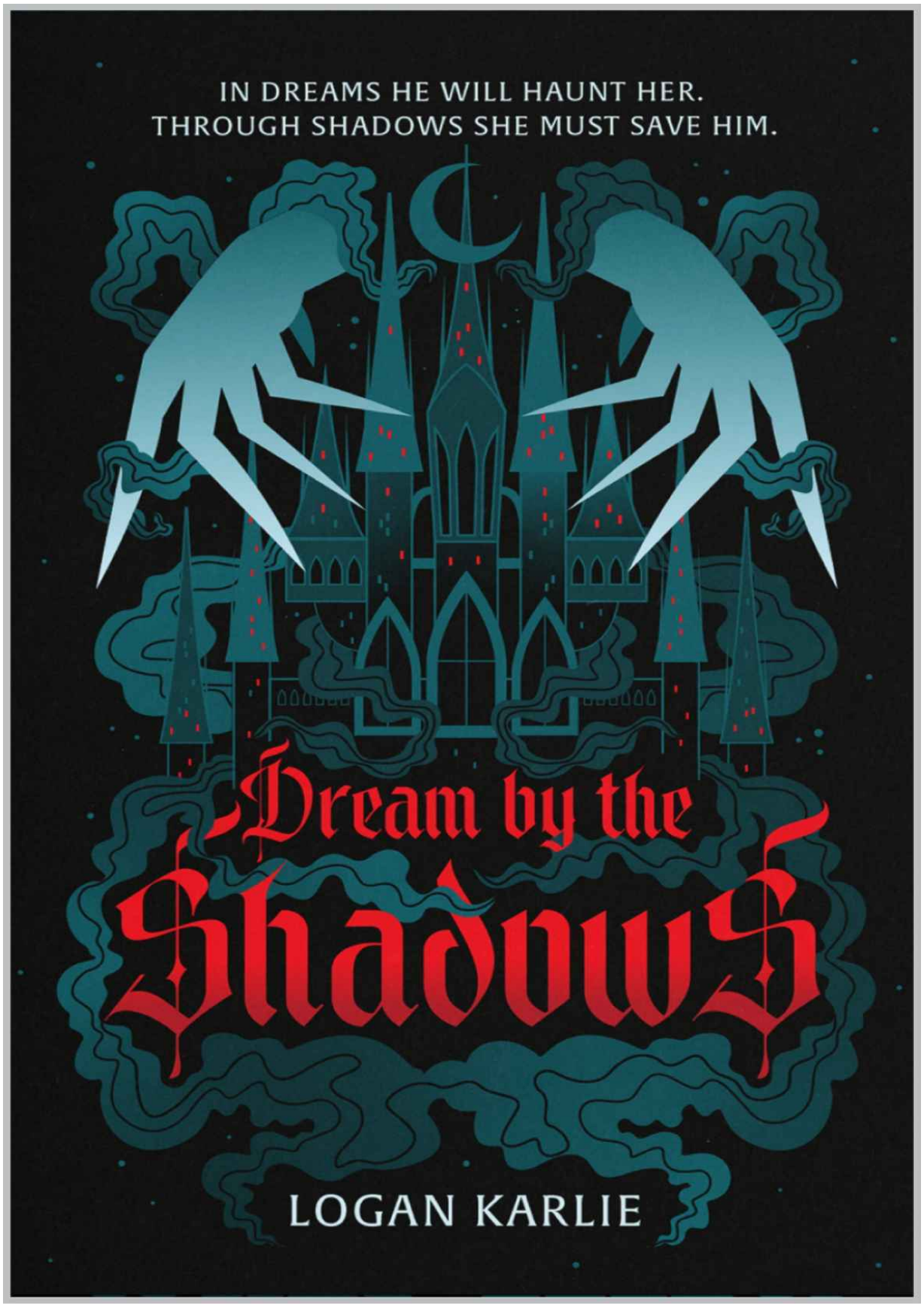
IN DREAMS HE WILL HAUNT HER.
THROUGH SHADOWS SHE MUST SAVE HIM.



Dream by the Shadows

LOGAN KARLIE


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SