt things returned. His voice was a frigid contrast to the living inferno his magic promised. "Nothing can balance your failure to protect my sister, a guest you were honor-bound to defend in your domain."

Titania glanced at the guard holding me.

I was thrown forward until I sprawled before him on my knees.

I saw him glance at me, his expression unchanged before resuming his death gaze at Titania. Wow. He was good-looking even close up. But I knew without a doubt that it was a mask for the monster he truly was.

Something clattered on the stones next to me.

A diamond-tipped golden spear.

"You know what this is." Titania smiled, a pointed-tooth smile, the kind she rarely revealed in her true form.

Fuck.

The fairy bitch *had* planned this whole thing. What the fuck?

Titania's voice was as queenly and smug as ever. "The weapon and this spirit will be more than enough balance. Now go! And get off my lands."

APPARENTLY, THERE ARE PATTERNS TO A LIFE, ONES THAT YOU CAN'T easily break, even after you die.

I had followed another boy with shining gold hair once. I had been at a low point after my mother was deported trying to bail me out of juvie. He'd said he'd care about me, that he'd help me get out.

I thought because he was blond, and had an expensive leather jacket, that he'd be like my friend Lana's rich buddy.

But he hadn't been anything like Lucas.

And here I was again, latching onto another man I barely knew to get out of a bad situation.

I wasn't a stupid teenage girl anymore, prone to making life-altering decisions based on a pretty face.

No, I reminded myself. I wasn't going to be used.

I was going to use him.

The magic spat us out.

Slimy, frigid fingers of mud splashed on to my flesh, soaking my clothes and skin. I let out a gasp at the icy shock. Stinking air, full of shit and decay, smacked me in the face. The temperature reminded me of death, but the scent, that rotting stench, reminded me just how much I was alive.

After Titania's place of floral horrors, it was the most glorious thing I'd ever smelled.

I bolted. I didn't know where the fuck I was, but I didn't care.

The dragon held the ring that controlled me, but I decided to take a chance that maybe it only worked in Titania's lands. And if it

didn't, maybe I'd piss him off enough that he'd just burn me to death for my lies and disobedience right there.

Win-win all around.

I ran and ran, until my lungs burned and my legs ached, which I hadn't even thought was possible.

I stopped to listen.

Nothing.

I sank to the ground.

Finally, freedom.

There was a shimmer of white in the forest.

The cold air in my lungs pierced me with icy needles, reminding me of how alive I was.

I drew myself up with a shiver of apprehension, knowing he was coming for me.

As he came closer, tendrils of smokeless white fire emanated from him. He walked toward me as if it were perfectly normal to be strolling in a dark, scary forest in white pants in the middle of the night.

My ever-living heart beat faster. Would this be it? Would this finally be how I came to an end?

Primal magic sparked around him, his button-down shirt collar open, revealing a deep intimacy with pushups. His shirtsleeves were rolled up to his elbows, highlighting forearms with dark arcane symbols swirling across his skin like solid smoke.

This dragon, this man, had besieged a fae castle on his own and forced the Queen of Fairie to a bargain.

I knew something of dragons, even watched my friend marry one while I was dead.

But none of them radiated magic like this one.

I needed to run. I needed to hide. But that part of me that had once been alive and feared being eaten by a predator? The part that I thought was definitely gone? Nope, that part was anchoring me right there.

He stared at me, evaluating me. His golden gaze made my stupid flesh body feel as if I were being x-rayed by some god who happened to be wearing a white suit.

Heart pounding, I tried to think of the inanest sassy thing that would get me killed. "So I'm wondering, dragon, what's with all the

white? Or are you planning on groomsman-ing at somebody's wedding?"

He said nothing, did nothing.

"Say something, dammit! Just get this over with and kill me already!"

His voice was smoother, more human than I expected. I'd once known a male phone-sex operator who had a voice like his. "I'm waiting for you to run again."

"Should I run?" I dropped my voice to a mocking tone. "Is that what makes you hot?"

"I want you to realize how useless it is to run. No matter what, I will find you." A smile curled his lips. He leaned forward into my personal space, and it was all I could do to not take a step back. "Go on. Try it."

There was an edge to his tone that made me shudder in a totally inappropriate way. This was also the problem with living, with being alive and having a body—far too often, the flesh had stupid reactions to things your mind knew better than to feel.

"You don't know what you're dealing with."

He stalked around me. The dragon radiated heat so much it was like standing in front of a fire. Despite his clean white-suited appearance, he smelled, strangely...sweaty, in a surprisingly not unpleasant sort of way. Was it an illusion? Even knowing what he was, and how dangerous he was, my body wanted to get closer to the source of the heat, closer to his scent. Illogical, stupid flesh. He caught my gaze with those eyes, and I understood the meaning deer-in-headlights better than ever before.

"You are one who died, reborn for vengeance." He tilted his head as if finding something remarkable. "Curiously enough, you don't want vengeance."

The way he was looking at me, it was as if he could see through my clothes. With my luck, Mr. Magic Dragon had X-ray vision too. "It's none of your business."

"I don't care why you've come to be what you are. But you will be useful to me."

Well, after lying to him and running away, those were the last words I'd expected him to say.

"I have an enemy. An enemy who betrayed my trust, murdered my brother, and has now taken my sister."

In his eyes I could see a hint of pain, and fury gone cold.

And it struck something inside me, an itch I needed to scratch. The strange magic within me welled up, potent and ready. I *knew*, like I knew my name, that I could help him. The dragon needed vengeance. He had been wronged, and my magic could correct that injustice with destruction.

Destruction. Death. That was the answer to everything.

The potential for such a delicious ending called to the magic within me, hot, enticing.

And then, like a cold dose of water, I remembered my mother's words. Whispers trickled, surrounding me, the sound rising until it swirled around me, overwhelming me. *Forgiveness...the only way...forgive me...unjust...forgive...peace...*

I covered my ears and closed my eyes, knowing it wouldn't work.

But to my shock, it fucking worked.

There was silence.

I blinked and saw the dragon staring at me strangely.

And my mother's voice was clear.

*Forgiveness is the only way to find peace in an unjust world.*

I looked down at my hands. What the hell evil magic was this? Was I cursed to be haunted by my past?

That was the one thing my mother strove against.

Too bad it had taken my death to truly realize it.

But just because I knew forgiveness to be the right path didn't make it any easier.

Fucking life and these messy complicated emotions.

I knew I should lie, tell him what he wanted to hear, play the willing woman.

But I was tired of that shit. I'd played that game my whole life, and where had that gotten me? Maybe honesty would get me what I wanted.

"I understand," I said quietly. "But I lied to you. What you want, I can't give."

His eyes narrowed. I could feel the pressure in the air change as magic surged around us, threatening and smelling unmistakably of him.

His magic curled around me, deceptively warm and soothing, like a soft fluffy blanket, but one completely flammable at the first

spark of anger. "I know you lied. But you will give me what I want. You'll give me *everything*."

---

I WAS in the passenger seat of some big, black fancy car driving who-the-fuck-knew-whereby the dragon. It had no logo I recognized, and its doors folded up like a spaceship. Two big hands rested easily on the steering wheel, and the dragon's body relaxed in the driver's seat as if we were old friends, rather than two strangers who had just emerged from a bush.

I crossed my arms and peered out of the window as we drove onto what looked to be a highway, wondering where the hell I was. We could be in Russia for all I knew. I hadn't been off Titania's lands since my resurrection. But that wasn't what was making me cautious.

"Do you have a name?" he asked casually, as if he hadn't just been a monster chasing me through dark woods.

I forced myself to keep looking out the window of the car. I chose my words and tone carefully. "Do you need one?"

If I played this right, he would kill me quickly, and I'd be done and...oh.

*Oh.*

I felt his warm touch, stroking hot trails along my inner thigh. I looked downward but saw nothing there. Heat bloomed inside me. So unfamiliar, so unwanted, and yet so desperately needed.

I looked at him and realized he was absentmindedly rubbing the ring on his finger as he drove.

I brought my fist down on the armrest, hitting the door loudly in frustration. "Stop it."

He stopped and looked thoughtful. "You feel me when I touch the ring." His statement was almost a question.

"Yes," I spat out.

"Interesting."

He stopped, but the feeling lingered, my muscles still tense. I stared out the window, determined not to look at him. What the hell had just happened? A sign passed by: 88 miles to Scranton. Scranton... Where the hell was that? That wasn't New York. I had the nag-

ging feeling that I should know, but too many brain cells were lost in my attempt to sedate myself in drugs. Ecstasy, Superfly, coke, heroin; there was no drug I hadn't liked.

But drugs, like food, sleep, and sex, held no more temptation for me after my resurrection.

I could still feel the warm trail of his touch.

No, fuck no I would not have these feelings—

“Why did you seal mark my sister's bear?”

My god, he was scrambling my brain so much I thought he was talking about zoo animals. I turned to stare at him. He seemed even bigger, more ominous in the dark.

His voice came again from the dark, deep and enigmatic. “You have my sister's seal.”

A vision of Rory handing me a flopping, wriggly wet baby seal flashed into my mind.

I frowned. “I have no idea what you're talking about.”

He glanced at me strangely. “It's a sort of mark. Invisible to everyone save for dragons. You bear it. Did you not know?”

What? I looked at my hands, rolled up my sleeves, looked inside my shirt.

An echo of a memory, a woman screaming in my mind.

I closed my eyes and thought of darkness to block the coming vision. I thought of the peaceful endlessness of death, but I could still feel my body, the seams in my shirt, the itch on my skin, the hair against my neck. My fingernails dug into the palm of my hands. It hurt. Just like the rest of life. Life was nothing but mistakes and pain.

And I was sitting next to someone with the power to end it all.

I leaned on the door, shifting to face him. “You know what? I'm fucking tired of people doing shit to me without even asking.”

“Wearing a dragon's seal is considered an honor.”

“It's called fucking consent. I don't want to be sealed. I don't want anyone's mark on me.”

I looked over at him. He didn't punch me in the face, burn me to ash with laser eye beams, or wiggle his fingers and make me explode.

He simply ignored me.

Where the fuck was the scary monster man-dragon that had broken through Titania's defenses like wet toilet paper?

I dared to poke him in his shoulder. It was like jabbing steel in a suit. "Tell me how to get this damn seal off."

"It's a friendship seal. It asks those who can see it to treat the bearer with respect. Only she can remove it."

I turned back toward the window. We passed a deer with glowing eyes on the side of the road.

"What did you see the night my sister was taken?"

I took a deep breath even though I didn't need it.

I rubbed my head, waiting for the spike of pain in my skull that came when I thought of that night.

None came. To my surprise, I was truly free of Titania's influence.

But at what cost? It was all part of her plan, I reminded myself.

Whatever; I had to play this right. He was an obstacle I definitely couldn't defeat with lies, let alone brute force or magic. My only advantage was that he wanted something from me.

I rubbed my ring finger, exactly where I would wear my ring if I ever got the chance. "We were together in the library late at night. Your sister had been helping me to try and figure out what I was. But that night, she wanted me to come and talk to her about death. She wanted to know what death was like, and whether I had met other dead."

"Have you?"

"I'm not sure. I remember watching the living. I don't remember seeing other dead. She came to the conclusion that I hadn't actually died; that I'd been stuck in a more intermediary 'shadow' state."

He glanced at me. "Did she use the word 'shadow'?"

"Yeah. Why?"

He ignored my question. "When did the angel of death show up?"

I smelled smoke in the car. Not cigarette smoke, but something else, something burning.

Were the ends of his sleeves darkening? No. They were...char-ring. And refixing themselves as they smoldered. Underneath, his tattoos moved on his skin. I stared in fascination at the charred edges, at the new threads regenerating as they burned, the designs swirling on his skin in a hypnotic dance.

Magic dragon, magic suit.

It was almost like life: creation, destruction in a never-ending cycle. Somehow, I had been placed wrongly outside of that circle.

I needed to get my death back.

"He said something I didn't understand. She yelled at him in the same language." I closed my eyes. Far from Titania, the fog hiding that memory was gone. "She threw a ball of fire at him."

He smiled. "Good."

"The room filled with smoke. I couldn't see. I heard something shatter. And then..."

"And then..." he repeated.

"I woke up in Titania's flower garden the next day."

"That's it?"

"Yup."

"What did they tell you about where they found you?"

Why would he expect that they would tell me anything? "Nothing, as usual."

"As usual?"

"I've died before. Or at least I've tried to kill myself before. Every time, I lost consciousness and woke up the next morning in Titania's flower garden."

Waitamminute. A sinking, horrible feeling gripped my stomach. If Aurora was his sister, then that meant she was a dragon too.

"A death demon with a death wish. How ironic."

I slapped myself in the forehead. There I was being stupid again, thinking that Aurora had been helping me because she was kind. All the while, she had the power to free me. She'd kept her secret from me. She'd put the seal on me to tell other dragons I was going to be her tool.

"You were resurrected by Titania. I did not know the shen wielded such power."

"You and me both," I said, not paying attention to his musings. I thought...

I clenched my fists and looked away, trying to hide the water falling from my eyes. Goddamn it, if I didn't need to eat or sleep, why the hell could I still shed tears? What was the point of that?

But I already knew the answer.

Pain.

I hadn't been punished enough.

I was tired of being a fucking pawn.

"I'll tell you something, dragon. I don't know what my powers are. I don't know how to help you. All of that back there? A bluff to

get me the fuck away from that bitch."

"I know," he said quietly.

I stopped.

His voice was dark, almost stormy. "I can smell when you lie."

I couldn't show fear. I had to remember my endgame. I had to piss him off. If I did it right, maybe he would end me now. "Fuck you. Did I ask to be smelled? You're invading my privacy."

Immediately, the air grew hot and harder to breathe. The edges of his sleeves started to char again, rising, falling, creation falling back against the forces of destruction, tattoos still moving. "You are trying to piss me off. Why?"

"You want the truth? Because I don't fucking want to live. I want my death back. I'm infected with life, and I can't cure myself of it. I've tried. Shot, stabbed, hung, burned, gored, trampled, and at the end of it all, I'd wake up just as whole and alive as before. Your sister said dragonfire would help me get what I want."

"How?"

"By killing me."

He said nothing.

"Death will solve all my problems," I repeated, to drive it home. I shouldn't be revealing what I wanted so casually, but part of me wanted to shock him, wanted him to say something.

Finally, he replied with a statement that was more of a question: "She said dragonfire would help you?"

"Yes."

"Aurora—she is of the blood, but she was born with a particular kind of disability."

"I saw the limp."

I looked out the window; the car was slowing. He was pulling over to the side of the road. The engine stopped. Everything went silent.

"No. It's not the limp. Aurora..." He paused as if speaking was difficult. "Aurora only has a human form."

"So?"

"In the old world, they would segregate her kind from dragon society."

"Like she had an infectious disease or something?"

"The disease of not being a true and proper dragon. She has fire, but her fire is not dragonfire."

I gave him a side-eye. What an asshole. Fucking racist. I should have known.

He saw it. "No, dragonfire in dragon form is different from fire in our human form. Your language has no words to explain it. Think about fireworks. They burn with different colors depending on the chemicals added. Her fire in human form is missing a particular... component."

I rolled my eyes at his explanation, trying to ignore the familiar heavy weight in my chest. It wasn't relief or anger. Just weariness, wariness, and a surety that I'd rather be dead than be forced to remember how crappy people were.

I had to stop thinking about it, start working on this guy, get him talking. Information was power, and I needed more to figure out how to either push his buttons or get the hell away from him.

"This angel guy that took your sister. You know him, don't you?"

His hands started glowing, and his sleeves started burning again.

Well, that answered that.

"There's a history there."

"Yes," he said, his angry tone warning me not to continue.

Perfect. Time to press harder.

"What happened?" I made sure to take a mean-girl tone. "Did this guy, like, betray you, steal your money, and beat up your brother too?"

I heard the sound of grinding teeth. "Yes."

"Yes? That's all you have to say?"

"Except for the money. He killed my brother."

Oh.

I tried to think of something to say, but finally he spoke. "The Angel of Death lives behind fortress walls that cannot be crossed except by the dead. You will fulfill that requirement."

"You want me to break into the fortress of a death angel. Sure. Easy. Were you even listening to what I was saying before? I don't even know what I am."

"I know what you are. I will make this bargain with you. If you help me find my sister and bring her back safely, I will give you what you want."

I glared at him. "Give you what you want," he'd said, as if he were a motherfucking king on high and I was just dirt beneath his fancy undoubtedly magic shoes. "Don't pretend I have a choice."

“You do.”

I let out a low laugh as derisive as I could make it. “I don’t think so. You wear the ring that binds me to you. The one that lets you find me.”

“Is that what is holding you back? I’ve got news for you: I don’t need a magic fairy ring to find you.”

The ring flew to me, even as I stared at him in disbelief. Nobody did stuff like that.

Nobody.

And then the ring was solid, in my hand, still hot from his flesh.

Power flashed through me, my skin glowing.

And at once I was free.

I WAS FREE?

I stared at the silver ring in my palm.

"You look surprised."

"I... You..." I glanced at him, then back at the ring. Words wouldn't come.

I closed my hand around it. Heat welled up from the ring.

I put it on and watched it shrink to fit my finger.

He had given me my freedom.

I looked at the depression in the door where the handle was. There was no visible latch nor lock.

"The lock is hidden under the handle," he said. "Go on." His voice was deceptively casual and controlled. "Try it."

I tried to say something, but there was something stuck in my throat, as if I had tried to eat something completely unfamiliar, that to my surprise didn't taste terrible, but at the same time, I wasn't so sure I liked.

Finally, I got out a single word. "Why?"

"Why what?"

Words once stuck now escaped all at once. "Why would you just give this over to me? Why not just command me?"

"Would you have obeyed had I done so?"

"I would have tried my hardest not to," I admitted.

He studied me. I fought the urge to cross my arms over my chest. Why did he keep looking at me so strangely? "I'd rather have a willing partner."

The ring was still strangely warm on my finger.

"Thank you," I said quietly.

"You're welcome," he said. "I'm Grant," he said, offering his hand, like he was some ordinary guy who happened to be driving me somewhere.

"Val," I said. I took his hand. It was large, warm, and dry.

"Is Val short for something?"

"Valentina Serena Martinez, if you must know."

"Do we have a bargain, Valentina Serena Martinez?" There was an accent to the way that he said my name that was not unpleasant.

We were still holding hands. I squeezed his hand gingerly as if he could sprout claws at any moment. "Okay, sure," I said, trying to sound confident.

He nodded, withdrew his hand, and put it back on the steering wheel. The car started again.

I had struck a bargain with a dragon. And I'd done it of my own free will.

Definitely not what I had thought would happen.

I fingered the ring, careful not to look at him.

Who the hell was this guy?

Magic simmered inside him, hot, controlled, and utterly enticing. If I reached over and touched his skin, would I feel his tattoos shift? Would his magic be tangible on my skin?

Fire was pretty too, I reminded myself.

In my first life, my original life, I'd had no ability to sense magic, but now, it was like realizing I had a nose and learning how to smell.

And his magic was oddly alluring in a way that was...unfamiliar.

Would he be as distracting to me if I couldn't feel his magic? It wasn't like I hadn't known good-looking men before.

I spared a glance over.

Tall, big, and blond, with a face that could launch movies and wet panties with a single smirk. He was probably perfectly toned and muscled underneath that groomsman outfit.

Again, I had that irritating urge to touch him, to see what was underneath. I wanted to slap myself for being absurd. I didn't even like him. It had to be a side effect of being alive; being dead with no body made for clearer thinking.

A weird awareness prickled the back of my neck.

A huge gray shape appeared in the road.

I barely had time to scream "Watch out!" The screens on the dashboard turned red, the car veering away. We flew off the side of the road, the world spinning around us.

The car came to a stop upside down.

I blinked.

I was still alive.

Relief flooded me. How strange. Shouldn't I have the opposite feeling?

"Are you okay?" asked Grant.

"Fine," I said, still dazed by an awareness of a strange jittering motion in my chest.

He unclicked my seat belt, and I fell onto the ceiling. I tried to open the door, but it was jammed on something.

"Here," he said, reaching over and punching the car door. It flew off as if it had been hit by a massive hammer.

I knew dragons were insanely strong. I'd seen Lana's dragon pick up an asshole's badly parked BMW and move it somewhere else without even breaking a sweat.

But watching life as a ghost and being alive, well, that was the difference between watching a movie and being in it.

I climbed out of the car. The night was still cold, and the moon was out.

There were no cars on either of the roads. The partial moon cast a silvery weak light. A strange gray figure floated through the trees toward us.

My heart hammered even more as the thing got closer.

Holy fucking shit. It was a real fucking ghost.

I remembered what I was supposed to be, a death demon, and felt just the tiniest bit silly.

He climbed out of the car. There were rips and tears in some of his clothes, and they mended themselves before my eyes.

"Grant," called the ghost.

I was irrationally relieved that the ghost was not here for me.

Grant went still, fire flaring from his eyes. He turned to face the coming threat. Gone was the smooth-talking man in the white suit who had asked me to be his partner: this was the dragon who had sieged a fairy queen on his own.

The thing became solid in front of us.

And he looked just like Grant. I stepped closer. No, not quite. This version was older.

The thing that wasn't Grant extended a hand to him. "Grant," he said. "You let me down."

Grant's hand began to raise.

I looked at Grant and then looked at the ghost. I didn't know what the hell the thing was. But I had a feeling it would be over for Grant if he took the thing's hand.

And why wouldn't that be terrible? I'd be rid of him and on my way to freedom. It wasn't even any of my business.

The old Val, the person I had been before I died, would have taken off. It wasn't my business, and I'd had more than my share of dealings with magical monsters.

But he had given me my freedom.

If he hadn't, this choice would have been so much easier. I wouldn't have had to think about this; I would just be gone.

He'd given me my freedom.

It had to have been because it was in his own best interest. Grant had plans for me, and when men made plans about my future without my input, it never went well for me.

Shit.

He had given me my freedom. And I now had to choose.

I knew I would regret this.

I grabbed his arm and yanked back as hard as I could.

Grant turned those glowing eyes at me. His human disguise had been so good that I had forgotten what he was. But I remembered now.

Time slowed for a moment. I could count the thumps of my irritating beating heart as he focused on me.

*Thump.*

*Thump.*

*Thump.*

He tried to shake me off, but I was able to hold on. I had come back from death stronger than before. He narrowed his eyes as if shocked to see a tiny ant holding him back. An inhuman rumbling sound came from him—a predator warning it was about to strike because it wanted you to run so that it could have fun chasing you. "Are you for real?"

I swallowed hard. It was a variant of the question I asked myself every day; how I could be alive whether this farce of living was reality or just some nightmarish version of hell.

I saw the pain in his eyes. An old, raw pain, the kind that inflicted internal wounds that determined the course of one's entire life.

I glanced at the gray thing that mimicked life. I knew life, and I knew death.

"Grant. That thing isn't what you think it is. Don't listen to it."

Grant broke free of my hold but took my hand in his, the one on which I now wore my own ring. The circular piece of metal flared hot. His fingertips rested on the ring, and I could see a measure of rationality return to his expression.

The thing that looked like Grant smiled, its eyes flaring green. "I know you, Valentina Martinez. You are not what you were. Dead? Alive?"

Oh shit.

I remembered those tones, sibilant and cold in my head, wrapping its cold around my thoughts as it had used my body as a vehicle. It had killed me in my original life. This was why I'd rather be dead than to suffer in that monster's terrible grip again. I couldn't move, couldn't breathe, could barely think beyond the answers it demanded of me. But to my surprise, other than the expected fear, there was something else.

Anger.

"Neither?" I said, struggling to speak. "Both? Not sure, actually."

Anger welled up within me. This monster had killed me. It had used me. My feelings awakened that sleeping magic inside me.

Vengeance. I could take vengeance.

Something else pushed back inside me. No, not vengeance.

But I couldn't let someone else suffer the same fate I had.

"It doesn't matter," said the thing. In a blink, black and viscous oily tentacles emerged from behind the monster. It was like a cloud of wriggling giant black worms, covered hooks, mouths and eyes, all watching, hungry, malicious. The sight of it froze me in place.

I pulled the hot circlet of metal off my finger. It resized itself as I slipped it onto Grant's pinky. Grant looked at me, and I could see his rationality, his control of his own mind, returning.

A hot torrent of magic burst.

But it wasn't from Grant.

It was from me.

I was elsewhere.

Blue fire surrounded me. Someone groaned, and the sound vibrated inside me. It was a death groan. I spun around, trying to figure out where I was, who I was.

And I saw Grant, lying face down in a pool of blood and black.

Terror stabbed icy claws into my spine, my sides. I tried to get to him, but no matter how many steps I took, he lay there, just beyond my reach, as if I were on an invisible treadmill.

"Grant!" I yelled.

Someone knelt at Grant's side, flipping him over. It was a teenage boy in white, and he tore open Grant's black shirt.

Grant's black shirt?

I blinked and realized though the features were similar, it wasn't Grant. Where Grant was handsome, this man had a jagged scar across his face.

No, it was the teenager who was Grant, somehow.

Another figure emerged from the shadows. A big man, with massive dark feathery wings, his face hidden by a helmet.

Young Grant turned on the winged creature, fire in his fists. His voice cracked in disbelief. "He trusted you. I trusted you. And you killed him!"

The winged creature's voice was deep and terrible, ringing with magic. "The Devourer has claimed him."

Flames shot from Young Grant's hands. The teenager's voice was full of pain as it deepened into a dragon roar. "*Betrayer!*"

Flames roared into my face as the figures faded into the memories they were. I had to turn away.

They were Grant's memories.

And the Devourer had returned.

The Devourer was here!

Another torrent of magic exploded from me. I fell to my knees, into soft black sand. I looked up and saw a rainbow-colored twilight sky with three moons, blue, purple, and white.

Where the hell was I?

But I knew.

Though this memory wasn't mine, I knew this place, had made this place into a part of me.

This was where I had gone after I had died.

And now, I saw it with different eyes.

This hadn't been True Death. It was a threshold, a place in between.

So I hadn't been dead?

Something hummed behind me. I turned to see an archway of dark stone set in the sand.

Within the archway, a beautiful darkness hummed a song of endings and permanence.

At that moment, I realized two things.

It was the most peaceful song I had ever heard.

The song wasn't for me.

I knelt and scooped up the sand and let it run out of my hand slowly.

It hadn't even been True Death.

I stared at the stone archway and took a step forward.

It moved, without appearing to move.

I took another step, then another, until I was running. And yet the archway was always out of reach.

I sank to my knees. The words were yanked out of my soul in a harsh scream. "What more do you want from me?"

That strange prickling at the back of my neck again. I turned and saw a human-shaped liquid black thing standing next to me.

It spoke with the monstrous sound of many voices, representing the many lives it had swallowed and taken. "Can it be? How is this possible?"

It spoke more for itself than to me, for I was but an insignificant bit player in the monster's discovery of death.

I thought of the horror, the atrocities, the agony that monster had caused. Even if this archway was not for me, perhaps I could do something to save others from the pain it had brought me.

"Why don't you go and see for yourself?" I said to the monster that had enslaved me and taken over my brain in another lifetime.

The thing shivered, turning into a strange simulacrum of a white woman with silver hair. She opened her mouth, stretching it to monstrous proportions, displaying rows of daggered teeth.

It attacked me supernaturally fast. It was all I could do to bring my arm up in a useless form of protection.

A pin pricked my forearm. The sensation made me realize that here, in this place, I was a giantess, and she was but a tiny white in-

sect, scrabbling at my skin.

I plucked the disgusting writhing thing between my fingers.

It roiled, shooting out little sparks of what felt like static electricity.

"There, there," I said.

The doorway was right there at my feet, the smallest of mouseholes.

It was never meant for me.

I closed my hand on that bug and shoved it into the hole.

The desert disappeared.

And then I was lying on the cold muddy ground. My mouth tasted like sulfur. There was a rock or something hard sticking into the small of my back. I sat up. Every bone, every bit of me, felt as if I had been set on fire and burned in acid. I could hear myself breathing hard, felt my heart thump in my chest, smell the rotting wet leaves around me.

I was still alive. Tears welled up in my eyes, the most honest I'd ever had.

The only way my mother would be free to be happy was if I no longer existed among the living. But apparently my fate was to torture her with my existence.

I couldn't even die properly.

Again.

I sat up, wiped my cheeks with the backs of my hands, and steadied my breath.

Grant stood there, leaning on a nearby tree, looking at me, holding my ring between two fingers. I couldn't tell what he was thinking as he stared at me with that stone-faced expression.

I remembered how the flames had licked my face. The anguish and torment in his voice: *Betrayer!*

Had he seen my memories?

I drew myself up slowly and brushed the leaves off me, something in my bones still ringing with...whatever I had done. Yet my mind was oddly focused on Grant, his presence, his watchfulness.

I still remembered Grant's screams as he'd watched his brother die.

I had to focus on what was important: getting my ring back. Because I knew men, and men did not give up control of women who revealed their power.

"You said you know what I am." I decided to test him and held out my hand to him expectantly.

He looked at the ring and then looked back at me with a strange kindness in his eyes, making me wonder what he had seen.

I didn't want his pity, couldn't have it, because that...that...

"Did you...eat the Devourer?" he asked.

I blinked. What? I remembered the bug in my hand. "No."

"It's gone. An ancient immortal monster that even the most skilled dragon warriors have a tough time defeating," he said. His eyes narrowed, his nostrils flaring. "And you...you make it disappear with a touch."

Fuck. I'd never get my freedom back now. What had he seen me do? "I don't know what happened."

He kept looking at me as if I were something significant. "You... you somehow opened a portal to an End. And it's something they can't learn from, they can't avoid, because an End is a True Death."

"How do you know it is True Death? Do I stink of blood? Of rotting flesh? Is that what you meant?"

"That isn't what death smells like; it's only what death leaves behind. But an End—a True Death—that has its own scent, its own power."

I was very aware of the fact that he hadn't answered my question. Great. I smelled like carrion.

And despite this literally killer thing I could do, I still couldn't kill myself.

I had been so close.

His voice was conversational as if he were asking me the time. "Did you know what was going to happen?"

I didn't want to keep talking about it. I seized upon the memories I had seen. "What happened to your brother, Grant?"

His face was hard. Whatever rapport we'd had was gone. "Old history."

That was better. I didn't need his questions, pity, or his closeness. "It's why you're so driven to find this Angel of Death."

His voice was hard. "Stop. Look what you're doing to that tree right now."

I looked at the tree I was leaning on. It was a dry black husk.

It began to crumble as if it had rotted within. A chill skittered across my skin.

Death.

"That wasn't me," I said in protest, drawing back—right into another tree.

Dry leaves floated and swirled downward. I looked up and saw the partially full moon floating overhead between the gnarled branches of the tree.

Something fell from the heights of the tree, falling to the ground with a thump.

A dead squirrel.

I crossed my arms, hugging myself, and shut my eyes, as if by doing so I could wish whatever I was away.

Heat fell onto my face, like the unfiltered rays of the sun on a summer day.

Suddenly, I was shoved so hard I fell over.

My ass hit the cold ground painfully. I glared at him and grabbed a handful of leaves. "What the hell was that for?"

He tried to hide his smile. Clearly, he thought this was fucking hilarious. "I just want to make sure that you didn't kill yourself."

"You are a jerk." I threw the leaves at him, but they just scattered. "That is a lame-ass excuse that makes no sense at all. If I could kill myself by touching myself, don't you think I would've done it already?"

He extended his hand to me. "Take my hand."

I frowned. "You think I'm honestly going to take your hand after that? Besides, shouldn't you be afraid of me?"

Was he hiding back a snicker? He raised an eyebrow. "Do I look like I'm afraid?"

I glanced at his hand. "You should be. I might kill you with a touch."

An arrogant grin. "I'm certain you couldn't."

I grabbed his hand. It was so hot I gasped and let go, but he kept his grip on me. He pulled me up and turned my hand, exposing the palm. He slowly traced a line in an oddly intimate gesture.

"See," he said. His gaze didn't leave my face. "I'm tougher to kill than you think."

His inner dragon heat must have been doing something to the surrounding air. That was the only logical explanation for the weird coiled tension within me and the way goose bumps sprang up all along my arm. I was mesmerized by his gaze, the way a strand of his

blond hair curled around his forehead, the unforgettable sensation of his hot fingertips on my hands.

I looked at him with narrowed eyes; this was what he had intended. "You were trying to piss me off, weren't you?"

"Like you weren't doing the same before. Besides, it's no fun traveling with a gloomy girl afraid of her own shadows."

I couldn't remember the last time someone had touched me without the intent to restrain me or kill me, at least not in this life. I shook my head slowly, unsure of what he was doing. "What are you trying to prove?"

"I can keep you from inadvertently using your powers," he said, looking at the ring on his hand.

Light seemed to twist on the little band of metal. I wrapped my fingers around the ring but forced myself not to pull it off. "You said you'd give me my freedom."

"I did. Do you think you can control your powers? Keep yourself from inadvertently hurting others?"

I was about to tell him the ready lie before remembering what he had said: *I can smell you when you lie.*

"I just want my freedom."

He was still stroking my hand, but his touch was setting my thoughts on fire. A hint of bemusement was in his voice. "Are you going to tell me to stop?"

This should be more traumatic. Before my death, I had been brutalized and abused by men. I would have said that I never wanted any man to touch me ever again.

Maybe it was the fact that I had died. Maybe it was the fact that this body, though it looked original, wasn't the flesh I had died in.

Grant's touch was different.

Because I really, really liked it. And that was a huge problem.

I narrowed my eyes at him again. "Would you, if I asked you to?"

His fingertips skimmed the inside of my wrist. "Why don't you try it?"

"Stop."

He dropped my hand. The heat on my skin still lingered from his touch.

"Give me back my ring."

He held out my ring and dropped it into my hand. "Control yourself. Or I will do it for you."

And there, that was the solution to my problem. All I had to do was make a mistake, hurt some random person, and he would end me, giving me the death, I wanted.

I closed my hands around the ring. Maybe I would have taken that path before I'd died. But going back to that place that was not death had given me a clarity of sorts.

And if Grant was the man I had seen, well, I had the feeling that he would uphold his bargain.

But I had been so wrong about men before, hadn't I?

And yet...I jogged over to him. "Just so we're clear, I still don't like you."

He snorted. "If that's what you want to keep telling yourself."

I grabbed his arm, and it was like yanking on a pillar of marble and just as effective.

"I don't want anyone to get hurt, not accidentally. Can you promise me that, if I let you take my ring?"

"Till death do us part?" he said with a sarcastic smile.

I glared at him. "This isn't the time for terrible jokes."

He shrugged. "No, I can't promise you anything. I don't understand the full extent of your powers. You'll just have to trust me."

Fuck. Was that what I wanted? Why would I go along if I was just trying to get back to my death anyway?

Distant screams echoed in my mind. When I had been alive, the Devourer had used my body to do terrible things, and while most of the time I was thankfully not aware, sometimes visions leaked through.

I didn't want to cause any more pain. And yet... "Do you have a plan?"

"I have a friend who may be able to help."

I narrowed my eyes. "A side trip? What happened to rescuing your sister?"

"The Angel of Death's fortress only reveals itself in the light of the full moon. It is vulnerable to attack then. I was already planning on a visit because they have...things that may prove useful."

I pressed the ring into his palm. The ring's warmth flared between us, and it coated my skin with a not-unpleasant tingling sensation that made me want to press closer to him.

Oh girl, thoughts like these were only going to lead to trouble.

I released his hand. "I don't want to hurt innocent people. Don't betray my trust."

He looked at me, his smile faint. "Don't give me a reason to."

I KNEW SOMETHING OF DRAGONS. WHEN I'D BEEN DEAD, I HAD WATCHED my friend Lana marry another dragon shifter. I had seen some of the things her dragon could do. Fireproof and fire breathing, of course, along with crazy super strength and equally near-magical healing capabilities.

Grant had all that and more.

The dragon I had to be stuck with? It wasn't enough that he was a dragon, with well, all the inhuman abilities I had learned to expect.

The car we'd been driving in? He picked it up, jumped back up to the road, and set it down on the tarmac. By the time I got around to the door, the car was in the exact condition it had been in before, possibly more pristine.

He wasn't just a dragon; he was a fucking more-magic dragon.

Not to mention the clothes shredded around him? His white suit was now as clean and immaculate as if he hadn't just finished laying siege to a fairy queen and followed that up by fending off an alien monster in a forest in the middle of the night.

He stood by the open passenger-side door and gestured to it.

"I know. I'm coming," I grumbled. As I brushed past him, I caught his scent, something like pines and musk. Jeezus, he even smelled clean.

He got into the driver's side and immediately the massive car seemed to shrink in comparison.

"What does it take for you to get dirty, Puff?"

"Puff?"

If I was stuck with him, I'd make him regret every moment. I poked him in the shoulder. Fuck, he was solid. "You *are* a magic dragon. You even smell clean."

"Grime and scent are markers of where you've been. I don't like giving potential enemies the ability to track me."

I rolled my eyes.

He adjusted the rearview mirror. "This is going to be a pleasant drive," he muttered under his breath. He swiped something on the dashboard, and the glove compartment opened, revealing a smart-phone. "Passcode is 12345. Check the weather for me. I need to know what I should be prepared for."

"Such a unique, secure password," I said, swiping it on.

"It's a burner," he replied.

I told him what he wanted to know, then I automatically logged onto social media before I could stop myself. Apparently, even death couldn't kill that habit.

The first picture I saw was my mother. She was sitting on a beach somewhere, smiling with my half-sister.

I had never met my half-sister, our contact mostly limited to "lik-ing" each other's photos on social media. I did call her once, to ask for money to bail Andrew out of jail, but she hadn't given it to me. It was super awkward, but I was too high to care at the time.

Because I loved torturing myself and feeling like shit, I swiped through the timeline of smiling photos, delicious home-cooked food, and photos animated with sparkling heart filters. Eventually, I came to the dates around the time Lana had told my mother about my death.

I remembered because I had been there as a ghost, watching and listening, as my mother heard I had died of a drug overdose, a necessary lie to protect her from the truth. I heard as my mother ever-so-calmly asked about funeral arrangements; since she wasn't allowed back into the country, perhaps Lana could help arrange for a cremation and have my ashes scattered at sea?

The postings didn't change. A meme about gratitude and God, a funny video about a baby hippo, and a recipe for cake in a mug.

I didn't know what I'd expected.

No, that was wrong, because I knew she had always regretted having me.

I put the phone down. She deserved to be happy. I had ruined her life after all.

"Is that your mother?"

"Yeah," I said with as little emotion in my voice as possible, trying to make it clear I didn't want to talk about it. I turned away, wiping my cheek with the back of my hand.

He ignored the hint. "She looks happy."

I had to change the subject. "Hey, are you keeping your eyes on the road?"

"You turned on the mirroring screen on my dashboard," he said.

"How do you turn it off?"

"I don't know. It's a burner phone, burner car."

Now it was my turn to look at him. "Burner car? Really?"

In the shadows, I could see the corners of his lips turned upward. "What kind of dragon would I be if I didn't have a treasure hoard?"

I wondered if one could sense the fire within him by touching his lips, his skin. Would his mouth be hotter than a human's? I shook my head, reassuring myself that it was me being stupid in my illogical flesh.

"You don't want your mother to know you're alive because you think it will hurt her."

My hands were on my neck, and I realized I was trying to feel the place where I had been beheaded. I jerked my hands back down into my lap.

I didn't want to talk about it with this man—not here, not now, not ever. I opened the glove compartment because that was a way to avoid unwanted conversations in the car. But there was nothing in there. I slammed the compartment shut.

"Told you it was a burner car," he said. "We'll stop in a little bit if you're hungry."

Who kept food in a glove compartment? "I don't get hungry, thirsty, or tired. Not resurrected by Titania."

"No pleasures of the flesh for you, then."

"No."

The damn feed, still on the dash, blipped with an alert. My mother had posted a picture of her new puppy, an adorable golden-furred ball of fluff.

I let out a sound of frustration. "How the hell do you turn this thing off?"

"Not sure. It troubles you to see her happy."

"Look, just stay out of my head. Last thing I need is you psycho-analyzing me on my mommy issues."

"I've touched a nerve," he replied, his calmness completely exasperating.

In the past, I had hesitated to tell people. It always made things weird. But right now, I needed him to shut up and stop asking me questions. Awkwardness would work just fine. "You wanna know what happened? My mother was raped when she was sixteen. She went to a party with a friend, had a drink, and woke up to find a group of guys taking turns with her. Nine months later, I was born."

"I'm sorry," he said.

"So. Am. I." It was how I had spent my entire life.

We drove on in thankful silence for a few moments. But then he started asking questions again.

"What happened to the rapists?"

"As far as I know, nothing."

Even in the darkness, I could see his look of disbelief. "Are you telling me she never told anyone? That the perpetrators were never punished?"

I snorted. "That's not how it works. She was the one who would suffer if it came out."

"She's a victim! She deserves justice, vengeance."

The magic inside me responded. I had the power to make things right, to give those men what they deserved, no matter where they were.

I clenched my fists, feeling the magic swell inside me. I could do it. I could find them. I could avenge her.

Only she wouldn't want it that way.

I drew a deep breath. Like a tense muscle, the magic in me released and faded back into nothingness.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Grant looking at me. Had he sensed my magic? Fuck, I had to keep talking, keep his attention off me.

"I would have agreed with you. My mother said to me once that those boys took away her power for one night, and that by forgiving them, she was preventing them from taking away her future."

"They should have paid for what they did."

"I said that to her. And she said that she had no control over that. And she would not worry about things she could not control." It was her way of moving forward, but it had pissed me the fuck off, her and her saintly forgiveness.

So I'd been stupid and done everything I could to make her regret having me.

I thought I'd succeeded. And this was why I could never let my mother find out I was still alive. She could move forward in her new life without me as a living symbol of the worst thing that had happened to her.

"She came to America, planning to give me up for adoption. I wish she had. But for some stupid reason, she decided to try to raise me on her own, with no money, no help, no family, in a foreign country with a language she barely spoke. It didn't go as well as she hoped.

"I'm not saying she didn't..." I paused, swallowing the bitterness in my throat. "Love me. She tried. She was always praying, forgiving her attackers, forgiving me for my 'innocent existence.'" I looked at Grant. "I can't have her know I'm alive. This whole resurrection thing?" I gestured to my body. My voice was starting to shake, but I couldn't stop talking. "It would upend all her beliefs about God, faith, everything that got her through the shittiest parts of her life. I can't—I can't do that to her."

Grant glanced over at me. "You're trying to protect your mother's faith."

I took a deep, shaky breath and blew into my hands, trying to distract my stupid body from the emotions I didn't need to feel. "I'm trying to give her the life she deserves." A life free of me. I clenched my fists, hoping Grant wouldn't press me further.

Because the truth was, my mother would have a better life without having to worry about me, being alive, the problem child who had been a self-medicating junkie.

"I have no plans on informing your family of your return."

"Good."

Silence fell over us. I hugged myself, rubbed my arms, and took several deep breaths. What was my mother doing now? Did she ever think about me? I hoped she didn't. The only thing I could give her was peace, with my absence.

"I never knew my parents," Grant said suddenly. "They died sending me and my siblings here."

Somehow, I couldn't imagine dragons crossing the Rio Grande in the dead of the night or floating here on a homemade raft. "To America?"

"No. To Earth."

"Oh." I paused. "So you're telling me that you—dragons are aliens?"

"To this world, yes."

I glanced around at the weird car. Was this a spaceship?

He looked over at me. "You don't seem surprised."

"No, it explains a lot," I said, gesturing to the car. "What about fairies? Are they aliens?"

"No, they are as native to this world as you."

I snorted. "I've never been 'native' anywhere, not even in the white-bread town I grew up in, which was made clear by the kids at school and the racist graffiti that kept being spray-painted on our mailbox." I clenched my hands as I realized I was just babbling now. "Who raised you, if not your parents?"

"My older brother."

Right. I had seen that. I wavered between asking him more and... not. It was no business of mine, and there was no reason for us to be talking like this. We weren't friends or even allies. I had to remember: Grant was the obstacle to my freedom.

And yet, to my surprise, he kept speaking.

"I was still in training. I thought I could save him by putting him into a stasis spell. I brought him to someone who I thought could help. Despite the hatred between the dragons and the shen, my brother had managed to forge a friendship with a particular shen whose power came from death. I brought my brother to him. He killed him." Grant's hands began to glow again. "He will not take my sister."

Bits and pieces finally fell into place, presenting a picture I had not fully understood. "The Angel of Death killed your brother."

"Yes. And with your help, I will kill him."

I folded my arms around myself. "Vengeance may not be the answer."

His voice was cold and devoid of emotion. "It is the only answer I'm interested in."

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I BLINKED and realized the car was coming to a stop. The clock read 3:47 p.m., and it was broad daylight.

Had I been asleep for more than twelve hours?

Grant waved his hand over the dashboard and the lights went out. "We're here."

"Did you put me to sleep?"

"You looked tired."

"I don't sleep, I told you."

"Everybody needs sleep."

Anger rose within me. "I haven't slept since I was brought back to life. You might have my ring, but don't think you can just magic me anytime you want."

He grimaced, and I realized there was a bloodred stain on the sleeve of his white suit.

"What happened to your arm?"

He looked at his forearm. The dark runes of his tattoos seemed faded in the sunlight. The blood disappeared from his sleeve.

"Nothing."

"Grant. I'm serious. Don't just put me to sleep." Anger, real anger, filled me. It felt like a betrayal of sorts.

Even though there was nothing to betray.

He stared ahead. "There was trouble on the road. I didn't know how you would react. So I made you sleep to keep everyone safe."

"How does me sleeping keep everyone safe?"

"You sleeping means you don't unleash your powers," he said as he got out of the station wagon.

I sat there, thinking about what he said. My powers? Wasn't he supposed to be in control of my powers? Wasn't that the whole point of him having the ring?

I followed him out of the car and smelled something disgusting. I hated that I knew what it was.

There were long scratches on the vehicle's black paint. Wasn't his car magic?

"Why does the outside of the car reek of brain and spinal fluid?"

He staggered for a moment, then straightened, as if he was trying to hide it. "I told you, I ran into some...things," he said, walking

away from me. "I took care of them."

There was definitely more he wasn't telling me. "What things?"

"Things you don't need to concern yourself with."

"Look, you said you'd rather have a willing partner. So treat me like one."

He stared at me as if I were speaking a foreign language. "Fine. Now if you please, *partner*, you're in my way."

I glanced up and saw the diner he'd brought us to.

Holy crap. I knew this diner. Ida's Pancakes.

"Hungry?" he asked.

"I don't eat," I said, thinking of the memories I had in this place. Had he "seen" this place in my memories too? I wanted to ask him, but then I'd end up having another long conversation about my past. He had already far too much information on me as it was.

I walked back to the car, having no desire to ever go into this diner again. "Haven't eaten since I was brought back. You go ahead."

He looked at me, trying to assess my intentions.

I shrugged. Either he trusted me or he didn't.

He set his phone on the dashboard. "Watch this while I'm gone."

I leaned back.

It wasn't that this was a bad diner. Aside from the one longtime waitress who only ever spoke to Andrew or only any non-brown people I happened to be with, the rest of the staff was friendly, and they had the best strawberry pancakes.

In fact, this had been our thing, early on in our relationship, back when Andrew had still taken me out to restaurants.

We weren't too far from the little white-bread suburb I had grown up in.

Something blinked on Grant's phone. I realized it was a camera view that followed him into the restaurant. He was definitely turning some heads with his fancy white suit, in a place filled with blue jeans and checked shirts.

I looked up from the screen, through the windows of the diner, trying to understand what was following Grant.

Nothing was floating behind him.

I looked back at the screen.

The vision was as clear as if was shot by someone standing behind Grant, following him.

Right. Magic fucking dragon.

I stiffened as I saw him approach a man with dark sunglasses.

No.

The man took off his sunglasses.

Andrew.

Rage filled me. I thought I had loved him. I had given everything to him. I had worked for him, bailed him out, and even fucked for him, and where had it landed me?

Sold to an alien monster who had eaten my brain.

I put my hand in the door handle, about to march into the diner.

But Grant started talking. "You have my attention."

"So to the point," said Andrew, enjoying the grandstanding show villain he was. "Let's eat first. I already ordered. The strawberry pancakes here are fabulous."

"Two coffees, with sugar. To go."

Two? I'd told him I didn't want anything. I didn't even like coffee.

The waitress took his order and left. Andrew smirked. "No black coffee to go with the tough-guy image?"

"What are you offering?"

"Something you've been looking for, in exchange for something I want."

He set a velvet box on the table.

Grant ignored him, staring at Andrew.

Andrew pushed the box forward. "Go ahead. It won't bite."

Grant opened it. He stared at the box for a moment. "What do you want for it?"

"Not much." Andrew leaned back and flashed a smile that had once made me weak in the knees. "I'll just take the woman in your car off your hands."

Grant closed the box. "Why? Is she special?"

"Val?" Andrew leaned back, waving his hand and chortling. "Naw, Val and I go way back. I miss her."

I choked back a laugh.

"Husband?"

They paused as the waitress brought Andrew strawberry pancakes and Grant his coffees.

"No, Val and I were never the marrying kind," said Andrew as he salted his strawberry pancakes, like the lunatic he was. "But I am a bit sentimental when it comes to Val. When she was gone, I real-

ized what I had lost. Now that she's back, I want us to have another chance."

Bull-fucking-shit. The only way that shit would stink more would be if he vomited some declarations of eternal love.

Grant looked at the box.

"No, thanks."

He picked up the two coffees, got up, and started to leave.

Andrew started cutting into his pancakes. "That's the real thing, you know. There's nothing else like it. You'll never have this opportunity again."

Grant didn't even break his stride.

I watched him come back to the car. The door opened automatically as it sensed him approach.

Grant got in the car, smelling faintly of syrup and coffee. He set the coffee in the cup holders between us.

"Do you want to go with him?"

I kept my eyes focused on the coffee. What had Andrew offered? And why had Grant gotten me coffee? "Are you asking me like I have a choice?"

"Do you want to go with him?" he repeated.

I clenched my fists. "Only so that I can fucking kill him." The threat dropped from my mouth as easily as it had when I'd been alive. Only now, I realized there was more weight to those words.

Grant grinned, and I realized I was proving him right about his attitude for vengeance magic.

"Okay, maybe not literally."

Amused disbelief crossed his handsome face as if he thought I was saying that just so I wouldn't lose...whatever argument we had been having. "What do you mean not literally? You have every reason to. He betrayed you and sold you like a dog."

I ignored his question. "Did you contact him?"

"No," said Grant. "I think Titania did."

"That bitch."

"It's what shen do."

The car jostled and bumped as the air around us outside shimmered and swirled. The world around us twirled in a dizzying fashion. I grabbed on to the door handle. "What the hell is going on?"

"I figured as much," said Grant calmly, as if glowing, bizarre colors and warped reality were a normal part of a road trip. "A pocket

dimension," said Grant. "What a stupid and showy waste of power."

"A what?"

"You put up a pocket dimension when you want to haul people or things to a place you don't want outsiders to see. Your ex-boyfriend seems desperate to get you back."

THE AIR SWIRLED, SPITTING US IN FRONT OF AN OLD GRAY-GREEN HOUSE, with peeling paint, taped-up screens, and mismatched roof tiles. Even the grass surrounding it was brown with bare patches of dirt. It hadn't always looked like that, but after Andrew's grandmother had left him the house, he hadn't taken care of it the way it should have been.

Why would he choose to bring us here?

"Your ex has made himself into a sorcerer," Grant said calmly. "It's not an easy path for humans, and not a kind one either. Sacrifices are required, ones that he has clearly not made himself."

I knew what Andrew had done to me, and yet, part of me still remembered the kindness that had drawn me to him in the first place. "How do you know?"

"He still has all his limbs intact."

I stared at the house.

Grant slurped his coffee loudly.

I glared at him. "Do you have to do that?"

"Only prey eat silently," he said. "Deliciousness should be appreciated, loudly." He picked up the second cup of coffee. "Here."

"I don't even like coffee."

"It's not for you." He gestured toward the window behind me. "It's for him."

I turned and saw Andrew waving at me, a shit-eating grin on his face. He thought he had us.

I took the coffee from Grant's hand. "Why, thank you."

"I'm assuming you don't want my help."

"Nope."

"Then I'll be here, making my coffee-slurping noises. Just say the word if you need me."

I got out of the car. The air had that autumn crispness with a hint of smoke. It was odd to have Grant at my back.

It felt kind of nice, actually.

The stupid part of my mind wondered if he made noises of appreciation at other times.

"Hello, Val."

I walked up to Andrew and removed the coffee lid.

"It's good to—"

I threw the hot coffee at him. He jumped back, but not before it splashed onto his stomach and crotch. He let out a shriek. "You bitch!"

"That's the least you deserve, you motherfucker. Fuck you, douchebag, don't you ever fucking come near me again."

He stood up. He still smelled of coffee, but there was an aura of darkness around him, along with that scent of blood, intestinal viscera, and spinal fluid.

"What have you done to yourself?"

He jutted his chest out at me. "Made it so that no one is ever gonna disrespect me again. You won't."

"Is this what you got in exchange for selling me?"

"It was temporary, babe. Look at what you are now. So much potential and power."

I spat at him. It was so satisfying watching it hit his face. Rage, pain, betrayal, all the emotions that death had distanced me from, revealed themselves once more, thrusting themselves into my voice, turning it into an almost unrecognizable shriek. "The thing you sold me to? Ate my fucking brain. It killed me."

He held up his finger. "No, technically your friend killed you. And for you, death wasn't a permanent state." He wiped the spit from his face. "You're going to pay for that, Val. You've forgotten how to be a good girl."

Before my death, I would have cowered, trembled, said I was sorry, and begged because he would have taken all the drugs away and made me do things like suck his friends' dicks. But I wasn't that drugged-up ho no more.

Funny how easy it was to be brave when you knew you couldn't die.

"There's nothing you can do to me, Andrew. Get out of here before you regret it."

He shrugged. "I always said, you don't need to be willing. You just need to be there."

He stretched out his hand to me.

Loops of familiar slimy black magic wrapped around me.

It tasted of the Devourer.

Had that madness in his eyes always been there, or had I just been too wrapped up in myself and the boy he had been?

My mouth dropped open. How could he? "You gave yourself to that monster?"

He laughed. "I give myself to nobody."

He didn't know. He didn't know that the alien intelligence was riding him, watching him, controlling him.

Perhaps he hadn't known how bad it would be for me when he had given me to the monster.

I blinked. None of that mattered anymore. There was no coming back once the Devourer got a hold of you.

Andrew was already dead.

His voice took on an odd timbre, shades of the nightmare I had known. "I invested so much time, made a lot of deals trying to bring someone back from the dead. I'm so glad that it's you, Val."

Grant leapt from the car.

With a wave of his hand, Andrew encased Grant in a glimmering white opaque bubble.

The Andrew I knew was an ordinary human. Where had he gotten the magic? Where had he gotten the power? And not just power, but enough to hold someone like Grant?

The opaque bubble began to vibrate and smoke. Not for long perhaps.

The tentacles started pulling me toward him. "You are very special, Val, even more so now that you're back. There's no one else quite like you, and together, we'll do great things."

The tendrils of my dark power curled around me, coiling tight, ready to explode.

So I let it.

We were back in that vast black desert, sand swirling around us, three moons above us hanging from a violet sky.

Flower petals floated past me in the breeze, but they had no scent. In fact, there was no scent in this place at all.

Andrew whirled, looking around in surprise. "What the hell?"

"I didn't bring you here. You did." I spotted another figure behind him, a swarming cloud of insects or just smoke; I couldn't tell. "Or perhaps it did."

The cloud formed itself into a naked human figure with pearl-white skin and with far too many mouths and teeth studded all over its body.

"So this is where you bring us," it hissed.

A doorway appeared behind it, white hot and glowing with an ancient primordial energy.

Andrew let out a whoop. "Yeah, baby! That's what I'm talking about! I knew you wouldn't let me down."

Before I could react, he pulled me into a quick hug.

I stood there in stiff shock. For a moment, I remembered the boy who had defended me from three guys trying to rape me in juvie, the boy who'd once spent his last nickel to buy me a vending-machine ice cream sandwich because I'd told him that I missed my mother.

Was it cruel of me to not feel regret for what was about to happen?

"You were always too good for me, Val." He greeted me on the forehead and squeezed my hand.

He had drugged me, dragged me into a life I'd never wanted, and sold me to get power. And yet, for the sake of our history, I had to give him another chance.

I grabbed his hand. "Andrew—"

He smiled, and I remembered the first time I had seen that smile, and he slipped out of my hold as if he were a wet fish. "I'm finally going to get what I deserve."

There were too many things to say and not enough time, so much emotion and history bound up in a few mangled moments. I tried to grab him again, but my fingers passed through him as if he were already a ghost. "No, you idiot. Listen to me, I'm trying to forgive you!"

Andrew swaggered toward the light, a confident smile on his once-handsome face.

I stretched an arm toward him. "Wait!"

He didn't even acknowledge me as rippling light surrounded him.

Spears of light pierced his body, burning holes in his dark figure. Andrew screamed in pain as the light skewered him, lifted him up, and yanked him into the doorway.

The doorway vanished.

Andrew was gone. I should feel something, anything, but I just felt...numb.

A gurgling voice spoke. "I will not be so easily deceived," it said. "You cannot kill me the same way twice."

I turned and saw the monster with far too many teeth rushing at me. White electricity shot from the monster, and I held up my hands to hold it off.

Fire erupted.

From me?

It swirled around the monster, burning, searing, and cooking the thing which bubbled, rippled, and bent itself into a hard ball of black shell.

And I realized, again, just how small it was.

There was no logic to the physics in this place.

I stretched out my hand and grabbed, and the tiny thing of teeth was in my palm. It was sparking and biting with fury.

All I felt were pins and needles in my skin, like the numbing sensation I got if I sat in a strange position for too long.

Grant's voice echoed in my head. *This is where you take them.*

I whirled, trying to see where he was. "Grant?" Was that where the fire had come from?

*I'm not really here. What do you do with them when you're done?*

Another mousehole of an archway appeared at my feet. I knelt and shoved the molten hardened ball into it.

The desert vanished.

And then the weight of flesh, of life, of breath, anchored me back into my body.

Grant had his sleeves rolled up, cradling me in his bare arms.

I blinked at his golden eyes, full of shock and surprise, as if I had disappeared and then reappeared in his arms. I wasn't so sure I

hadn't. I swallowed hard, trying to think of something to say.

"You *are* different," he said finally.

"Thanks," I said, slowly. "I think."

"I thought you said you weren't going to kill him. If that is your idea of balance, I can live with that."

"You can put me down now."

He set me gently on the ground. I almost expected him to cop a feel, but he didn't.

I looked around the front yard.

I had loved Andrew once, and even though he had scoured that emotion from me with a metaphysical blowtorch, a part of me still ached over what had happened.

Hate would have been so much simpler.

But I couldn't. We had essentially grown up together, and so I understood what had shaped him, had also made me.

Death, and the clarity it came with, had been the difference.

I looked away from Grant, up into the clear blue autumn sky. There was a single fluffy white marshmallow of a cloud in the sky. A red-gold maple leaf spiraled down toward me.

It seemed strange that it should be such a pretty fall day.

"I didn't mean for it to happen," I said.

"From what I saw, he made his own choice," said Grant.

I faced him. "I didn't see you there. How is it that you saw what happened? How was it that my hands were covered with...fire?"

Now Grant frowned and looked away. "I suspect it is because I hold your ring. But I'm not quite sure of the mechanics of it. You were delivered back to life with shen magic. I was trained in draconic magic."

"There's a difference?"

"As different as Latin is from Chinese. You're not what I thought you were."

Was he admitting a weakness? A hole in his knowledge? Andrew would have never done that. But then as I stood there, looking at his tall, broad shoulders, his handsomely rumpled dress shirt, his sleeves rolled up and exposing those arcane forearm tattoos, like a startling sexy god of groomsmen, I knew he was no Andrew.

He wasn't even human. I had to stop staring at him.

I looked at the house. For some reason, I remembered it being larger and scarier, not this old, tired little thing that looked as if it

might fall apart during the next snowstorm. "What was it that he offered to you in exchange for me?"

"The Key of Transcendence. It makes doors in places where there are none, even supposedly to death."

I turned at the sound of some strange music from within the house. "Do you hear that?"

Grant gave me an odd look. "Hear what?"

I listened intently but didn't hear anything else.

"If there was something to hear, I would hear it."

"Maybe it's magic," I snapped.

"Perhaps," Grant replied. "But what I know of human magic? It doesn't last past its maker's death."

"What about the Devourer's magic? The Devourer was driving Andrew like a car."

He looked at the house and focused on it, pausing for a moment before he spoke. "I have dedicated my life to recognizing the signature of the Devourer's magic. If there was a remnant of it in there, I would sense it, and destroy it. It is best we go now. We're late."

Grant moved toward the car. I needed one more moment to see if I could hear that sound again.

"The Key sounds valuable."

The car beeped and the doors slowly folded upward, like a bird tucking in its wings. "I spent a long time searching for it because I believed it would help me break into the Angel of Death's fortress. But I no longer have need of it," he said, giving me a meaningful glance.

Because he had me.

I gave the house one last look. "An inanimate key is a lot less troublesome than me."

"I don't doubt it."

He could have traded me. He could have sold me for what he wanted.

"Thank you," I said, getting into the car.

He shook his head. "You don't need to thank me. You don't sell people who trust you."

LUCKY FOR US, ANDREW WITH HIS LITTLE POCKET-DIMENSION STUNT, had cut short our journey to where we were going.

I fingered the reddish pink rose on my lap. It was small and delicate with tiny green leaves still attached.

We had reached a sort of understanding after leaving Andrew's place. I kept looking at the grass I was stepping on, touching leaves and trees, trying to see if any bit of power was inadvertently escaping me. I felt as if I might be a bomb about to go off.

Grant had noticed.

Before we'd left, Grant had gone off into the forest and found a wild rose.

"Here," he'd said, handing it to me. "I've taken the thorns off. Hold on to this. If it starts to die while you are holding it, then you know something is wrong."

Andrew had never given me flowers.

Regret and relief churned within me.

For a part of my life, he'd been the only one who stuck by me. There were moments that hadn't been bad. Even if he hadn't been the best human being, he had kept his promise about never leaving me alone, well, until the day he'd left me with his "friend."

My eyes were wet, and I kept my face toward the window. Tears streamed not from sadness, but from a vast sense of relief that Andrew was truly gone, that I would never have to think about him again.

Was this how my mother felt about me?

Grant tapped me on the shoulder and handed me a tissue. "I'm sorry."

I tried to scrub the ridiculous tears from my eyes. Why the hell was I crying? "I'm not. Andrew got what he deserved."

"You're not...mourning his loss?"

"No." I said no more, hoping Grant wouldn't ask.

Thankfully, he didn't.

We drove on in silence for a while until Grant turned off the road down a dirt path. Tree branches scratched and squealed against the car. "There's something I have to tell you about this place," he said. "My friend's wife is a bit unusual."

I snorted. "Unusual? Is she a mermaid or something?"

"Or something. She's a shen."

Something pricked my finger. I turned the stem. "You keep mentioning that word like you expect me to know what it is."

He paused. "Titania is a shen."

There was still a small thorn attached to the rose. You couldn't rely on others even if they meant well. I picked off the thorn. "I thought Titania was a fairy."

"Fairy is what humans call them. Shen is what they call themselves."

I checked the rose for more thorns and didn't find any. "As long as she isn't related to that bitch."

"She *is* related. They all are."

"What?" I went hot and cold all at once. "I thought you were going to help me. Are you planning on leaving me with her?"

"Sophie's not like other shen."

"That's not an answer," I said, drawing my power to me. Strangely enough, it was easier than before. I was slowly learning how to move my wings, but I still didn't know how to fly.

"You don't need to feel threatened. I still have plans for you."

"That's not particularly reassuring."

"It's not supposed to be." He turned and looked at me. "It's honesty."

And somehow, I was okay with that, because at least I knew where he stood.

What did it matter who I was stuck with?

The car slowed to a stop before a huge red boulder. "Sophie will know more about what you are because you were made with shen

magic.”

“You seem quite confident that she isn’t like Titania.”

He turned off the car. “Hunter wouldn’t have married her if she was. And Hunter... I once would have said I would have trusted him with my life.” He got out of the car.

That didn’t bode well. I shoved the door open and ducked out of the rising door. Thick leaves crunched underneath my feet as I followed Grant into the forest. He wasn’t going to avoid this conversation. I called after him, “What happened?”

“Nothing. I just learned not to trust anyone with my life.”

I glanced at the ring of mine on his hand. “Is that a lesson I should have learned too?”

“That’s different. I know what betrayal is, and I won’t do it to anyone else.”

“Oh, now that’s completely reassuring.” I waved my arms exaggeratedly. “All I have to do is trust you.”

The red boulder in front of us moved.

It wasn’t a boulder.

It turned and drew back its lips, stone flowing like flesh and skin in a strangely nauseating manner. The size of a two-story house, it was a massive Chinese Foo dog like the ones outside of the buffet my mother used to take us to on the rare coincidence of special occasions and money.

The thing lowered its suitcase-sized nose to us. Grant held out his hand. I jumped in surprise. A primal shiver went down my spine as Grant let out a draconic snarl that sounded completely fuck-you vicious.

The beast nodded and turned back into the brush, moving way more quietly than something that big should.

“What was that?”

He was smug even when he shrugged. “How you say hello in Draconic.”

A ball of light floated toward me. A woman’s voice emanated from it. “What are you?”

I tried to look at the fluttering light, but it was so tiny bright and blinding, I couldn’t see what it was. “Is that...a fairy?”

“No,” said the woman’s voice. “A communication light. Just in case that I decide I don’t want you on my land. You feel of death magic.”

"She's a human brought back from death by the fairy queen Titania."

"Against my will," I added. "I would have been perfectly happy staying dead."

The light stopped moving, hovering in midair. "Did you say Titania?"

"Is that a problem?"

"No." The light continued floating. "Go on."

"I've been told I'm a demon spirit of death. But until last night, I didn't even know what that meant, other than the fact that I can't seem to die."

"Have you been trying to kill yourself?" asked the light with humor in her voice.

"As a matter of fact, I have."

"Really?"

I ticked off the manner of ways I had tried off on my fingers. "Shooting, stabbing, both with steel and wood, drowning, poison, falling from a cliff—none of that worked. All it was was painful, and eventually I'd black out and then wake up on one of Titania's gardens whole and as if nothing happened."

"What happened last night?"

Grant spoke this time. "She killed a piece of Devourer. On her own, by touching it."

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WE HIKE THROUGH SHRUBBERY, following a dirt path for what seemed like forever but couldn't have been more than minutes, before we came across a large grassy meadow. As we walked, the air began to warm, becoming more humid, more fragrant, smelling of oranges and flowers.

Just like Titania's lands.

An awareness prickled at my scalp. More fucking fairies.

But then a disgustingly handsome man in a black T-shirt strolled out.

Oh, he was definitely not a fairy. His magic screamed *dragon*.

I paused. Could I sense types of magic? When had I learned how to do that?

He welcomed Grant with a big thumping bro hug.

"Sorry I missed the wedding," said Grant.

"It's fine. I know you don't come to those things anymore."

There was a small, modest-looking house, but beyond it was a grassy field that stretched some distance. Two huge red barns were behind the house. Movement caught my eye, and I squinted to see what it was.

Was the red siding on the barn moving?

I stepped forward, shielding my eyes from the sun, staring harder.

No movement. How strange.

A heavily pregnant dark-skinned woman came out of the house. She had that mixed-race Afro-Asian-Latino look that wasn't traditionally pretty but compelling all the same.

She wasn't a dragon, but she wasn't quite...human or fairy either. I didn't know what she was.

She introduced herself as Sophie and offered her hand.

Hunter grabbed her hand. "I don't want you touching her."

For a split second, it hurt. But I understood the reasoning. "I think he's right. I'd rather not."

Sophie heaved a sigh. "Stop being rude, Hunter. These are guests, welcomed on the land. Look, I'm pregnant, not unable to protect myself. I know the shape of Titania's magic, and I've already put defenses into place."

"Just because you know how a mousetrap works doesn't mean that you can't be hurt by it," said Hunter, watching me as if I were a snake.

She tilted her head at me, and I had the strangest feeling that she could see things about me that I could not.

"She will be fine," said Grant. "That's why she's holding a rose. If it begins to wither, I will act. I have a ring of binding."

Was that what it was called? Were rings of binding a common thing?

Even now, I still couldn't believe that I had given it to him. What had I been thinking?

"See, it will be fine, Hunter. She is welcome, and she and Grant are going to have lunch with us," she said with a finality. Sophie turned to me and smiled. It transformed her face from ordinary to extraordinary. "You've come just in time for cuss noodles."

Some foreign food I'd never heard of. "Umm, I don't eat."

Sophie gave me a strange look.

"She doesn't sleep either," said Grant.

"No?" She seemed genuinely astonished. "Still, you have to try this dish. It's my grandmother's recipe."

The cabin's main room was a honey-wood-paneled space that looked like the comfortable sort of place people actually lived in. On one wall was a huge scroll with hundreds of Chinese characters. I walked over to a table with incense, a bowl of oranges, and a photo in a frame. It was a picture of Sophie and an Asian woman. I squinted, trying to think of why the Asian woman looked so familiar.

My stomach growled.

I set the photo down and put my hand to my stomach. I was feeling...hungry?

"Looks like you do need to eat," said Grant, brushing past me.

I rubbed my stomach, trying to get rid of the hollow feeling, but it only seemed to make it worse. "I guess."

We sat down at the table, set with napkins and chopsticks, watching Sophie and Hunter through the cutout to the kitchen. They reminded me of my friend Lana, and her dragon, who I had watched as a ghost. Oddly enough, I had seen more of love, felt more of love, when I had been dead, than in life. Even if it hadn't been directed at me, watching my friend was like seeing a story unfold on a TV. It made me feel things, and want things, but in a safe way because I was already dead.

But this, seeing those unspoken glances, the casual touches, those little moments of warmth in real life?

I felt even more empty.

I thought I had long reconciled that part of myself, the unwise part that wanted some imaginary connection to another person.

That sort of thing wasn't meant for someone like me.

I hugged myself, trying to ignore the emptiness inside me, desperate for the oblivion and temporary happiness that drugs had brought me.

Knowing my luck, even if I had drugs on hand, they would be as effective on me as death was now.

I met Grant's gaze for a moment. He immediately looked away.

He had been watching me.

Probably making sure I wasn't going to accidentally try to murder his friends.

I glanced at the rose I was still carrying. Still alive.

"Have you thought about putting the rose in your hair?" asked Grant.

"Huh?"

"You know, so your hands are free to eat. I'll let you know if something happens to the rose."

I tucked the rose behind my ear.

Sophie dropped a big platter of yellow noodles in front of us. It had bits of chicken and vegetables mixed in and smelled mouthwateringly of garlic, ginger, and cilantro.

Sophie served me first. "Do you need a fork?" she inquired.

I picked up the silver chopsticks. "I'm fine, thanks."

Hunter, Sophie, and Grant chatted as I stared at the yellow noodles on my plate, with a scattering of seaweed and sesame seeds sprinkled on top. I'd had Chinese food, of course, the ubiquitous cheap, greasy takeout, but this? This was all light fluffiness and something else altogether. I lifted a bite with my chopsticks and inhaled the smell.

The scent of those noodles, oh, that scent was fresh yet familiar, exotic and homey all at once. There was a hint of curry, a touch of chili, and other spices I didn't recognize.

The scent alone was almost enough.

"Go on," said Sophie. "I promise I'm not trying to poison you."

"It wouldn't work anyway," I said before taking a bite.

Maybe it was the fact that even when I had been alive, my senses had been dulled by drugs, or maybe it was that I hadn't eaten anything since I had been resurrected. "Oh. My. God. This is the fucking most amazing fucking fabulous thing in the world!"

Sophie burst into laughter, and the other two men started to chuckle.

"This is why Grandma called them cuss noodles," said Sophie. "They're so good, they make you cuss."

---

AFTER MAKING a glutton of myself by having second and third helpings, I was finally done.

Sophie went to take a nap, apparently exhausted. Grant filled my wineglass. "Go for a walk on the grounds. Hunter and I are going to clean up and work on a few other things. But if lights come flying to you, don't go any further. The stone lions might eat you."

I raised my eyebrow at the mention of cleanup. Men who cleaned up after a meal? Now I knew I truly was in a strange land.

I side-eyed him. "I don't mind dying."

As I said it, I realized that that wasn't quite true anymore.

Grant looked at me strangely.

And I remembered what he said, about smelling my lies.

I had to get out of here. I spun on my heel and headed out the door.

I followed the gray stone path down toward the orchard. By all appearances, it seemed to be like any ordinary slate-and-cement path, but in between the bits of mortar there were little shells, keys, and crystal-like beads. It reminded me of the steps at Titania's court, only without bones and teeth.

The sky was blue with a single cloud. I headed toward the line of trees, with my glass of wine, the liquid on my lips tasting of life and richness in a way I'd never known it could. The air was oddly warm, more summer breeze than autumn air, with the hint of something floral and citrus. As I came closer to the orchard, I realized that they were orange and lemon trees.

Up here? In Upstate New York? Even I knew those trees shouldn't be growing up here.

But they were thriving by the looks of it.

Bees and jeweled hummingbirds flitted between the leaves.

My physical body was full for the first time, but simultaneously, it made me realize how empty I was.

I couldn't honestly remember the last time I'd had a home-cooked meal, let alone in a home so filled with light and love.

It gutted me.

It was a longing that had haunted me for my entire life, a hole I had tried to fill with Andrew, to forget with drugs, and to escape in death.

But apparently, I was going to be cursed with life forever.

And I had to admit, rightfully so. I had always been a problem for those nearest to me. My mother, Lana, Andrew.

And now...

I drained the glass of wine to stop myself from finishing that thought.

"How are you doing?" asked Sophie, startling me. For a pregnant lady, she was pretty damn quiet with her footsteps.

"I'm fine," I said, forcing my voice to a pleasant lightness. "How are you feeling?"

"Like a cow," she said. "I'm at the point where I just want this baby to be out of me. I was going to walk the labyrinth and get some exercise." She took the wineglass out of my hand and pushed it into the air. It started floating toward the kitchen. Sophie turned back to me. "Come, walk with me."

I wanted to be left alone, but I could hardly turn down the request of a pregnant lady who had just fed me. I followed her through an opening in a tall hedge and stepped onto a gravel path.

"I'm sorry for what Titania put you through. It will be of no comfort to you, but she does mean well."

It never did any good to tell people you thought their family members were bitches who needed to be broken. So I shrugged. "You can't choose your family."

"No," replied Sophie. "You can't. And this is why I know you are not a true vengeance demon, because you're not seeking revenge on Titania or me, or even your friend who killed you."

Lana. I yanked a twig off a bush and started pulling off the leaves. I should call her. But then what would I say? *Hey, it's Val. I'm not dead, but I'm trying to fix that.*

I saw that Sophie was giving me an uncomfortable look and realized what I was doing.

I pushed the twig back into the bushes. "Sorry."

"Just try not to do it again." Sophie tilted her head at me. "Demons are creatures of rage and passion. Nothing pisses them off more than to be told that they are wrong. And again, you just showed me you're not a true demon."

I touched the rose in my hair. Soft petals, still alive. "Is all of this going to be a test?"

"No. I'm pointing out the ways in which people have been wrong about you."

"Then what am I?"

"Honestly, beats me. I tried to call my godmother."

"You talked to her?"

"She's not taking my calls right now," Sophie said in a voice thick with history. "Sometimes she's just like that. Super solicitous busy-body when you don't need her and entirely nonexistent when you do."

I looked up into the sky. A huge bird of prey, with fingerlike wingtips, soared overhead.

"So then what is the point of this second life that I get?"

Sophie shaded her eyes, frowning as she looked up at the bird. "Isn't that what everyone is trying to figure out? How to give their life authentic meaning?"

I snorted. "'Authentic meaning'? What are you, a philosopher?"

"No. Just someone else who's spent a long time looking for her place in the world."

I glanced at her very pregnant midsection. "Looks like you found it."

She placed a hand on her belly. "Maybe. Sometimes we are so caught up within our own questions, we fail to realize we're part of someone else's story."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Sophie looked at me. "There is a particular shadow to your aura. One I've never seen before. Of course, that doesn't mean anything, because I didn't start seeing magic until recently. But Hunter once told me that when Grant was young, an old dragon seer came to see him. She told Grant that he was cursed. His fated mate's path had been turned aside somehow."

"I don't understand." Why was she telling me this?

"Dragons believe that each one of them has a destined fated mate who travel on parallel paths in a lifetime until they intersect and become one. She said that Grant's mate traveled on a parallel path and simply ended."

"What does that mean?"

"It means, that Grant was destined never to find his other half, because they would die before he ever found them. Apparently, it's a rare thing that happens to dragons once in a while. But do you know what they call those partners they would never have? Shadows."

I shook my head. "No disrespect to you—I appreciate your hospitality and your little pep talk here—but being a part of someone else's story is no reason to live. One has to find meaning in their own lives, and not just as an attachment to someone else."

Sophie looked at me in surprise.

"Death, or wherever I was, gives you a certain perspective. I lived a long time, attaching myself to someone else's dreams, someone else's journey. And where did that leave me? Betrayed and my body stolen and driven by a monster." I looked away and muttered under my breath. "If I'm going to live, I need to find my own meaning."

"Looks like you already see the path." Sophie was looking at me as if I were a dog who had just done a surprising trick.

And I realized what I had said.

*If I was going to live.*

I shook my head. Choosing to live would be stupid; I would be condemning myself to the mistakes and the inevitable emptiness that was life.

"There are those who have lived entire lives looking for meaning," said Sophie. "Maybe it's the journey that has the meaning."

"Now that is some internet inspirational-meme bullshit."

Sophie merely laughed. "Maybe. But that doesn't make it any less true."

"You know what? If the journey is the whole point, then I definitely want to be dead. Because the journey in my old life? Fucking sucked." I shook my head. "I don't know why you're telling me this. Does Grant know that you're telling me this?"

"Telling me what?" said Grant, his voice cutting through our little bonding session like a knife.

"VAL'S NOT A DEMON," SAID SOPHIE. "THOUGH I AGREE WITH YOUR assessment that there is definitely a connection to the plane of True Ending. Honestly, I'm not sure what she is." She looked at Grant and shrugged. "I wish I could help you more, but I was always better at the theory than the actual practice of shen magic."

"Hunter wants—"

Sophie waved her hand. "I know, I know. Well, I'll leave you two to it. Just don't go by the red barn," she said as she walked away.

"You know that only makes me want to go by the red barn, right?" I called after her.

Grant snorted, and I realized he was holding two glasses of wine. He handed one to me.

Sophie didn't even turn. "At least you're honest about it. But really, don't go there."

I watched her walk back to the white-shingled house. Behind the house were rolling fields of green grass. The sun was setting, giving everything a golden hue like we had walked right into a nature calendar. I glanced back to Grant. His jacket was off, the top collar of his white shirt unbuttoned, but the crisp whiteness of his ensemble was almost blinding in its brilliance. As he leaned against the all-too-convenient fence post, a dangerous red-wine glass in hand, it looked as if he were waiting for a casual photoshoot with his bride.

Sophie's revelations reeled back into my mind. Why was Sophie trying to make me think that I was his mate? Was this part of a plan to manipulate me into doing what they wanted? Had Grant put Sophie up to it?

Just as quickly, I dismissed that thought. It wouldn't be like him. He'd be more direct.

But why did I think that? I mean, I barely knew Grant.

Grant's sleeves were rolled up to his elbow, revealing those thick, nicely tattooed forearms, but with a different pattern than I had seen them last. If I touched his arm, would the tattoos move in response?

I tightened my grip on my wineglass. "Why did you bring me here?"

His eyes met mine, and I realized he had been surveying me as much as I had him. "Sophie and Hunter have a workshop of sorts."

I struggled to focus on the topic, trying to mask the direction of my thoughts. "What are they, like, Santa's elves? Do they make toys or something?"

He took a sip from his wineglass. "No. Weapons."

I gestured at the orange orchard, the picturesque farm straight off the pages of an inspirational poster. "Sure looks like it."

He snorted. "Magical weapons. Ones that can be used against the Devourer. You cannot defeat the Devourer the same way twice." He paused, looking at me. "Except, apparently, you can."

Goosebumps prickled my skin. I felt the nearness of him, the smoldering heat of his internal flame.

And a strange, similar fire within me.

Rational thought disappeared as I fell into those endless blue eyes tinged with gold, leaving nothing but a primal sense of what we were.

Woman

Man.

*Dragon.*

What would he taste like if he kissed me? What would it be like to unbutton his white shirt, exploring the muscled ridges I had only seen hints of? Would his skin burn me if we touched?

I was so close to him. All I had to do was reach out.

But I knew better than to play with fire.

I looked at an invisible spot on my wineglass, breaking the weird spell. "I know what drives you, Grant. But what are you going to do afterwards when you finally get what you want?"

Grant exhaled slowly, and I thought I saw a trace of smoke escape his lips. "Never much thought about it."

I turned my back to him, not wanting him to see the way my eyes were watering—because something had flown into them. I didn't want him to mistake it for weakness.

"Vengeance," I said. "I know you want vengeance."

As I said the words, there was something in me that hungered to help him. Vengeance would fulfill the emptiness it whispered.

I could see how glorious it would be, to be the instrument of his vengeance, to unleash my power and fury and see others cower and repent for what they had done.

It would be so easy. Because that could be my meaning, my purpose.

I thought of my mother, clutching her rosary beads as she prayed.

*What's done is done.*

*I forgive your father, whoever he was.*

*I forgive you, my daughter.*

*I forgive.*

I had asked her why. Why forgiveness?

*Because if we don't forgive, then we give them more power. We give them the ability to define who we are. And we keep the cycle of hate going.*

I hadn't understood at the time.

But now?

Perhaps I was my mother's daughter after all.

I blinked, and it was as if no time had passed. "Vengeance is not a way to live."

Dry leaves rustled on the ground behind me as Grant moved. "I will not ask you to do what you do not want to."

I wiped the water from my eyes and turned around. "Are you really going to try to kill an Angel of Death?" I heard my question and shook my head at the ridiculousness of it. "That sounds stupid even as I say it. Is an Angel of Death even alive?"

"Oh, he is very much alive. And yes, he can be killed." The way he said it made it clear that he was relishing the thought of it.

A thing of death that was alive. Maybe there was a deeper reason Grant needed me, one that had been in front of me this whole time. "Is he like me?"

Grant had amusement in his eyes. "You think you're an angel?"

"I'm a pretty piss-poor excuse for one if I am. Sounds like this guy isn't either."

"His name is Calix, and he is called the Angel of Death by other shen. My brother was friends with him, which is still rather rare between shen and dragons. Calix has the power to restore life to those near death. The Devourer nearly killed my brother, so I brought him to Calix. Calix said he would help. And in the end, he killed my brother."

Now the tattoos on Grant's forearms were beginning to dance. "Calix betrayed my brother, and he betrayed my trust. That cannot be allowed to go unpunished."

Clearly, he was someone who did not take betrayal well. "I understand."

He looked at me, his eyes dark. "Do you?"

"Just because I choose not to act on my deeper inclinations doesn't mean I don't have them."

"I'm not the only one who sticks to what they know. Or have you changed your mind about your ultimate goals?"

It was a nice way of asking if I was still intent on killing myself.

I let out a deep breath. "Sometimes you think you are following a light that will lead you out of a tunnel. And sometimes, the light merely blinds you to all the other potential paths around you."

He moved closer, and I was struck by his scent: smoke, something wood-like, and another element that was all him. I was caught by the intensity of his gaze. I couldn't move away if I had wanted to. "Are there other paths?" he asked softly.

"If there were, would you keep following the one you were on?"

His eyes turned hot. "Would you?"

There was a chime. He looked up, and I stepped back as a glowing light appeared above us.

Sophie's voice spoke. "Grant. Hunter's ready for you to test out the device."

"I'll be there in a moment," said Grant.

I turned my back to him, unsure of what was going on.

I didn't want the spell to be broken. But this never had a chance of lasting.

He was a warm, silent sentry behind me. "I will fulfill the bargain we agreed to. But if my preferences mattered to you, I would rather you live."

---

I STOOD in the orchard alone for a period, watching butterflies flit around me. A black squirrel leapt from orange tree to orange tree. I never thought that autumn in Upstate New York would ever be the place for oranges, but I picked up a ripe orange off the ground and found it entirely unblemished.

*I would rather you live.*

What the hell was I supposed to do with that?

I tossed the orange absentmindedly from hand to hand. I had to be realistic and not mistake his meaning for what it truly was. Of course he would rather I live: he needed me to help him with his angel-killing plans.

But hadn't we been talking about what would come after?

The orange spun into the air.

Why should I even care about what he thought? Just because he was hot? Just because he seemed like a genuinely good guy, well aside from the I-must-have-vengeance attitude?

Was I going to help him kill someone I didn't know?

And that, I realized, was the likely truth of the matter. He was trying to make sure that I was on his side when the time came.

The weight of reality settled into my stomach. That's all he meant. That's all it could be.

I began pacing as I tossed the orange in the air.

I had no idea what I would do if he asked me to kill some angel.

I had to get my ring back. These conflicting emotions were too dangerous to have around Grant.

But to do that, I had to bring my powers under control.

It was getting dark, so I followed the stone path to Sophie's back door. The interior door was open, but the screen door was locked.

I knocked. "Sophie? Hunter?"

The door opened of its own accord, and I walked into the kitchen. On the counter lay a series of what looked to be a United Nations of teapots: Asian, African, English, and others I definitely didn't recognize.

Sophie stood there, carefully cleaning out the stem of a teapot with what looked like a very long cotton swab.

"Shouldn't you be resting?"

Sophie pulled out the cotton swab. Sparkling pink slime was stuck to the other end. Okay, so not exactly a normal teapot.

"That's what everyone keeps asking me. But how can I rest when there is so much cleaning to do before the baby comes? I don't think these pots have been cleaned in decades!"

I didn't know how having clean teapots would help her prepare for a newborn in the house, but then again, I had never had a kid before.

"I have a question for you."

She picked up a pot that looked as if it was created from a crystalized blue rock and peered inside the spout. "Go on."

"You told me you didn't know what I was. Is there any way that I can at least try to figure out what my powers might be or the extent of them? So that I can learn to keep myself from hurting others?"

Sophie put the teapot on the folded towel and smiled. "I thought you'd never ask." She untied her apron and hung it up. "Follow me."

As I stepped outside through the back door, I realized that the stone path I had walked up on had...moved. Rather than heading down toward the orange orchard, it now twisted around the back of the house, through a tall hedge of bushes studded with tiny white flowers. The scent was subtle and pleasant, unlike the stink at the fairy queen's court.

Behind the bushes, and completely enclosed on three sides by them, was another cabin.

"Here's where you and Grant will be staying," she said, pushing open the unlocked front door.

Lights switched on automatically as we entered the cabin, revealing a more luxuriously appointed living room. It looked as if it was ready for a fashion shoot, with a white couch and a furry gray blanket tastefully slung over the side, and a huge, pristine coffee-table book about rain forests.

Toward the back, modern barstools faced the small, white-and-gray marbled kitchen.

I gave Sophie a look of disbelief. "Not saying your house isn't nice, but this..." I waved to the cabin. "Why wouldn't you want to move in here?"

"I'm comfortable in the other house. Come," she said, brushing past me. "Let me show you the rest of this place."

We turned down a small hallway with two doors. "There's one bedroom here," she said, pointing to one door. "And a bathroom over here."

One bedroom for me and Grant was not going to work. "Umm, Sophie..."

Sophie placed her hand on a small square pad on the wall. A door slid open, revealing a room that seemed straight out of Japan: sparse white walls and a floor consisting entirely of tightly woven straw matting. At one end of the room was a low coffee table and two square cushions for floor seating.

"Is this the room I get for telling you that I don't sleep?" I asked.

"The tatami mat floors are natural magical neutralizers, great for training purposes but obnoxiously hard to clean if you walk on them wearing outdoor shoes," she said, slipping off her shoes.

I followed her lead and stepped onto the matting with my black socks. It wasn't as terribly uncomfortable as I thought it would have been, in fact, it was oddly soothing, in a strange foot-massage-ish way.

I watched her walk to one wall. Panels slid at her touch, opening to a closet filled with what seemed to be several large and fluffy pillows. Was this entire house full of fake walls?

"This room is more of a Japanese-style bedroom, with the traditional futon that you fold up and put away in the closet each morning."

She walked to the other white wall and placed her hand there. A massive screen blinked into existence, gradually revealing a gradual swirl of stars in space.

"Perhaps this program can help you figure more about your powers. There's a series of video lessons here that will lead you through magical meditation and exercise steps..."

"My name is Zoe," said the sort of calm, relaxed female voice one might expect from a hippie yoga teacher. "I am pleased to be your guide in this journey."

"Zoe is an...artificial intelligence of sorts," said Sophie.

I held up my hand. "Hold up. First of all, are you telling me this is a computer program for magical training?"

Sophie laughed and shrugged. "In a sense, yes. Zoe was created by my grandmother, to help me try and figure out and achieve the magical potential she was sure I had."

The screen had turned into a slow spinning flower pattern that was gradually making me dizzy. I looked away. "Did it work?"

Sophie shook her head, frowning at the screen. "I never liked this pattern," she muttered. "Zoe, can you change this, please?"

An image of an upward-looking perspective, surrounded by tall towering trees, replaced the flower pattern. Interesting how she wasn't answering my question. "Why do you think it will work on me?"

"It's worth a try." She looked at her hands, the fingertips which were stained pink, perhaps from the goo in those teapots she had been cleaning. But what kind of teapots had pink goo in them? "The dragons trust my knowledge of shen magic. But honestly, I'm not a very good practitioner of it. There are others far more well-versed, far more advanced than I. But to ask them... Shen rarely share their secrets. And those that would know what you were? Would ask you to sign your soul over to them before they would ever even deign to help you."

"So why are you helping me?"

"I know what it's like not to have any idea of your purpose or potential. Plus your Devourer-killing ability needs to be explored further."

"I didn't even know what I was doing."

"Exactly. You need to learn, and be conscious, so you can control...whatever it is you do." Sophie put a hand on her belly, yawned, and straightened up. "If you have any questions, just ask Zoe to call me."

"Hold on, wait."

"I know it seems lame, and you don't want to do it. But this can only help you. The room is heavily warded, so you don't have to worry about hurting anyone. And with the artificial intelligence, you can turn yourself loose without worrying about what others may think of you."

"I got it," I said. "But does it have to be the hippie-lady voice?"

"Would you prefer your own voice?" said Zoe, using an oddly pleasant version of my voice. It sent a chill through my spine. Ugh, who in the world would want to hear themselves telling themselves what to do?

Sophie cracked a smile. "I used to use the voice of a little green wizard from a space movie."

"Talk like this, would you prefer?" said Zoe, in the wizard's grumbly voice.

"Yes," I said, even though I was sure I would regret it.

"Then proceed we will."

---

I LANDED on my ass in the most painful way possible. Above me, a ninja raised his sword. I instinctively brought my arms up to block, even knowing that it would be useless.

"Alligator enchiladas!"

Immediately, the ninja froze, its blade a fraction of an inch above my bare forearm.

"Tired now, are you?" said Zoe. "The true warrior—"

"Oh, shut up." I sat up. My ribs ached, my legs ached, and my head felt as if I had tiny gnomes running wild and drilling random holes into my skull. I was tired; I had meditated and gone through martial-arts exercises designed to control my magic with my breathing.

The ninja disappeared.

"Well you have done, my apprentice."

I looked at my hands, at the smoky dark tendrils that I could now call forth at will.

Sophie's program might have sort of kind of worked.

"I still don't know where I brought the Devourer," I said out loud. "I can't even go back to that place."

"A requirement may be a living, sentient being on the verge of death," said Zoe.

My forearm prickled with a pins-and-needles sensation as I absorbed the dark smoke back into my skin.

"That's enough for now." I was getting tired of this space wizard voice and the strange way it convoluted sentences. "I just want to be left alone."

The screen disappeared. I crawled over to the futon on the floor that I'd pulled out of the closet during another training exercise and flopped backward.

To my surprise, the futon was quite comfortable. I closed my eyes.

I heard footsteps in the hallway. A door opened and closed. Water started running.

I blinked.

Probably Grant.

Taking a shower.

I had seen hints of his flesh, his naked skin, a flash of the rippling muscles underneath that ridiculous white suit he had been so intent on wearing everywhere.

I imagined the water running down the rivulets along all his masculine lines along his arms and down the shallows and contours of his back. How would he react if I skimmed my fingers along the planes of his chest, down to the ladder of his abs?

I could almost imagine the touch of his skin on my fingertips. I shuddered at the strangely tangible feeling and tried to brush it away.

The strange sensation only traveled inward to my wrists.

I shook my hand, but the touch only moved up, along my inner arm, hot on my skin.

Oh shit. Grant still had my ring on.

WAS HE RUBBING MY RING ALL OVER HIS DAMN SELF WHILE HE WASHED?

I should march toward the bathroom, hammer at the door, and demand that he stop.

But instead, I closed my eyes, letting myself feel the imaginary warmth.

Grant wasn't there, and he wasn't touching me. And because of that, it somehow was more...okay for me to savor the feeling because it wasn't real.

The touch grew warmer, the sensation slowly trailing down my neck, between the valley of my cleavage. It drifted and followed the curve of my breasts.

I let out a breath as the warmth slowly closed in on my nipple. A twisting sensation of desire pinged my core.

What the fuck he was doing in there?

I rolled over, trying to get up. I felt another hand caress the inner skin of my thighs, drawing patterns of warmth. Goose bumps rose, loosening muscles I hadn't even known were tight.

I stumbled to my knees as if moving away could diminish the sensation as if he were there.

But he wasn't. The warmth slid upward in a sweet, unhurried tease. I couldn't even remember the last time I had had a partner that had taken their time to tease my flesh.

That was a lifetime ago.

The heat reached the seam between my legs, and need unfurled within me. My knees buckled. I fell back to the futon, still hearing nothing but the sound of running water.

Invisible fingers began to tease my clit.

Fuck, there was no way he was just washing taking a shower.

Was he imagining this?

The idea of Grant thinking of me like this shocked me with desire.

I could feel his lips at the curve of my neck, trailing downward. I was entirely clothed, yet utterly bare to the invisible sensations of *him*. His hot mouth closed around my nipple and sucked hard. I gasped, trying to find a hold on something, anything, but there was no Grant there. The need for him took me by surprise, not just for these...feelings but for his physical presence.

I wanted him, even as I knew it would be so dangerous.

It was better this way because this wasn't real.

Did he know what he was doing to me?

I gasped at the touch of a heated finger at my clit.

Fuck, even if it *felt* real.

My body trembled as his finger began to rub wicked little circles. I thought that would be the beginning of the end as that delicious gripping sensation began to bloom at my core.

But silly, logical me hadn't realized that invisible hands weren't bound by the laws of reality: while huge hands squeezed my breast, pinching both my nipples hard, my legs were shoved open by another pair. My hips arched, and I fought not to cry out, because I would die if he stopped.

I felt him, the huge blunt head of him painting the seam between my legs, even as something kept swirling around my clit in lazy, maddening circles. I didn't know what the fuck this was, because the motions didn't logically match up to washing at all, but maybe he was jerking himself off—

Something hot and hard thrust inside me. My eyes opened wide, and I was clearly as alone as I had ever been, but my vision was lying to me, ignoring the undeniable sensation of a hot, thick cock slowly pushing inside me. Against my will, I cried out. How could it feel this damn good? It was too good, so good it had to stop, because otherwise I would be undone.

But there was nothing physically there for me to escape, nothing but the sensations of *him* against me, forcing my thighs wide and open.

He thrust inside me again, hard, fast, and delicious. I let out a cry. It was too damn good, and I didn't want it to stop. Not the circles around my clit, the pinching fingers on my nipples, and the unmistakable rhythm of a huge, thick cock filling me, moving inside me.

I couldn't remember anything, anyone feeling as good as this... nothingness filling me, but it wasn't enough. I wanted him, wanted to feel his weight on me, his muscles bearing down on me. I wanted to smell him, see his face as he took me.

Fantasies so dangerous I could never give in to them.

I arched my hips at stroke after intense stroke. Every thrust drove me higher and higher, bringing me closer to the release I had refused to ever acknowledge I needed.

And just as I was on the brink of an explosion, the sensations vanished.

I opened my eyes.

All I could hear was the sound of my panting breath.

No more water.

Fuck.

My heart was pounding, my body twisted with erotic tension.

I touched myself, needing relief, but my hands were no match for the feel of him. It was useless, of course. "Fucking bastard," I said with gritted teeth.

I had to get up, move, do something to stop this...desperation. It was just chemicals, I told myself, hormones produced by a flesh body, a totally irrational distraction from what was important.

I glanced at the door.

Insanity seized my mind. What if he came to my door now? Would I let him in?

Or worse: What if I went to go find him?

I stared at the white wall that didn't remotely resemble a door. My cheeks turned red. Fuck, if he knew, I'd never be able to look at him the same way again.

I staggered to my feet, trying to shake off the remnants of whatever had been happening. My skin still buzzed, my limbs were still unsteady. "Zoe!"

The wall screen blinked on. "I need a rigorous training exercise, something that will certainly kill me over and again."

The room disappeared. I found myself in a back alley of some large foreign city with strange smells. In the shadows, glowing red

eyes appeared.

"Perfect."

I ran at the shadows.

---

AS REQUESTED, death came for me again and again, but never was it the death I wanted.

The program would simply bring me to a white room, ask if I wanted to continue, and then give me a lesson on how I could stay alive. At first, I ignored the lessons, preferring merely to die, but at some point, I got tired of losing. I started fighting back.

And I learned how to call my power at will, sort of.

Sort of. In the program, the monsters died at my touch, but Zoe warned me that real life wouldn't necessarily work that way. It was her hypothesis as to what would happen.

Not to mention that there was still a deep core of stillness, of strangeness, that I couldn't seem to touch. It was there, but no matter what I did, I still couldn't touch it, couldn't move it.

I don't know how long I was in the program, nor did I care, until Zoe finally said something about needing time to process information to prepare for the next stage of training. There was a mechanical beep, and the wreckage of the surrounding city dissolved in to the white, spare room that Sophie had left me in.

Sunlight streamed in through the windows.

Hadn't it just been nightfall? I couldn't have been in the program all night? But without the need for sleep, I had very little sense of time.

I put my ear to the door. I had no desire to run into Grant. No desire to say or hear anything about what had or had not happened. In fact, nothing had happened, I reminded myself. I straightened my spine. There was nothing to be embarrassed about because literally nothing had happened.

But the warmth of his invisible touch still lingered on my skin.

I gingerly slid open the door a fraction of an inch and listened for any sounds.

What if he had been thinking about me like that?

I opened the door a little more.

That need at my core I thought I had worked out of my system? Came right back as if I hadn't just spent what felt like hours trying to pretend it had never existed.

I went to the hallway, saw the bathroom door was open, and dashed inside. I closed the door behind me, locked it, and braced myself against the door.

I stared at the bathroom.

When was the last time I'd had a shower?

I turned on the water. The *shhh* sound of the shower was almost soothing. I forced myself to step into the cold water. The icy shock was what I needed. I stood there, until I was properly numb, and normal.

I made a face at myself in the mirror. Brown skin, brown eyes, shockingly messy brown hair. I looked as I had in my original life. It would have been nice to be brought back with a smaller nose, fuller lips, a little more in the chest department, but no. Apparently this was going to be the face and body I was stuck with. Bodies were such stupid animal things, putting feelings and thoughts in your head that had no right to be there. Physical responses were merely that, and once I shoved that aside, what was I left with?

Nothing had changed. Except for the fact that I had made a huge mistake in letting him hold my ring.

This time, wrapped in a towel, I opened the bathroom door and promptly strode across the hallway, back to my bedroom, just in case he happened to be around and looking.

Which of course he wasn't.

In the closet, I found a neatly folded pile of clothes. Stretchy dark yoga pants, a black long-sleeved shirt that had a faded Union Jack on it, and even a silver package with "disposable underwear" written in English and French on it. I wondered just how many people came here needing new clothes that Sophie and Hunter had them stocked in their guest room.

I got dressed, squared my shoulders, took a deep breath, and stepped out into the hallway.

The very silent hallway.

I casually walked past the other bedroom. The door had been left open and I could see the rumpled sheets.

There was no one else in the rest of the house.

I was finally alone.

And it was a little unsettling.

I went to the front door and stepped outside. The sky was covered with thick ominous clouds, and yet, birds chirped and bees buzzed. The air was damp, and dew glinted from the leaves of the nearby bushes.

It was morning.

I wasn't sure what to think of this.

I followed the strange stone path back to Sophie's back door, but both doors were locked and the windows were dark as if no one was home. Still, I knocked and called their names, to no response.

Where had everyone gone?

As I circled her house, I saw the red barn down the other hill. White smoke pumped from the chimney of the red barn while golden sparks shimmered around it.

*Maaaagic*, whispered the weird fifth sense I apparently had now.

Sophie had told me not to go by the red barn, but didn't I tell her that her warning was going to make me more likely to go?

With my luck, they wouldn't be there either.

That, I realized, was even more disturbing.

This could be my chance to leave. Could I just walk off the property? Somehow, I knew it wouldn't be that easy. Titania's lands looked like you could just walk off of them too, but you'd just end up walking around in circles.

Not to mention where the hell would I go?

I made my way down the hill toward the barn. As I got closer, it looked more and more like an ordinary red barn. I was facing the back, so I walked around, looking for the door.

Only when I got to the other side, there was no door.

That was ridiculous. How could there be no door?

But then I hadn't realized that the sliding door to my room was a door either.

What if I knocked?

I stared at the big red barn, all of which looked the same.

I randomly picked a place, feeling dumb, knocked, and waited.

Nothing.

I knocked again, waited longer.

Still nothing.

I turned away, and then I heard something swing open.

A square opening appeared in the barn at chest height. Sophie was wearing thick goggles and had her big curls tied up in a messy bun, and there was what looked like a smear of grease on her forehead. She wore a massive, thick apron that looked like it was covered with a variety of grease paint.

"Hey, I know you said not to come here, but I couldn't find anyone else around," I said, feeling awkward.

Sophie lifted up her goggles and gave me a very strange sort of look, one that I didn't know quite how to interpret. I realized she was looking at the rose in my hair. I touched it, found the petals still soft, and dropped my hand.

"You don't sleep."

Had she been spying on me? I wasn't sure if I should be surprised, or annoyed. "Oh?"

She wiped her face, smearing the black grease across it more. "I didn't know that the program would send me updates about the training sessions that you've been...undertaking. You unlocked the upper levels rather quickly."

"Oh?" I said again, because I wasn't quite sure what she was trying to say, nor how I should respond. I was still annoyed that she had been spying on me, even though I suppose I should have known.

She bit her lip as if considering something. "You reached levels that I hadn't even known existed."

I blinked, fumbling for something more brilliant to say.

"Is that good?"

The bottom half of the door opened.

"Why don't you come in. I have an idea of how you can help us out with something."

And there she was, already assuming that I was going to help as if we were friends. Though it was hard to say no to someone who had welcomed you to their home, treated you as a guest, and happened to be very pregnant.

I walked into the upper catwalk of a spaceship.

A very dirty, filthy spaceship with a layer of grime and ash coating the white walls with an industrial gray filth. At least, that's what it looked like to me. The space was huge, looking like a warehouse that stretched for miles. Along the walls were three levels of multiple bays. Most had silver doors, but some had semitransparent win-

dows, revealing weapons, armor, and other devices in various stages of development.

I allowed Sophie a look of disbelief. She gave me a look as if I had forgotten something important. "The Devourer."

A chill went through my spine at the mention of the immortal alien monster that had killed and eaten my brain.

Sophie's footsteps on the metal walkway were slow and measured. "The Devourer killed most of my family. My mother, my father, when I was just a baby. And my grandmother recently." Sophie turned to me. "The Devourer is going to keep hunting me, and my child, until we figure out a permanent solution."

There was a desperation and determination in her voice. A mother desperate to protect her child, her family, who would fight until the end.

This child was so fortunate. I was pretty sure my own mother had never thought of me like that.

"The Devourer has been hunting both shen and dragons since it arrived on Earth millennia ago. The only way to survive, is to build, adapt, plan. I'm going to kill it, within my lifetime, once and for all."

I shook my head. "How can you hope to fight something that old, ancient, and powerful?"

Sophie gave me a measured look. "You did. Twice."

I held up my hand backing away. "I don't know—you don't even know what I am."

Sophie paused. "If you can gain control over yourself, or your magic, you may be what we need to stop the Devourer once and for all. It has hunted the shen until almost none of us are left. And dragons are even fewer than when they first came to Earth. Its goal is to eradicate every sentient being on this planet. If we don't stop, it will be the end of everything."

I folded my arms to my chest. "You're lecturing someone who had the Devourer living in her head. I know. But you can't pin your hopes on me. I was just a drugged-up ho that died."

To my surprise, she reached out and squeezed my shoulder. "You are more than that, Val. You can be more than that."

She was wrong if she thought she knew me better than I knew myself. The living always thought they knew everything. "I'll think about it," I said, because it was a way to shut someone down even when you knew the answer.

"Thank you," Sophie replied, even though I didn't know quite what she was thanking me for.

Sophie stopped and looked downward. I followed her gaze and realized we were on a walkway above a sunken work area. Titania's spear lay on a table, clamped down by thick metal braces as if it might get up and run away.

Grant and Hunter were on opposite sides of the table, tapping at tablet screens. Both were shirtless and looked like they had both been working in a forge, with soot smeared all over their naked torsos.

"It is ridiculous how good they look, when they're filthy," said Sophie, changing the subject.

"You're lucky," I said.

"I am," she replied. "And I don't deserve to be, but somehow I am."

Hunter looked up, winked at Sophie.

Grant glanced at me and then turned his attention back to his tablet. Something stupid and irrational fell in my chest.

No, it was as it should be.

Hunter said something to Grant, set down his tablet, then jumped up three stories to the catwalk in a single leap. He nodded to me as he curled a big arm around his wife and kissed her on the forehead. "Hey, I thought you said you were going to go rest."

Something ached inside as I watched them.

"You need a rest too, Hunter," Sophie said, poking him in his chest. "You've been working most of the night."

"Together?" he asked.

"Together," she agreed. "Head down there, Val. Tell Grant what I said."

I tried to ask what it was she said, since I wasn't sure Sophie had said anything, but the pair were already walking away, their hands deep in each other's back pockets.

I ignored the hollow feeling inside me as I made my way down. Grant kept his eyes lowered on his tablet as I came down the stairs.

When I finally got to the bottom, he greeted me with a brief "Hey."

I felt the smallest bit of relief. Because here I was, alone with him again with this crazy unnecessary awareness to his presence, and we were definitely not going to talk about what happened last night.

That was good, I told myself. It was what I wanted.

"What are you doing with Titania's spear?"

He walked over to the table and entered something on the panel of buttons attached to the metal table.

"We are augmenting it."

I looked around the workspace, filled with an alarming mixture of what looked like surgical implements and tools. This would be the place to torture someone.

I wondered if they had.

Sometimes, it was the nicest people who turned out to be the worst monsters, and you didn't know until it was too late. So often it was hate that did that, twisting you into something barely recognizable from what you were.

And Grant...his quest for revenge defined who he was, leaving little room for anything else.

Not that it was any of my business.

He still wasn't looking at me, and for some reason, I found it maddening.

I started talking with a statement designed to get his attention. "Sophie thinks my magic somehow could be used against the Devourer."

He didn't look up. "She does," he replied, more of a statement than a question.

He was refusing to look at me. I stepped closer to him. "Is that why you brought me here? Because I have the potential to be a weapon somehow?"

He kept poking at his stupid tablet. I had the urge to yank it from him and throw it behind me to get his attention.

Now I was right in front of him. "I gave you my ring in good faith, Grant."

Now he turned that blue-gold gaze on me. All of a sudden I was even more aware of the space between us, how huge and close he was.

"Is that what you are concerned about? Dragons do not go back on their word. Show me you can control your powers and I will give you back your ring."

I rubbed the finger where I had once worn my ring. We were both on the same page, and yet, it pissed me off for some reason. "What if I can show you right now?"

His tone told me all I needed to know. "You think you're ready?"  
To show Grant what I could do and keep him out of my head?  
"Yes."

WHAT LOOKED LIKE A FOREST OF ORANGE AND LEMON TREES NEAR THE barn turned out to hide a vast dirt arena. There were a variety of strange tracks in the red brown dirt scattered with hay ranging from heavy machinery-like tracks to dragon footprints. There was the scent of smoke and ashes surrounding it.

“This will be a larger version of the simulations you went through. Only—”

Holes opened up in the dirt, revealing human figures made of clay in various sizes. “Your opponents out here will have actual physical form. If you are not careful, they will hurt you and may even kill you.”

I walked to the center of the dirt pit. “You know who you’re talking to right?”

He shrugged. “Standard disclaimer. Are you ready?”

I nodded.

The arena disappeared.

The first one took me by surprise and sent me sprawling. I lashed out with my magic like instructed. The clay golem exploded into dust.

And so it went.

They kept coming, one after another. And I took them down until there were no more of them.

I fingered the rose in my hair. Still alive.

The ground began to tremble, the dust began to swirl. It came together in a tornado—no, a spinning column, darkening until it be-

came a black thing, coagulating with blue sparks, into something with far too many eyes and mouths.

The Devourer.

It was here.

I took a step back. No, it was just an illusion. It wasn't real.

A dark tentacle lashed out at me.

I reach for my power.

But it didn't come. The stillness didn't move.

I couldn't move.

Cold slimy tentacles looped around me, dragging me toward a gaping mouth.

Notrealnotrealnotreal —

A tentacle fucked my open mouth, choking me with coldness, insanity.

Just like before. It was going to take me.

Time stopped.

The stillness within me surged forth and obliterated me. I was floating, falling, nothing, weightless, no sound, no air, no anything. I had no form, no body, no sensation.

Then massive jaws of pain clamped into me, breaking the spine of my existence.

I screamed and saw a gray cloudy sky.

My body felt like it had been burned from the inside out. I sat up.

And saw the massive dark blast circle surrounding me.

There was no grass, and all the trees I could see were merely dark black husks.

A horrible awareness stabbed into my memory.

"Grant?" I stumbled up, looking around.

And saw him lying on the grass as if he were asleep.

Dead rose petals fell from my hair.

I stumbled toward Grant, walking, then running, my heart feeling as if it were on a cliff about to fall into a dark abyss.

I got to him, saw his chest rising and falling.

I sank to my knees. He was still alive.

How had he survived?

I reached out to touch him.

And an invisible barrier sparked between me and Grant. It bit into my finger, like static electricity.

Out of nowhere, Hunter landed, pointing a dark barrel of something long and vicious at me. His eyes were cold. He would kill me without a thought and be glad of it.

"What the hell did you do?"

I could tell him to end me. Hunter could produce dragonfire. All of this would be done.

But the words wouldn't come.

"I—"

Grant sat up coughing. "It's all right. I'm all right. I told her to test out her powers."

"You idiot, that's not— " Hunter stopped, looked at me.

And I knew they had been talking about me, had plans for me. Only those plans had stopped Hunter from killing me right there and then.

"Do you know how long it took Sophie to grow those trees? I'm not telling her." He poked the other end of the weapon at Grant. "You're telling her."

Grant glanced at me. I couldn't tell what was behind that gaze.

I took a step back. "I'm sorry.... I'm so sorry."

He stood up. "It takes practice to control your magic. Sometimes it may even take years."

Years.

Was that what they had planned for me?

I looked at the horizon, at the dead trees surrounding us. It was a mistake. It had all been a mistake.

I was a fuckup. Always had been. And I always would be. I had been so stupid to lean into the illusion. I started to walk away, deeper into the trees.

"Wait," said Grant.

"Let her go," said Hunter. "She won't be able to leave the grounds. There's a circular spell in place."

Just like Titania's. Despite all the smiles and food, I was ultimately still a prisoner.

Fuck that all.

---

I WANDERED INTO THE FOREST, the fields, the hills, seeking some way out, but no matter where I turned, or how far I trudged, I couldn't get away from Sophie's house.

All of this was a mistake. The more power I revealed, the longer they would hold me. And all these warm fuzzy feelings I had been starting to feel? Designed to make me play into their plans.

But what were relationships other than ways to get people to do what you wanted them to do?

This was why I was done with life.

And yet, in the beginning, Grant had given me my ring.

It didn't make sense. I walked and walked, until it got dark, until the lights in both houses went dark and the moon began to rise.

It was fuller than it was before.

I walked into the dark house.

Grant's voice emerged seemingly from nowhere. "Sophie sent over some more cuss noodles." I tried to say I wasn't hungry, but my stomach rumbled loudly. This stupid body betrayed me at every turn.

"She didn't need to do that," I said. "I should go apologize to her."

"I can't say she wasn't upset. But she said she understood."

I felt bad about the trees, and didn't need to talk about it anymore, especially with him. "Have you just been sitting here in the dark?"

I heard the clink of a glass. "Dragons don't need a lot of light to see." Fingers snapped and candles on the counter blazed to life. He was eating some noodles at the counter.

My stomach grumbled again. I wasn't supposed to need food, I reminded myself.

Still, I took a stool across from him and sat at the counter. "I've blocked you from a portion of your power. Something like that shouldn't happen again."

A reminder of the mistake I had made. I'd have to figure out some other way of getting my ring back.

"I made a promise, Val," he said, laying out a plate and fork in presence of me. "I will keep it."

"Even if Sophie and Hunter want you to do otherwise?"

He frowned, setting a wineglass next to my place setting. "Is that what you are worried about?"

"They make weapons against an immortal monster. And I can tell that whatever I am intrigues Sophie."

He shook his head, pouring me some wine. "They're not like that." He looked at me. "*I'm* not like that. If you want to help them, that will be your choice." His voice softened. "It will always be your choice."

I believed him, even as I knew I shouldn't.

I picked up my wineglass. "You seem to know all the right words to say with me. Why? Does your magic help you?"

He seemed taken aback. "My magic doesn't work that way."

I took a sip of the wine, mainly because I didn't know what else to do. It tasted pretty good. "It must have been nice growing up with those kinds of abilities. I hope you weren't a bully."

"I was a late bloomer with my magic," he said, picking up his own wineglass and swirling the contents around. "My magic didn't manifest until I was almost eighteen."

I helped myself to some noodles. The aroma...there had to be some magic in this dish, but I just felt reckless. Probably the wine. And then I realized it was impossible for me to get drunk. "Is that unusual?"

"Dragon magic is typically evident the moment a hatchling emerges."

I took a bite of noodles, trying not to shove the forkful in my mouth like a pig. So fucking good. I considered what he was saying. Emerged? Hatchlings? I wondered if dragons hatched or were born.

"My parents were both well-known combat mages. They were considered to be magical prodigies. They died fighting the Devourer so that we could escape to Earth. It was assumed that I would follow in their footsteps."

"Only you had a no-magic problem." But he clearly had it now.

The fork in his hand began to glow and droop. "Yes."

"Grant, the fork."

He turned from me, dropped the fork into the sink where it hissed.

He stood there, his back to me. "Humans have many stories of ordinary people accomplishing extraordinary feats in moments of crisis. The same is true for dragons."

Somehow, I knew what he was talking about. "The night your brother was killed."

"I didn't accomplish anything that night." He laughed, and it was a harsh, painful sound. "I got what I thought I wanted. But in the process, I lost what was important."

"You can't blame yourself," I said, even knowing that my words were useless. The few people who had known what I was had said similar things. And of course, I would agree and say yes, I know.

But knowing what one should feel, and what one did feel were two different things.

I understood that. Because I too, was the product of someone's darkest moment. Only that moment wasn't mine

It was his.

I wondered why he was telling me this.

"You and I," he said, "are not so much unlike. You have to keep trying, Val. Failure is how we learn."

And I realized that he didn't want to hold on to my ring either. It should have been comforting, reassuring.

It wasn't.

I stabbed at my plate. "This is why life sucks."

Grant dropped his plate into the sink. "You're right," he said, before leaving me in the kitchen.

---

EATING HAD GIVEN me a strange sensation of contentment that was totally fake.

He had gone to his room, closed the door.

I had gone to my room. I should make use of my time, train some more, but instead, I lay on the futon, staring at the ceiling.

Maybe he was trying to get rid of me as much as I was him.

But why? Didn't he need me for his plans?

I hated this wondering, this thinking, this weirdness that was now there.

I got up, walked out of my room, and went across the hallway to his door and knocked.

No response.

I knocked again. Still nothing.

I pushed at the door, expecting it to be locked. It wasn't.

The bedroom was empty. Billowing white curtains blew inward from a set of open double patio doors.

The air smelled of jasmine and oranges.

I went toward the open door.

Something flashed in the sky, drawing my attention, and in the blink of an eye there was a silhouette of a dragon in flight.

It was gone before I even realized what it was.

The dragon landed in the shadows, too silent for something that large. I stood there, staring into the forest for what seemed like hours.

Grant strode out of the shadows, naked, save for a white towel around his waist. I wondered if it changed with him, or if it was something, he had taken with him and left in the woods.

He smelled like moonlight and smoke. His voice was more growl than words. "I'm not in the mood to be civilized."

I walked over to him. I came eye to eye with Grant's perfectly proportioned pecs and taut, dark nipples.

"There's something I want to know. Why did you tell me that stuff about yourself?"

"Why did you get so upset when you thought you might have killed me?"

My hands covered my mouth. How did he know?

"Sometimes...you project what you're feeling."

I froze. Just like he did the other night.

There was a dilation in his pupils as he realized what I was thinking.

His nostrils flared as he took in my scent.

I remembered what he said, about me smelling like death. I took another step backward. "Do I smell like a corpse to you?"

He was so still. "True Death is merely a part of the natural order of things. Like sun, wind, water."

I needed to move, but I couldn't.

"You smell like you," he whispered. He opened his eyes, and there were flames within them. "Like the spaces between the stars."

It was as if I could feel the blood pulsing in my wrists, my neck—my core. Did space have a smell? "I don't know what to make of that," I said. "I don't know what to make of you."

"We have that in common," Grant replied, his eyes never leaving mine. I could drown in those eyes, those dark blue pools tinged with

gold.

I took a breath to steady myself, and I was hit by the unmistakable scent of *him*, all male and dragon smoke. Instantly, something inside me quivered in response.

In this moment, I couldn't help myself. I placed my hand on his chest and traced the center line of his pecs, down his abs, touching him as he had touched me. His skin was hot to the touch, hotter than any human, but not uncomfortably so.

My heart was beating so fast.

It wasn't a good idea.

"It's a terrible idea," he said. I realized he was replying to the thoughts I had said out loud. "I am not what you need," he said. "And we have no protection."

"Oh?" I said, my fingers playing with the towel at his waist. The words came tumbling out before I could stop myself. "I can't get pregnant, I can't carry diseases."

His big arms moved, muscles flexing as if he wanted to pull me to him. He stopped himself. "I know what you've been through, how Andrew...used you." There was an alarming flash of flame in his eyes. "You deserve better because I can't be gentle."

My fingers hooked along the edge of the towel at his waist. "I don't want you to be gentle."

If there was ever a chance for hot risk-free sex, it was now, said the unhinged part of me.

I yanked the towel off.

Oh. Wow.

He was thick, he was huge, and he was beautiful.

His big hand closed around my wrist and pulled me to him. His arms locked me against his naked skin as his mouth covered mine. His magic filled me, touching all the cold, empty spaces inside. My body sang and trembled with joy of him, a discovery I had never thought possible. Heat surrounded me, tempting, promising a completion that would be so, so good.

His cock rubbed against my abdomen, far too high, and the bitch in heat within me yowled in frustration.

I broke away from the kiss. "Grant—"

My voice choked at the invisible touch at the small of my back. Involuntarily, my nipples went hard. The invisible sensation went up and down, the most delicious magical back rub I'd ever have.

His mouth was on my ear. "That's it. You've woken a hungry dragon."

I couldn't help but let out a giggle, surprising myself. "That is the cheesiest line I've ever heard, Grant."

He chuckled and I could hear the smile in his voice. "You're encouraging a beast with that laugh. You make me want to tell you all the bad lines."

He had no right to make me feel so warm. I rubbed my face against his freshly shaved cheek. What was I doing? This lightness, this banter, this wasn't what this was supposed to be. "Don't tell me you have more of them."

"Or what?"

"I'll have to think of some awful pun about being a maiden and wanting to be taken."

"Do you?" This was it; this was my chance to tell him. I had to halt this madness, because this wasn't... couldn't be what I wanted—not these feelings, not this closeness, not whatever this was.

"Yes."

He shifted me upward, and I wrapped my legs around him, pressing my core against his length, rubbing him against the thin cloth of my pants.

His voice was serious as he carried me over to the futon. "Then I will fuck you into oblivion and back again."

He was a blur of movement, and then his mouth was on my mine. His heated hands were under my shirt cupping my breasts, but then more hands hooked the waistband, peeled off my yoga pants, exposing my still-damp panties. He made a hungry, masculine dragon sound at seeing my pussy.

"You're so fucking beautiful." Grant slid a hot, thick finger along my clit, ratcheting up my need for him. I pulled him to me kissing him frantically, desperately, my hips arching against his hand. "I like you like this," he said, as his fingers played me skillfully.

I gasped at the sheer pleasure of his heat, his touch. How did it feel so good?

"At your mercy?" I gasped.

He leaned forward, and his hot tongue licked my nipple. "Is that what you are?"

At the same time his fingers thrust inside me, he sucked hard on my nipple. Pain and pleasure collided at my core, wresting wordless

cries from me.

He spread my legs, and his gaze was all blue dragonfire. "Valentina," he said, and my name had never sounded so beautiful. "I'm going to fuck you so hard. I'm going to fill you so deep with my fire you will never ever be cold again." His cock was at my entrance. He snarled and released a savage hiss, his muscles in hard relief.

He was holding himself back.

He said between gritted teeth, "Fuck, Val, you undo me. I have all these plans to taste you, but when I'm touching you like this, all I want to do is dive into you."

I slid myself onto his crown. The hot, slick sensation of him naked inside me was sheer bliss.

He groaned even as he held still.

I grabbed his thick forearms. I sensed the magic churning within his tattoos. I wanted to feel him, wanted him to unleash his power, his cock in me. "Grant, don't hold back." I eased another bit of him into me. "You can't hurt me."

A dragon sound vibrated through him. It only rattled my desire for him more. I needed him, needed his cock inside me like I never needed anything before. How was it possible to want someone so much? "Grant, you drive me fucking crazy."

"That's the plan. You're so slick, so hot, almost there..."

His fingers rubbed against my clit. "Fuck, oh Grant—"

"Yes," he said, his voice more monster than man. How could a dragon snarl make me feel so fucking hot? "You're so wet. You feel so fucking good, so fucking delicious."

He thrust himself inside me.

I thought I had known what it would be like to have him touch me, to have him inside me, fucking me. But whatever had happened between us when he was in the shower was no match for reality.

He was riding me, fucking me, spreading me, pushing me higher and higher. He heated every atom of my being with his fiery essence.

"Fuck yeah," he growled.

Magic exploded around me, hot and pulsing with forever and eternity.

---

LATER, we lay there, his arms tight around me, his fingers drifting across my forearms.

I couldn't look at him, was afraid to look at him.

It wasn't like I hadn't had sex before. I had. But not like this. Nothing had ever prepared me for...this.

I liked how Grant's massive arm kept me pressed close. His tattoos were still, his heartbeat steady and strong against my ear, reminding me of how alive he was, of how alive we both were.

I wanted to be deluded by the fantasies of post-sex bliss.

"Hold me, Grant. Just hold me."

"I'll hold you as long as you want me to."

I closed my eyes, wishing that it were true.

MY SKIN WAS COVERED WITH LIGHT.

Strangely enough, it didn't hurt. It felt...kind of nice. Warm, almost protective.

Sunlight streamed through the window. I lay on his bed with a blanket covering me. Grant must have put it on me before he left.

I kicked the blanket off.

Men said all sorts of things during sex. I had been deceived by silly stupid post-sex sentiments before. Those were mistakes of my first life, ones I was determined not to make again.

Better to take the evidence for what it was.

An exercise for physical relief.

He needed me for his vengeance plans and was doing his best to make sure I'd be on his side, making sure that I'd want to help him, rather than convince him otherwise. And though I knew his game, it didn't mean that it wasn't effective.

I did want to help him.

Not with his dark idea of vengeance. But at least with saving his sister.

The scent of coffee permeated the hall as I ducked into the bathroom.

I stared at myself in the bathroom mirror.

I brought my hands to my neck. If I were killed now, would I still return? Did I genuinely want to go right back to my death?

I didn't, I realized, at least, not yet.

The coffee smell grew stronger, barging into the bathroom like an invisible elephant. I mean, I had smelled coffee before at least a

gazillion times, and I had never been a coffee drinker. But there was something about this coffee that made me want to roll around in the aroma.

When I came into the kitchen, his bare back was to me. There were strange scalelike designs that hadn't been there before, but that seemed to be part and parcel of Grant's ever-moving tattoos. Underneath the currently still tattoos, the muscles of his shoulders and back were so thick, so defined, I almost saw the dragon wings that would sprout from those shoulders.

Though that probably wasn't how it worked.

My eyes slid down the delicious curve of his spine, a deep indentation in the flare of his back, tapering downward into that delicious V shape, which bubbled up with what I knew to be a very fine ass.

Though one couldn't tell underneath those immaculately white sweatpants.

I almost laughed. "Only you would be wearing white sweatpants."

"It's part of what I am," he said idly.

From the casual tone of his voice, it was better to act as if nothing had changed.

I leaned against the doorway and folded my arms. "Dragon? Hunter seems to use colors in his clothes."

"Magic bleaches anything I wear," he said, not turning around. His voice was still distant as if last night hadn't happened.

"Wow. Remind me to make you do my laundry sometime."

His voice was still strangely formal. "People know what I am, so they tend to give me white clothes, anyway."

"Did you sprinkle some magic on the coffee too, Puff?"

"This was in the house. Shen don't believe in skimping on their guests." He turned and looked at me. There was warmth in his eyes. "You should try it. It's quite good."

Everything I had told myself had been a lie.

Because I couldn't just pretend nothing had happened, not like before.

"So is this how it's going to be? Like nothing has changed?"

He set down his mug and came to me.

Slowly, deliberately, he trapped me between his big body and the counter, bracing his arms around me.

I was distracted by his gaze, his scent, his body, all of it turning my mind into a useless mush.

And when he kissed me, he was sweet, hot, and more delicious than anything I had ever tasted in my life.

I wound my fingers around his neck and kissed him back, savoring him. I jumped and wrapped my legs around him. He grabbed my ass and perched me on the counter. I rubbed my core against him, relishing his reaction.

He stopped, put his forehead on mine.

"This is strange," I said, my hands up inside his shirt, feeling his skin, the broad muscles of his chest.

"Yes," he agreed, with one hand on my back. "But I'm curious to see how this plays out."

"This can't end well. I fuck things up."

His hand slipped around mine. "I'm not thinking about the end. I just want to focus on right now. Can we do that?"

Could we?

And I realized, I wanted to.

"I—"

Something exploded outside.

---

GRANT HAD BOLTED OUTSIDE, faster than I could run. I got to the door and saw a huge white dragon soaring into the clouded sky, toward a forked tongue of blue-green lightning.

I watched him fly toward the weird magical lightning storm. I felt utterly and completely helpless.

There was no sound, but the breeze carried the faint hint of arcane smoke.

A glowing light appeared beside me. "Get to my house," said Sophie's voice.

I began to run, but I couldn't keep my eyes off the dot that was Dragon Grant. Something bright shot from him.

The arc of light burst into a bloom of fire. Streaks of green, wiggling light, almost like worms, streamed downward.

And slid off against an invisible shield.

Dragon Grant hovered in the sky.

Thick black clouds blocked my view.

I ran to the main house, and the back door opened automatically and closed behind me.

"What the hell is it?"

Sophie stood there, staring at a screen on the wall, her arms folded.

"Is it the Devourer?"

"No," said Sophie. "It's my uncle."

I paused. "Your uncle?"

"Many-times great-uncle. He tried to strangle me when I was young. Humans once called him the God of Kung Fu, but before that he was one of the Eight."

"Eight what? Kung Fu gods?"

Sophie shook her head. "The Eight were a group of the most powerful shen that used to rule everything." She frowned. "My grandmother was one of the Eight, but I think he's the last one left."

And I thought my family had problems. "Sounds like an all-around great guy," I said.

The building shook as if hit by an earthquake. I ducked, but Sophie remained steady. "Hunter," she said to the screen. "What's going on out there?"

I startled at the harsh sound of a dragon snarl behind me.

"Hidden speakers," said Sophie as she saw me look around. "This is a shen thing. Hunter, you don't—"

The snarl turned into a roar. Sophie waved her arm, and the volume went down. "Stop frightening our guest! And yes, I will do the talking. I'm pregnant, not mute."

There was more angry growling. Even at a low volume, the sound made me jittery.

"Look," said Sophie. "I'm going to come out, and you can stand there and look scary."

The roar grew even louder.

Sophie snapped her fingers, and the sound cut off. She walked away from the window. I took her place, saw the rows and rows of figures standing still. I started counting the figures. Ten, twenty... fifty...way too many to keep counting... Holy shit. It was a lot of fucking people.

How the hell had an army snuck up on their place?

It was her, Hunter, and Grant against an entire army. No matter how magic they were, surviving this wouldn't be easy.

I looked at Sophie, who was rubbing her stomach and looking at the floor-to-ceiling scroll of Chinese characters. I wondered what she was doing.

"Is everything okay?" Immediately, I hated myself for asking such a stupid question. Of course she wasn't okay. A magical army was surrounding her house, intent on killing her or worse.

Something in me hardened in determination. Maybe it was the fact that she was pregnant, or maybe it was some strange magic, but at that moment, I didn't care. It didn't matter if Sophie and Hunter had been making plans about me. Sophie had been kind to me and had tried to help me. They were doing their best to protect the family they had. I'd never had what they had. So I knew what a rare, precious thing it was.

"Tell me what I can do to help."

She kept looking at the scroll. "Are you offering to fight? There's no need. This isn't your battle. Shen always provide safe harbor for everyone, even guests of their enemies, so long as you don't take up arms against them."

"Do you think I came here looking to be safe?"

"What can you do that two dragons cannot?"

I glanced out the window and saw the enemy lines, dotted with monsters and smoke.

It was an army out there.

Oddly enough, they didn't scare me. I had chased death for so long, I had no fear of being hurt.

Hairs rose on the back of my neck.

Servitude and enslavement, on the other hand...

"I hear it's pretty damn hard to kill the Devourer. Also, I owe you for those trees. Really sorry about that."

I saw the moment Sophie remembered what I was. I saw a calculation take place. She had to protect her child, and here I was, offering myself. "It's fine. But if you're determined to help, I'm going to go out there and talk to my uncle. You can watch my back."

I had no idea how I would do that, but I would try. She opened one of the living-room ottomans and pulled out a big piece of wood that was far too long to have fit in the small rectangular space. "Here," she said.

"You want me to watch your back with a really big stick," I said dubiously.

"It's an enchanted staff. So long as you're holding it, you'll be a ninja."

I dropped the staff to the ground. Sophie looked up at me in surprise.

"Is it going to control my movements? I've been piloted before," I said, thinking of the way the Devourer had taken over my body before I had died. "I don't enjoy the experience."

"Right," said Sophie, understanding in her eyes. I wondered how much Grant had told her about me. "It's not like that. It will only do what it's supposed to do if you let it. Just pick it up and say hello to it."

I stared at the staff on the ground, at the intricate vine-like carvings along its surface.

"Do you have anything else?"

"Are you an expert at hand-to-hand combat? A sniper? Military service perhaps?"

"No."

"Then no."

"You don't have to do this if you don't want to."

Something thundered outside.

Sophie placed her hand on her pregnant belly and looked away.

Fuck it.

I picked up the staff. "Hi. I'm Val. I don't like letting anything take over my body, but if you'll help me fight the bad guys, I'll let you, so long as you give me back control later."

The staff glowed in my hands.

"I think it agrees," said Sophie.

I felt like dropping the thing to the ground again. "Is it...alive?"

"Think of it like another variant of artificial intelligence."

I watched her pull a shimmering gold cloth out of the ottoman.

"Are you sure going out there is a good idea?"

Sophie shook out the golden fabric, which smelled of lemons.

"This is standard for a shen fight. You can't fight without first insulting each other face-to-face in a parley, and then you fight."

It sounded like something out of a movie. "You trust him not to try to hurt you in this?"

"He's such a stick in the mud about proper shen formalities that there's no way he would dare. And in any case"—she held the fabric up to her body—"I'll be just fine."

There was a glow from the fabric. She let go of the ends, and the fabric hung there for a moment before molding itself to her body. Then there was a flare of light so bright I had to look away.

When I looked back, the fabric had wrapped around Sophie and transformed into gleaming gold armor.

My mouth dropped open.

"It was a baby-shower gift," she said almost defensively. "I didn't expect it to be so shiny. Ugh, I feel like an armored cow."

I shook my head. She looked like a fertility war goddess, complete with matching gold boots. "Trust me, you don't look like an armored cow."

Sophie stared ahead, already far away.

Along the distant tree line, I saw what seemed like a troll with glowing eyes staring back at us. I looked back at Sophie. "Are you sure you need to do this?"

Sophie shrugged her shoulders back. "I don't have a choice."

She opened the door and stepped outside.

In the distance, down below across the grassy field, a dark-skinned, older Asian man who kind of looked like he might be Bruce Lee's hottie grandfather sat on top of an animal that looked like a cross between a dragon and a deer. It had golden antlers and golden scales with a snow-white horselike tail. It stamped the ground and snorted white smoke into the air.

"You can't actually expect to fight," I said.

"No. I don't need to. I have a dragon."

As if on cue, I heard a dragon roar directly above us. I immediately squelched my primal urge to run and hide from the monster, reminding myself that it was just Grant or Hunter.

I followed behind Sophie, trying to look fierce.

A huge black dragon swooped down and landed behind her, its huge claws digging dark gouges in the grassy turf. He lowered his massive head to her, and she rubbed his chin.

"Uncle." Sophie's magically enhanced voice carried across the field. "What brings you here to my part of the world?"

The old man spat. "I didn't believe that any honorable shen would defile themselves with serpents, but then again you never

were a proper shen, were you?"

"Oh, were you talking? Because I wasn't hearing anything except someone passing gas."

"You are worse than your father."

"I take that as a compliment."

"Only when I have your child."

I clenched my fist, felt a swell of familiar coldness wrapping around me like a comforting blanket.

My mother had been taken away from me. Look where I had ended up.

I would never let anyone take Sophie's child from her.

Sophie's face changed to that of a cold, implacable goddess. She withdrew the sword from her sheath, and it shimmered with a red flame. "You are not worthy of my time."

The old man's face was one of horror. "You disrespectful snake whore. That's alien magic. You corrupted the purity of our line."

"No. I'm saving it."

She thrust the sword into the ground. A magical wave pulsed forth.

At the same time, the old man did the same with his staff.

The dragon roared behind us, an echoing, terrifying sound that seemed to resonate off Sophie's armor. I felt a pulse of power in response from the staff I held.

A nearly translucent red bubble stretched upward, surrounding us, protecting us. It was similar in...magical feeling to the protective ward Titania's magic had produced. Against it, the enemy lobbed fire, bullets, and dark, liquid-like things that splattered against it and hissed with smoke.

And then I saw him. Grant was white fire in dragon form, zip-ping, dodging, hovering in midair, disappearing in thick black clouds roiling with arcane lightning. He tore and burned and slashed through the dark-winged things with too many teeth. I heard his defiant roar, even from so far away.

Sophie turned her head to the side. "Mack and Jack," she hollered. "It's time to come out and play."

The ground began to shake.

I looked up and saw not one massive stone Chinese lion, but two. They smashed into the enemy troops, tossing bodies into the air as if they were dolls.

And the freakiest thing of all?

There was no screaming, no cries, no sounds at all from any of the enemy.

THINGS THAT HAD ONCE BEEN HUMAN PRESSED AGAINST THE BUBBLE ward. Something had happened to them, their empty-socketed eyes glowing with an odd light.

Spidery fingers far too long to be human held spinning, fiery things, like magic chainsaws that shrieked against the ward.

Warm magic burst from the bo, flowing through me, alive, like green vines. I trembled with panic and opened my hands to drop the staff to the ground, but it was too late. Invisible vines and tendrils of magic speared into me.

And suddenly, I was *more*.

I sensed my own magic surge forth, trying to meet the magic of the staff, but there was that strange barrier inside me.

Still, I knew I could take them all and then some. "Get back to the house, Sophie. Let me deal with any stragglers that break through the ward."

I heard Sophie yell her thanks, but I didn't stay to see if she listened; battle was calling, and the staff had to go.

The hordes outside pressed against the ward wall.

I paced the semi visible wall, which pulsed like living glass, watching humanoid zombie things snap their sharp teeth.

Something about them reminded me of the Devourer's minions, but Sophie had said that there was no chance of that.

I heard something cracking, like stone breaking. Too far from me, I saw a spark of light pushing through the barrier. I ran toward it.

A stick-thin zombie thing fell through the opening, falling to the ground, and then another.

They picked themselves up. Slowly, like seeds unfurling into growing plants, the zombies grew bigger and bigger with each step.

Crap.

I followed the weapon's instinct and paused to watch and assess.

Whereas the things outside the ward were skinny as scarecrows, the thing that lumbered toward me was a massive, hulking hairless gray troll, as tall as the giant Foo dogs and as wide as an SUV. Its eye sockets glowed red, and it howled with serrated yellow teeth. Smoke trailed in its footsteps as it left dark footprints in the grass.

Wait—they weren't footprints. They were killing the grass.

Were they somehow sucking magic from the land?

The bo shimmered, transforming itself into a sword. I heard a gong, and then to my surprise, a fire snapped forth from the edge of the sword.

A flaming fucking sword? I yelled, "Now that's what I'm talking about!"

The troll roared and ran at me.

I angled the sword and let the magic take me.

---

THE MAGIC SWORD made me faster and stronger than I'd ever been. I sliced through the trolls, cutting them down until the ground grew slick with their black blood.

And still they poured through the crack in the ward.

The sword was controlling me, but this body was getting tired. I reached for my magic, for that cold well of stillness I knew was inside me.

Blocked.

Sweat poured down my face, and my hands grew slippery. Beyond me, I heard another cracking in the shield.

I saw the giant stone lions, still loose and rampaging.

Massive claws and heads with far too many eyes and teeth kept falling from the sky, victims of the two dragons soaring far above us.

How were there so many of them?

Something huge and massive shrugged itself through the crack. It was as tall as a two-story house, with a roughly humanoid face, but its head was pockmarked with eyes all over its scalp. Its body

was strangely shaped, and it walked on two thick legs while six hairy bristling arms wielded maces the size of me.

A spider troll?

I wiped wet gunk from my eyes. "You have got to be kidding me."

It staggered toward Sophie's house.

I sliced at a monster in my way, the blade cutting through it like butter. "Hey, asshole! I'm over here!"

I sprinted at the thing, my lungs, my legs, everything feeling like it was on fire, and not in the good way like fucking a dragon, but in the oh-my-god-I'm-gonna-die way.

And then pain punched my back so hard I fell, sprawling to the ground.

My vision went red, and for the first time in a long time, I felt true, actual pain. Nothing I had done to myself at Titania's had ever been as excruciating as this.

The magic sword I still held forced me upward, forced my arms to find the blade stuck in my lower back.

I ripped the dagger out with a scream and threw it, slamming into a troll's eye.

Another troll came at me and hit my spine so hard my teeth rattled.

I fell, slipping in the mud. My vision dimmed and my heart thundered, the blood in my veins pumping frantically. My heart had beat fast before, but not like this. Primal fear seethed through me, twisting needles of panic into my flesh that made my hands tremble.

Fuck. I couldn't die now! I had to survive, had to finish this and see this through. What would happen to Sophie and her child if I died? Even if I was resurrected, would I end up back in Titania's clutches?

Fuck. It would be just my luck to die today.

Something smacked into the back of my head. White lights exploded into my vision. I fell forward into the puddle of mud, and blood and viscous guts filled my mouth and nose. I rolled over.

Despite blurred vision, my sword arm sprung up, blocking the immense blow of a mace, the force of the blow rattling my bones.

It went dark.

Flame, white-hot, burst over me, flashing nearly all the colors of the rainbow.

I blinked, trying to get my vision back, scrambling to my feet.

And then I saw it.

A massive white dragon the size of an airplane.

I had never seen Grant up close in full-on dragon form before. Each scale shimmered and sparkled, pearlescent and tinged with gold. Blue electricity crackled around him.

Grant swung his head toward me. His eyes were huge, and full of magic and intelligence.

And he winked at me.

Grant. It was Grant.

Not that I hadn't known that, but something in my mind couldn't reconcile this creature from stories with the man I had just been kissing earlier this morning.

Four bolts of force shot down from the sky, sizzling the ground with magic.

A massive glowing net pinned the dragon to the ground.

"No!"

There was another blinding brilliance of light concentrated on Grant's prone form.

I screamed, staggering to my feet, even as I knew that all my efforts were helpless.

That couldn't be the end of Grant.

The sword took over. I couldn't see, but I knew it was working me, using me to cut down the monsters in my way. Fear seized me because part of me already knew it would be too late. I was always too late.

A blinding light blinked into existence in front of me.

The spider troll roared and tried to smash the light with his enormous mace.

Hands shot from the light, dimming as it caught the mace in his hands.

The mace exploded.

We went flying backward.

I scrambled to my feet, only to see the light—Grant with a glowing sword, slicing the troll's arms off limb by limb, until all that was left was the head.

The head went flying.

Grant turned and waved at the crack in the ward.

The ward sealed itself shut.

I blinked.

Grant was suddenly there, less than an arm's length away.

At first glance, I had thought the armor to be that of a fairy-tale knight. But up close, I realized it was more like some fancy space armor, like in some online game. Swirling almost-invisible designs crawled over the pearl-like plates of his white armor, tinged with gold.

Something in my chest went tight, and my skin flushed hot.

He was the sexiest man I'd ever seen.

And he was staring at me as if I were something he couldn't figure out.

It had to be because I was covered in mud, gore, and sweat, or because he had seen me fighting, wielding the sword like I knew how to use it.

That had to be it.

Because if it wasn't...

I shut down that thought. No. That was the path toward certain heartbreak.

Grant smiled, and fuck if I didn't instantly feel like I was a hundred times lighter.

I shook my head, trying to stop being dazzled by his fancy armor. "What is it with you and the color white?"

He took a step forward. "I told you. It's what I am. I'm a combat mage, specialty in the forward position. Designed to attract attention on the battlefield because I'm bright and shiny."

I wanted to fall into the blue pools of his eyes. "You are definitely shiny."

His eyes darkened. "What are you doing out here, Val?"

I almost felt relieved because now I could pick a fight with him. And that was so much easier than...whatever had been on the verge of happening. "Picking oranges, drinking wine, having a picnic. What else would I be doing?"

He ignored my sarcasm. "I didn't know you could fight like that." He glanced at the sword in my hand. "A shen sword. Right."

"It's amazing, the things that Sophie lets me borrow."

It startled me when he reached for my free hand.

And shocked me even more when he kissed it.

I yanked my hand back. "That's disgusting! It's been splashed with zombie troll guts!"

He burst into laughter at the look on my face. "Okay, that was worth it."

He turned his head and coughed, and fire shot out of his mouth. "There, happy? That'll take care of any germs."

"Always got an answer for everything."

"No, not everything."

With a sudden unstoppable movement, he kissed me. The world the battle, the monsters, all of it fell away, leaving just him, me and... impossibly, love.

It was hopeless. Completely hopeless. I was totally in love with him.

Grant broke away from the kiss and pressed something into my palm. I knew what it was the moment it touched my flesh.

My ring?

I stared at Grant in surprise.

"I want you to survive this. You'll need all your strength."

I put the ring on. For the first time, I felt completely in control of myself. I looked at him, with tears of happiness welling into my eyes.

The future seemed bright and warm.

I had no words. "I—"

The hissing sound grew overwhelming. I glanced up, and above the ward, the sky was dark, rippling with black fog.

And I realized it wasn't fog, but lots of tiny flying things with too many teeth.

Grant looked up and then back at me. "You're not going to try to die on me now, are you?"

I had been wrong about falling in love with him. I was already in love. "Not now. Too many things to live for."

He smiled. My god, I would fight a million spider trolls to see that smile.

"Good." Grant leapt up into the sky. With a flash, his massive white dragon form exploded into being.

I turned back to the wards.

---

WHATEVER GRANT HAD DONE to the ward held back the monsters for a short time.

There were too many of them, too many glowing, cutting weapons that screamed and shrieked with dark magic against the ward. It was only a matter of time before they broke through again.

I tightened my grip on the sword and brought it upward. I was ready.

I heard the cracking of another gap in the ward, this time right in front of me. But instead of those sticklike zombies breaking through to become trolls, black smoke poured in.

A chill gripped my spine. This was no ordinary smoke.

The smoke dropped to the ground and solidified into a living black thing, viscous.

And then eyes, far too many eyes, opened and looked at me.

The Devourer was here.

SOPHIE'S MAGICALLY FUELED VOICE OF OUTRAGE BOOMED ACROSS THE field. "*Traitor!*"

The old man's voice came back in equal volume. "The enemy of my enemy is my friend. The dragons are an infestation on this world, one that needs to be cleansed before we can begin again."

My own magic swirled around me, and the barrier within me fell away.

I headed toward the dark cloud, quickly oozing more and more of itself into this side of the magical ward. "I killed the Devourer last time. I'll do it again," I said, with more confidence than I felt.

I would fight the Devourer today, and even if it took me again, well, I had been doing something I believed in of my own free will.

Even if I never got to figure out what was between Grant and me, it would be a good death.

A firefly-sized glowing light flew next to me, speaking in Sophie's voice. "No, you can't—"

My magic curled around me. "I've killed it before. And I'll do it again."

The cloud drew itself up, searching.

I ran to meet it, whirling my magic around me.

And the blob split and streamed over me, around me, surrounding me, in a strange bubble of magic.

My magic pulsed into my sword, but the bubble was invisible, flexible, and moved with my movements.

It was heading toward the house.

"*Come on,*" I screamed, trying to convey my anger at the sword.

It flared blue. I knew what I had to do.

I threw the sword. It slashed through the bubble, popping it soundlessly.

I looked up at the house.

Sophie stumbled out, black liquid eating away at her golden glowing armor, and then she stopped moving.

The ward shattered, and the lines of enemy fighters flew at me.

I bolted, running for her like I had never run for anyone else. That well of stillness? It was *alive*, fueling my steps faster than I had any right to move.

Because True Death was near.

I grabbed Sophie as she slumped to the ground.

The Devourer's ooze closed over me, so cold it burned, etching into my flesh, my skin.

And somehow, part of me realized that it was eating away at my flesh, at my body at the atomic level.

*You cannot kill the Devourer in the same way twice.*

And clearly, it had figured out how to kill me. I wasn't surprised. Oddly enough, it didn't hurt, but was more like a freezing cold, slowly numbing everything.

Sophie gasped. It was on her too.

My fingers, my arms, all of me was slowly dissolving. I held on to her as long as I could, feeling the spark of life that was hers, and... the baby. It was dying, it was dwindling, no, no, no, this wasn't how it was supposed to be—she—they couldn't die, not when they had everything to live for.

And the zombies kept coming.

I heard the distant roar of dragons.

Something inside me reached for the sparks, drawn to the heat, even as I realized, what I was doing.

I was Death. And I was going to kill them.

I tried to stop myself.

But then the light went out.

---

THE ONE THING that humans had gotten right about death was its connection to darkness.

Here I was, back in the cold, permanent darkness, back to the place I had been trying so hard to get to.

I remembered holding Sophie, reaching for that spark of life.

Something familiar and monstrous sparked in the darkness.

Rage filled me.

In this place with no physics, no logic, I reached for that bit of the Devourer, took it into my hands and crushed it. Under my pressure, the thing burned, separated, until it was nothing more than atoms, dissolving back into the dark.

And when it was done, I realized that I had no hands, no form, no body.

Or was it just the fact that it was so dark I couldn't feel anything?

An invisible wind sliced through me.

A baby cried.

A woman wept.

I reached for them both, knowing my touch wouldn't kill them since we were already dead. I had to try to comfort them, knowing I would never be able to find them, knowing I would never be able to reach them, feeling their sorrow, their desperation.

And yet I had to try. I had to help them find their way.

They were so close and yet hidden from me.

Fury ripped me, fueling my efforts. Goddamn it, I would help them, and I would spend eternity if I had to, but I would find them.

Neither they nor I had any physical body, but somehow, they were there, tiny little sparks of soul.

In comparison, I realized I was huge—no, not just huge but bigger than immense, so massive I couldn't fully comprehend it.

I surrounded a spark, reached for the other one, and brought them together.

I sensed the baby reach for its mother, the warmth of their love, and it spread throughout the rest of me.

They didn't want to be here. They weren't supposed to be here.

And then holding them, I saw them. Two lines of fire searching, reaching.

*Save them.* A woman's voice filled my head. She was speaking... Was it Japanese? Somehow, I was able to understand her.

I looked around and saw nothing but darkness.

"Yes, that's what I'm trying to do. But I'm not sure how."

There was no sound. But I had the oddest sense there was someone sighing in exasperation.

*Grab the light.*

I did.

One was meant for the mother and child, that I anchored to them.

And they didn't move.

*They can't find their way back without you.*

"How?"

*Oh, for fuck's sake, just click your heels three times.*

"I never actually saw that movie."

*Hold the place and moment in time in your mind. And imagine yourself there.*

The lines of fire crackled around me, burning with life. The lines went taut.

And we went flying.

---

I AWOKE TO PAIN.

Ice-cold water doused me. I gasped for breath at the freezing cold. I shook the water out of my eyes.

Hunter picked me up by the throat. I gagged.

"I'll ask you once. What did you do to my wife and child?"

I coughed, struggled, panicked.

Hunter's voice was one of rage and sheer anger. *"What did you do?"*

Had I failed?

"Where is she?" I gasped.

Hunter dropped me to the ground. I fell, and mud sloshed into my open, gasping mouth.

Fire sparked in his hand.

Hunter had thought I had been trying to kill them. His voice was barely human. "They're dead!"

Agony ripped through me. I had killed them. Despite all my efforts, I had killed them. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I was trying to help. I was trying to save them!"

There was a silence that seemed to drag on forever, before Grant's voice judged me. "She's...not lying."

Hunter let out a roar of rage, changing instantly into a massive black dragon, and flew at Grant.

The air twisted sideways, and Grant was replaced by a massive white dragon, bellowing as the black dragon went for his throat. An inferno surrounded both of them, so much fire that air was sucked from my lungs. I struggled for breath as the oxygen vanished.

Something fragile shattered within me, something I knew better than to try to build, something I had tried to hide from myself.

I was a demon, a thing of death, and that's apparently what I was destined to be. I should have known better. Better to destroy this cancer, this illusion of love, then let it grow into something more devastating.

The coldness inside me cracked open, responding to the heat of its own accord like blood oozing from a cut. It was beyond my control, the power swelling within me, a wave I never had a chance of riding. I heard it coming, heard it rushing toward me, the roaring of power in my ears, undeniable, unbreakable, and utterly unstoppable.

My vision blurred.

Galaxies spun before me, each moment a millennium. Life, death, matter, energy, past, present, future, all part of one magnificent cycle.

And for the briefest moment, I understood everything.

Nothing was ever destroyed; it was only transformed.

Pain slammed into me. I was back in my body. Time slowed. Power exploded from me in an invisible blast. I tried to stop it, but it was like trying to stop rain by holding your hands up to the sky.

I saw it, invisible lines slicing through the torsos of the two dragons, ricocheting against the buildings and into the wards behind us, shattering them with a noiseless fury that hammered me in the deep place where my power pulled.

I thought I had died; I thought I had experienced all the pain there ever was to experience.

But not until I stood up and saw Hunter and Grant, in human form, sprawled out on the ground.

I had killed them too.

I screamed, rushing to Grant.

He was alive. Hunter was alive. They both were.

Relief flooded me.

I dropped to my knees. *Thank you*, I whispered, pressing my closed fists to my head, to whatever, whoever was listening.

The world vibrated around me.

What had just happened?

In the grass, I saw my ring gleaming and glowing.

I picked it up and realized the tiny circlet wasn't truly metal, but some other strange substance. I glanced at Grant, saw what looked like metallic paint on his fingertips. I rubbed my long-sought ring in between my fingertips, still warm from whatever Grant had done to it.

My freedom was finally in my own hands.

But this wasn't what I wanted. Not like this.

I put the ring on and looked toward the ward.

It was gone.

And the army that had sieged the farm? Piles of bodies.

Grant began to stir.

*I don't need a magic fairy ring to find you.*

I glanced at the ring on my hand. I always fucked things up. Sophie and her child were dead.

I had failed Grant, just like I had failed everyone who had ever been in my life. All I did was fuck things up.

I turned and ran.

Right smack into the lizard-deer snarling with teeth longer than steak knives and a forest of sharp antlers.

The deer-thing hissed at me, pawed, and stamped at the ground.

And then Sophie's uncle appeared.

I had thought I knew what being trapped was like. Despite Grant's control of me, what had granted a measure of my freedom was his unfamiliarity with shen magic.

But this was a shen with the full knowledge of their magic.

Sophie's uncle snapped his fingers.

A net of invisible magic surrounded me. I struggled. It strangled me.

He smiled, sending a chill into my bones. "I was looking for you. Perfect timing."

I GRIPPED THE ARMRESTS OF MY CHAIR, RUBBING MY WRISTS. THICK ROPES tied my arms and legs to the wooden chair. We were in the middle of what appeared to be a thicket—no, a fence of bamboo, with the only opening above to a gray, clouded sky.

He sat across from me at a small square table with a lazy Susan, pouring something hot into two white porcelain cups.

“Won’t you please join me for tea?”

I was about to make a remark about being bound, only to find my wrists free. My legs, however, were still stuck.

He cocked his head and gave me a smile as if to say, *Really?*

“I don’t have a choice in this, so stop pretending.”

He chuckled, so clearly amused and full of himself. “No. But I promise you this jasmine is quite good. But then I suppose your kind aren’t tea drinkers?”

There was no escape from stupid racist attitudes, even from shen. “My kind? You’re saying that Mexican people don’t drink tea?”

“No,” he said, slowly. “Death demons. You don’t eat, you don’t sleep.”

Oh. Right.

He pulled out a silver cigarette holder, snapped it open, and offered me one. I shook my head.

The chair moved closer of its own accord.

He put a cigarette in his mouth and touched his fingertip to the tip. The cigarette lit up. “You have no need of nourishment. You are also immune to poison, so that shouldn’t concern you. But you can still taste. Drink it for the taste.”

I took a sip. It was floral and grassy. I started to choke.

He sighed. "Nobody has any appreciation for the finer things anymore."

I set the teacup on the table. "Get to the point."

"You are extraordinary and unique. There has been no one like you ever in the existence of this world. Well, similar, but not the same."

"What do you want from me?"

He smiled. "I would just like you to open a door for me."

I thought of an alien desert, with three moons and a freestanding doorway to a place of no return.

I spat into the teacup, trying to get that cloying floral taste out of my mouth. He wanted me to kill someone. "Why should I help you? You tried to kill your own niece."

"Niece is a very loose term. There are more generations between that spawn and I than exist between primates and you. In any case, it is in your best interest to be willing to help me. I can force you to assist me, but the aftereffects, like madness made physical, can be quite gruesome."

Madness made physical? What the hell did that mean?

The man merely closed his eyes and sipped his tea, leaving me to ponder his statement.

I shouldn't have been surprised. Same old story men told women the world over: Shut up and let me do what I want with you.

"But if you help me, I will grant you your freedom."

Willing or unwilling, the man would have his way.

I almost laughed. It was a strange twisted echo of what Grant had said to me. Patterns, turns, and despite all that had come to pass, somehow, I was back to where I had been even before I had died.

Trapped by yet another immortal with powers beyond most human comprehension.

I should have known—no, wait, I *did* know it would be like this. This was why death had always been my goal, why death was the best place for me, why my resurrection was a total fuck-you to the world because it was clearly better off without me.

But I had been lured, misled, and almost even believed...

Tears filled my eyes, and I swallowed the bitter salt in my mouth.

None of this went unnoticed by the old man.

"In fact," he said, his voice taking on an unexpectedly gentle edge, "I believe that helping me is part of your destiny."

He slid a black wrought-iron key, finely carved with geometric designs, to me.

They moved.

Just like the designs I had seen on Sophie's red barn.

It sang to me, the same strange music I had heard coming from the house I had shared with Andrew.

Grant hadn't recognized it, didn't sense it.

Because it was a shen key, made with shen magic, which was why Grant hadn't sensed it.

I picked up the key, and it began to pulse with a warm glow.

"See. It knows that you are meant for this."

I stared at the key in my hand. Nothing had ever felt so straightforwardly logical and right. He was so right; how could I ever doubt his wisdom?

And that complete and utter surety was what told me that this man was a con of the highest magnitude, wrapping some spell of trust around me like a cozy warm blanket. I recognized it, I knew it, because I remembered the feeling when Andrew had asked me to stay and "help out his weird friend," never knowing it would be the start of my enslavement.

Sophie's uncle smiled. "I have grown tired of this life. I would like to be free of it all. But as you know, it is not easy for ones such as us to remove ourselves from existence."

I knew he was lying. But I wondered what he meant by "ones such as us"?

Was he saying I was a shen? But hadn't he just called me a death demon?

Or maybe shen were demons.

Fuck it all, none of it mattered anyway.

I set the key down. It clinked on the tabletop as if it were made of glass though the appearance was that of engraved wood.

"This...doorway. You want it open so that you can die?"

He smiled a sharp smile. "Death is but another beginning."

I shuddered at the thought.

Still...I had only managed to reach that in-between place in the company of others.

I wondered if I could do it at this moment.

And in that dark well of strangeness within me, an invisible fist choked me.

His handsome face changed into that of a terrible angry god. He had known the shape of my magic, sensed me reaching for it. He drew an invisible line in the air, and I was cut off from my magic as if it had never been there. "Do remember who you are talking to, child. I've created things like you well before your ancestors even attained the ability to speak."

This was what life was: pain, hurt, enslavement.

Grant's face flashed in my mind.

I had been so pathetic to think it could ever be anything else.

What other choice did I have?

Life fucking sucked.

It was a truth I had always known though I had almost deceived myself into believing otherwise.

Fuck it. If I could get back to that place between life and death, I'd make my own goddamn door.

I picked up the key.

"Take me to this door."

---

FOG as thick as cotton shrouded me. The air was thin and cold, but moist with the scent of greenery and life.

"Where are we?"

"On a mountain," said Sophie's uncle, who materialized beside me, fog clinging oddly to his form like wisps of cotton.

It occurred to me that I didn't even know his name. Not that it mattered.

I jumped at the sound of a scream which sounded like a child's wail that was cut off. Something screeched in triumph, then I heard a second screech of something birdlike.

"What the hell was that?"

"An eagle killing a rabbit," he replied.

"Rabbits scream like that?"

"Maybe it was a sheep." He shrugged. "It is the nature of life. There are those who are prey and then those who prey."

The fog parted briefly, and I realized that we were standing on the edge of a cliff.

Dark mountains draped with snow stretched out in the distance below as far as I could see.

"Where the hell are we?"

"The Himalayas."

How the— Right, it wasn't even worth it to ask. The answer was magic.

"Where's the doorway?" I asked, staring at the mountains below.

"It's here, somewhere," he said.

It was yet, another astoundingly beautiful place, like a screen-saver on a computer. And yet it didn't matter. "You don't even know where it is?"

"It presents itself to the proper wielder of the key."

The fog closed in again.

There was an echoing thunderous sound in the distance. I wouldn't have known it before, but now I knew the monstrous roar that would never be mistaken for anything else.

Dragons.

They were here to avenge Sophie. And take out their fury on me.

I closed my eyes, wondering what death by dragonfire would be like. Would it be quick? Or would they make it last?

I deserved whatever I got.

Sophie's uncle frowned. "I'll be back."

He stepped away from me into the fog.

"Hey, wait—"

But he was already gone.

I stood there waiting for I didn't even know how long. The wind began to howl, blowing with ice and snow. I glanced at my hands and realized that there was ice encasing them. I wiggled my fingers, breaking the ice.

This wasn't normal, I realized. But nothing about this body had been normal. If I were human, I would be freezing to death.

I wasn't human, was I?

Unexpectedly, a swirl of warmth curled around me, as if the breeze from a summer's day had found its way up here to wrap around me.

My chest went tight as I turned, seeking the source of the warmth.

I saw the glimmer of light before I saw him.

The fog parted.

Grant in his white sparkling armor. He had come in his armor, helmet and all, because he thought I was an enemy.

The knowledge wrapped around me, like vines with barbed thorns, piercing me with the twin poisons of loss and hopelessness.

I had no weapons, and Sophie's uncle had blocked my access to my magic. I should run; I knew I should hide. If I jumped off the cliff, could I die before he saved me?

Just as before, I was anchored to the ground as if I were glued there, prey in the presence of a predator.

I reached for my magic inside me, but the wall that Sophie's uncle had placed to block my magic was as strong as it had ever been. Still, I willed my magic to smash against the wall.

A crack, but not enough.

I braced myself, preparing myself for the pain that would get worse. All I had were my words. I had to make him angry enough to kill me.

It would be all over soon.

My heart stopped. I had to say something, anything.

He took off his helmet. "Sophie and her child are alive."

They were the last words I expected to hear him say. I must have just gone still because he repeated his words again, taking a step toward me. "Not just alive, but well. You brought them back."

Relief swept through me. I *had* done the right thing. It should have been enough.

And yet, it wasn't like I could forget the pain of the last few hours, or the lesson that this had taught me.

I looked at the dark key in my hand, warm with magic.

I heard him take another step toward me. "I believed you," he said.

"I don't know if it matters." I walked over to the edge of the cliff, the key as warm as the wind was cold. In the distance, I heard a dragon roar and above me saw parts of the clouds spark with a red light from their flame. Almost certainly Hunter. "I know the truth about myself. I need to go back to my death."

"Of course it matters! You saved them." He looked at his hands, the same gesture he had made when he knelt at his brother's body. "I know what failure is. And I've been trying to fix it."

"With vengeance," I said. I squeezed the key in my hand. It blazed with heat, sharpening itself into a stiletto.

"Show me another way," he challenged me.

And suddenly I knew how I was to open the door. I almost laughed. Of course it would be that way.

"Val," said Grant, his tone wary. "Don't do this."

I turned to look at him. The sight of his handsome face only magnified my pain a thousand times.

He stepped toward me carefully. "Dying is not going to solve anything, Val."

Fury gripped me. The words exploded from my throat. "I'm broken, Grant! Don't you get it? I can't be fixed. Death will solve everything! No more mistakes, no more hurt, no more pain."

"You can't—"

"Or you'll what? Kill me?" I laughed. Life was pain. I had known that from the beginning.

Time to do what I did best.

Fuck everything up.

"I've been asking you to kill me since the day we met, which wasn't that long ago. Days, actually. You think your cock is so magic to make me rethink my goals after having sex one time?"

The wind howled. Grant's face went pale. "Don't do this."

My words were acid, disintegrating whatever had been between us and my heart all at once.

"I can do anything I want. We're not mates, we're not partners; we're nothing but passing strangers."

I gave in to the rage, the anger, the need for destruction. The knife sparked with power, power to stop the pain of my unfortunate existence.

I would end it all.

I plunged it into my heart.

But Grant *moved*.

His arms were around me, the tip of the knife barely touching the fabric of my chest. I struggled with him as he kept me from ending my life. It should have been no contest with his dragon strength, but this, this was my true destiny, and the knife, so close to completing its journey, was giving me the strength to fight him.

His voice was hushed and thick with emotion. "Val. Please."

Tears fell unbidden from my eyes.

I struggled, but so did he.

We were at an impasse.

"Oh, isn't this adorable," said Sophie's uncle, who appeared in front of us, Titania's spear in his hands. Where had he gotten it from? What had happened to Hunter? "But two deaths will do just as well."

He raised his hands.

Grant flung me from him.

I stumbled and scrambled to my feet, even as I realized that it would be too late.

Titania's spear pinned Grant to the ground. It glowed with dark magic.

I screamed and looked at Sophie's uncle, cutting a line of light through existence. "A single dragon's death will work too."

I rushed at Sophie's uncle, but he stepped through and disappeared through the cut, which vanished after him.

I ran over to Grant. His skin was pale, and he couldn't speak.

"No, no, no, no." I hugged him to me. Already, he was several degrees cooler than he should be. "Grant!"

I tested the magic inside me. Still locked away.

Grant's breathing slowed.

"You can't die on me! I'm supposed to die! Not you, you... stupid!"

Desperation filled me. I grabbed on to his armor—and realized I still had the stiletto-turned-key.

Grant closed his eyes.

I was out of options. Except for this one.

I closed my eyes and plunged the stiletto into my heart.

I KNEW THIS DOOR.

It was the door to my mother's house. The one in Mexico that I had never been to, had only seen on social media, when she would post photos of the pink and yellow flowers she tended.

Only this door had no greenery, no flowers around it.

I took a wary step toward it, gravel crunching under my step.

The door unlatched and creaked open slightly.

*"Valentina."*

I turned.

Grant stood there in his white suit. The outlines of him shimmered with fire.

Only it wasn't pristine. It wasn't perfect like it had been in life. It was dirty, tattered, and stained with blood.

Goddamn it, Grant wasn't supposed to be here!

I walked over to him, intending to kick him in the shin or punch him or something, and found myself enfolded in his arms.

I shuddered. Hot tears fell from my face. "You're a fucking idiot! Why the hell did you do that? What about your vengeance, your sister? How are you going to save Aurora when you're dead?"

He stroked my hair. "Sometimes the role you think you are meant to have is the wrong one."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"Rory is doing what she was meant to do. I wasn't meant to save her." His arms tightened around me, his voice a whisper. "I was meant to save you."

The memory of pain surged within me, hot and visceral as it shouldn't be in this place. I broke away from him. "I'm not yours to save."

To my surprise, Grant knelt. He took my hand. There was a thin band of light on my wrist. Grant wore a matching one as if we were in some bizarre amusement park. My heart beat as if I were still alive. "Perhaps not. But I am yours."

I knew I should take my hand away, because he didn't mean it, not really, because...

He had given up his vengeance, his life, to save me.

And I knew why.

I killed a monster that couldn't be killed the same way twice, and I did it, not just twice but three times.

My voice was so low it was almost a whisper. "You want me to go back and fight the Devourer."

Grant looked at me in surprise.

And I realized the thought hadn't even occurred to him.

But there was something else there, something else that made me feel as if I were on the edge of a precipice. I shook my head slowly. "You don't even know me, Grant."

A woman's voice startled me. "Time is only a dimension. Entangled particles will forever be so, beginning, middle, and end."

I turned and saw a pretty young Asian woman with white-tipped furry fox ears in some fancy, expensive dress.

I was totally bewildered, and by the looks of it, so was Grant. "Do I know you?"

"No, and that is as it should be. You've earned the right to your death, but you should go back, Val."

I couldn't. "But Grant... My mother..."

The fox lady's voice was gentle. "Your mother forgave you a long time ago. Isn't it time you forgave yourself for a wrong you were never responsible for?"

What if I did? What if I could have a life? What if I could have a life with Grant?

A strange calmness settled into me, warm and lulling. If Grant was with me...

But Grant had died.

I opened my eyes. "Not without Grant."

Fox Lady's expression became enigmatic. "He's chosen his path. His doorway is waiting."

White-hot rage surged through me. "That's not fair! He sacrificed himself for me!"

"You are meant for death. And more."

"And more? What's that supposed to mean? Death is the end! I'm supposed to die!"

She shook her head, her dark hair swirling around her ears. "Words," she grumbled. "So bad at the actual meaning of things. Yes, death is part of who you are, but you're more than that now. Under the right pressure, common graphite becomes diamonds. You have become more than an ordinary human soul."

"And what is that, exactly?"

"A guide," said Grant.

"Like Anubis, Charon, and the Valkyries before you, your role is to guide others to the paths they are meant to be."

I had watched a bad movie about warring ancient gods once, so I actually kind of knew what she was talking about.

"I'm not a death demon?"

She smiled. "You could have been. But you chose differently. And it is in our choices that we become who we are."

She had the answers I had been looking for.

But none of it mattered now, because Grant was here, and he wasn't coming back with me.

"You said I'm a guide. What if I refuse to guide Grant to his death?"

"Then he will remain in eternal Twilight, lost forever."

"What if I remain here?"

She shook her head. "You know it doesn't work that way."

I put myself between the fox lady and Grant. "This can't be. This isn't right."

He kissed me on my forehead. "I knew the consequences when I made my choice, Val. The world of the living can't lose you. You have go back to help kill the Devourer once and for all."

"You can't leave me. You're mine."

Something on my wrist grew warm.

I looked at it.

A thin line of light and fire was tied around my wrist, a line which led...

To a similar loop around Grant's wrist.

"He's mine," I repeated.

The line glowed again.

"No one may come and go as they please into the Twilight...save for those who belong, like you...and those who serve those who belong."

"I am hers," he said, looking into my eyes. "At her service, now and always."

This time, light surrounded us.

WHEN ONE RETURNS FROM THE DEATH, SOMETIMES IT TAKES A WHILE FOR the senses to adjust. Sometimes vision's the first to return, and other times it's a sense of smell, touch, or taste.

And sometimes it's a strange mix of things.

My mouth tasted like a dark-skinned woman in a white dress standing on a green cliff singing a strange song to a stormy ocean.

I opened my eyes and saw the sounds of birds, red, yellow, and blue, so intricate and strangely symmetrical.

Cold kisses melted on my face.

I blinked. Snow drifted down from a dark sky.

And then all at once, the weight of gravity, of breath, of life, punched into me.

I choked and coughed, but gravity held me down. Had breathing always been this hard?

No, wait, it wasn't just gravity.

It was something motherfucking heavy on top of me.

I looked.

"Grant!"

He raised his head.

I pushed at him and gasped. "Grant! I can't breathe. You're squishing me."

Grant sat up. He was wearing his white suit, but I had never seen it so dirty before.

No, wait, I had.

Oh god, what had I done?

I scrambled to my feet, arms and legs aching, and looked around. We were in a snow-covered clearing, surrounded by pine trees dusted with white. In the center of the clearing, there was a small cabin, but one that could in no way be called rustic. With its wall of windows, it was a rich billionaire's version of a cottage in the woods.

"Where the hell are we?"

Grant stood next to me. "Northern Canada. It's...my place. This is where I come when I need to think."

"You brought us here," I said. "How?"

He ran his hands through his hair. "I guess I was thinking that I was sorry I never brought you here."

I looked at him, bruised and imperfect.

We were alive. And I loved him.

Fuck.

Lights blazed on from the cabin, and I shielded my eyes. When I looked again, I realized we were facing an entire wall of windows. Inside, I could see a huge fireplace and a pool that seemed big enough for his dragon form.

We had literally gone through life and death together.

And he had pledged himself to me, I thought, in a weird sort of way.

It had been the only way to save him, but Grant would regret it. I knew he would because that's just how things always happened. And when it ended, I would be destroyed.

I folded my arms. "Is this your bachelor fuck-pad?"

He raised an eyebrow and smiled. Heat sparked along my skin. Why did he have to be so good-looking? "Jealous?"

Yes. "No."

He grabbed my hand and squeezed. "I've never brought anyone else here. Come on," he said with a smile. My heart beat impossibly faster. "Let's get out of the snow."

---

THE CABIN WAS a single large room. It had heated floors, a pool in one corner, and what looked like a massive bed up high in a loft above the pool. Across from it were two walls of floor-to-ceiling windows and an entire wall full of books. I drifted over to the bookshelf while

he was on the phone in the kitchen. I could hear bits of the conversation: Hunter was alive, but Sophie's uncle had made off with Tita's Spear, which apparently wasn't a good thing.

My fingers drifted over the spines. They weren't the fancy old dusty ones you saw on TV, but the colorful spines of books that people read for fun. I pulled one out with a dark blue spine. A comic, with a spaceship, in Japanese.

I put the book back and took in the rest of the books. There were books in so many languages. "Just how many languages do you read?"

"A few," he said.

Japanese. Chinese. Hebrew. Greek. Arabic. There were more, but I couldn't look anymore. I could speak Spanish at least, but I wasn't even close to being literate. I walked over to the window. He was so smart. He was a magic dragon. And me? I had dropped out of high school. I guessed I was magic now too, but I wasn't sure who I was anymore.

And those were only two of the things that were so different about us.

He called from the kitchen. "Would you like marshmallows in your cocoa?"

I kept my back to him so that he wouldn't see the tears welling in my eyes. "Sure." I glanced upward at the bed in the loft above. There were no stairs or ladders I could see. "Why do you have a pool below your bed? Aren't you worried about falling out of bed and into the water?"

"I used to have nightmares and wake up in flames," he said.

Oh.

"I don't anymore," he added.

"What changed?"

"Chamomile tea before bedtime. It works wonders."

I stared outside at the snow-covered pines, the orange-red sky of the setting sun. Things had been so much clearer when we had been literally facing death's door. But the reality was that we barely knew each other.

I sensed his warmth behind me. This awareness of him was so strange, so not necessary.

"You okay?"

"I'm fine," I said, even as I remembered what he'd said about smelling my lies.

He let out a sigh.

"Fine, I'm not okay. Don't you find this all weird?"

He tilted my chin to look at me, his eyes meeting mine. I could sense the magic within him, simmering, churning as his blue-golden gaze sent a heated jolt through me. His gaze was electric; he was shockingly alive.

*Mine*, that bitch inside me yowled.

"Yes." He inclined his head toward the kitchen. "Come with me. Have some cocoa to warm up."

He had been nothing but unfailingly polite since we had come back.

I didn't like it. Men were never so kind and polite as when they were about to drop something on you that they knew you wouldn't like.

At least before, I'd known what he wanted from me. And now?

"How is Sophie doing?"

"She's fine. Also, rightfully and incredibly pissed off with Hunter and me. She wants you to come and visit."

I wasn't so sure that was a good idea, so I just said nothing.

Disparate emotions of anger and sadness clawed at my chest, still too raw. I changed the subject. "What happened with your sister? Did she kill the Angel of Death?"

All that magic stirred, the pressure in the air changing, and his clothes started to char. "No," he bit out. Behind us, the pool started to simmer with heat. "It's worse. She's working with him of her own free will."

"What?"

"Something about resolving dimensional rifts. There wasn't a lot of time to talk, but trust me, there is a conversation that is going to happen." He took a deep breath. The pool in the back stopped bubbling. "But not right now."

"Awkward," I said.

"Yeah," he replied. "Not like us at all."

A smile snuck onto my face. "Nope, not at all."

He came to me and drew me close to him. I rested in his arms, listening to his strong heartbeat.

And it felt so terribly right.

My voice cracked. "I don't know how to do this."

His hand brushed my hair. "Neither do I. But we'll figure it out."

I drew back. "No, you don't get it. When I was alive, I fucked up everything, everyone's lives. I was literally born fucking up people's lives. It was the only thing I was good at. And I—" I took a step backward. "I'm going to fuck this up, Grant."

"Most likely," he agreed.

I blinked. "What?"

He winked at me. "You're just lucky I'm the forgiving sort."

My mouth dropped open. "I'm spilling my feelings out to you and you're mocking me?"

"You're trying to make excuses to run away. I'm not going to let you do that."

"Grant—"

"Val. I'm not blameless either. I almost lost you because of my own inability to see who you were."

"I forgive you for that," I said, the words coming out in more of a growl than I wanted.

Grant only grimaced. "I don't forgive myself. I'll spend my life making it up to you. But we will both make mistakes. They will happen. But we will learn from them. We will talk to each other. And then we will move on."

"I don't know how. I don't know how to live and not fuck things up for people I...care about."

"You know how to forgive. Despite the life you lived and all the wrong that has been done to you, you still believe in forgiveness. You still believe in people, enough to risk your life to save a woman you barely knew. You think I'm magic, but it is you who are magic, Valentina."

How had my mother forgiven everything that had happened? I still didn't quite know.

And if I stayed alive, one day I would have to visit her.

I closed my eyes, pushing the thought away for another day.

"I know I'm *supposed* to forgive. The actual forgiving, that's the harder part."

He took my hand in his. "We'll figure it out together."

Grant made it sound so simple. And I wanted to believe him. "You know who you are, what you're supposed to be," I said, think-

ing of his shiny armor and all his magic and books. "I don't even know how to read anything other than English!"

"I can teach you."

"No." I clenched my fists. "I'm going to do it myself. I'm going to get my GED, I'm going to learn shit like calculus, and go to college and learn to be smart."

"College and smarts are not mutually exclusive, but if that's what you want, then I'm all for it. You can do whatever you want. So long as we're together and we trust each other."

My reply came so fast before I even had time to stop and think. "I do trust you."

And to my surprise, it was true.

"Do you?" His gaze settled on my hands. "Would you give me your ring?"

I looked at the thin band of metal that wasn't. Once upon a time, I had treasured this ring because I had stolen it, thought myself so clever. But it was because of this ring I'd been caught, thrown in juvie, and my mother deported. My friend had worn it, and it had become part of my enslavement to life.

And now he was asking me to give it to him.

"Aren't you supposed to offer me a ring?" I asked, even though I knew we were nowhere close to something like that and wasn't sure I wanted.

"In time. But right now, I'm asking you if you trust me."

"You're asking a lot."

*You will give me everything.*

He held out his hand.

I took off the ring and dropped it into his palm.

His big hand closed around mine, holding the ring and my hand both. The pressure in the air pressed against my ears as he gathered his magic. "I'm going to try something. It might sting for a moment. Do I have your permission?"

"Am I going to regret this?"

Heat surrounded my hands. I looked down and saw that we were on fire. But it didn't hurt; in fact, it was strangely ticklish.

He smacked me on the forehead. "You'll thank me for it."

"You are an arrogant dragon."

He smiled. "That's why you love me."

Blue fire burst from his closed fist.

Magic surged inside me, ringing, resonating. Agony exploded inside me. The floor flew forward, and my vision went dark.

And then I was light.

A galaxy surrounded me once more.

So many stars, so many lives, so much beauty.

I blinked and saw Grant's magic. No, it was his love.

Against all odds, all rationality, his love was bright, ever-burning and incandescent.

So long as he lived, his love would never go out.

I gasped, and then all my senses returned.

Grant was cradling me, holding me to his chest. I opened my eyes, for real this time.

Tiny little sparks of magic floated around us, slowly burning out as they fell.

"I'm free," I said softly.

"Yes. And I couldn't have done that without you."

"What?"

"You always had the power to free yourself. You just needed some help."

*I am hers.*

Grant had freed me. Again. "But you're not," I said. "You're... bonded to me. You know I have no idea what this means."

Grant shrugged. "We'll figure it out. Looks like you're just stuck with me." He picked me up. "A hot, rich, magic dragon. Terrible fate. Such suffering."

"Modesty is clearly one of your strongest traits," I said, rolling my eyes. I caught sight of the loft above us. "How do you get up there to go to sleep?"

Grant swept me into his arms. I let out a stupid shriek of surprise as he jumped.

He set me down gently. "Like that."

I looked over the edge of the loft floor and saw the clear blue water of the pool beneath. "This is kind of scary, you know."

"I know," said Grant, understanding in his eyes. "But it will be fun too."

"Is that a promise?"

He smirked and shrugged off his jacket, the shirt stretching across his chest and shoulders. "Would you like me to show you?"

Something inside me shivered in anticipation.

His arms came around me, and then he was just holding me. "Valentina, I love you," he said against my ear.

"I love you too, Grant," I said.

"Good." He stroked my hair. "Hold on to that thought."

And then he flung us off the loft into the pool.

Warm water closed in around us, surrounding me, washing away all my doubts and fears. I opened my mouth, and he kissed me.

I shoved him away and swam upward. I emerged to the sound of his guffawing laughter. I glared at him, trying to be angry, but his joy was overpowering. We had survived the doorways of death itself to be here.

He swam over to me. I tried to splash him in the face, but his arms simply shot out and pulled me to him. He kissed me hard, and I was surrounded by all his focused dragon intensity.

His kiss was liquid rocket fuel, and I melted. I wrapped my legs around him, my hands roaming all over that gorgeous muscle, and kissed him back.

Grant pulled back and looked me in the eyes.

"Things will get fucked up, Val," he said, his forehead against mine. "I'll make mistakes, and so will you. That's life. But we'll be all right."

I wound my hands around his neck. "As long as we're together."

He kissed me hard. "Always."

\*\*\*

Want to read Val and Grant's hot sexy bonus epilogue?

Here's a taste:

*My mouth tasted like perfumed smoke and incense. My tongue felt big, strange, swollen.*

*"Val?" said Grant's voice. "Are you all right?"*

*"Give me a moment." My voice sounded strange as if it were underwater. I was slowly getting used to this disorientation of my senses.*

*It came with what I was: a chaperone or guide to one's final end (as opposed to the temporary end I had been in when I originally died). Sometimes, I found myself in that place in between, called by a soul who didn't quite know where to go. I helped them figure out their path. Doing it made me feel good, gave me a purpose. It made me feel right.*

*The problem was that when I came back from the threshold of death, my senses often were temporarily mixed up. It wasn't uncommon for me to see*

*smells like chocolate (which looked like red velvet in light oddly enough) or hear bright lights that tinkled like bells.*

*I opened my eyes, and saw Grant staring at me, as if I were a stranger. This was a little odd. Usually when I came back to myself, he was ready with a cup of tea and even sweets.*

*My eyes sharpened. Whoah, had the colors on the rug always been so vividly burnt red and blue? I blinked and realized Grant was still looking at me strangely.*

*"What? What's wrong?"*

*He spoke as if to himself. "It is you, Val. Your scent hasn't changed, and neither has your internal fire within." He was always referring to the fire or magical something that connected us.*

*"But... You look different."*

*"What?" Sometimes words were hard.*

*I looked down at myself.*

*And saw —*

This bonus epilogue is ONLY available to newsletter subscribers. To keep reading, get it free ONLY at this link:

<https://www.karalockharte.com/BondedDragonBonus>

(Note, if you sign up for my newsletter at a different link at for example, Facebook, you will still eventually get the bonus epilogue, but it will take a few days at least.)

\*\*\*

Dear Reader,

It's not what you think it is.

The story you heard isn't completely true.

The Angel of Death did come to the fairy queen's library that night.

There was a fight.

But I held my own. And in the end, I went willingly.

Why did I go with the man responsible for my brother's death, you ask?

I have my reasons.

In fact, I clung to them, trying to focus on the reasons why working with him would save us all.

Especially during those nights that should have been inconsequential.

Our people hate each other. I have to keep reminding myself, I have to keep telling myself.

It's not real. It won't last.  
No matter how much I might wish otherwise.  
Because wishes are for dreamers.  
And I know better than to believe in dreams.  
Aurora's story coming in ABDUCTED BY THE ANGEL in late  
2019!  
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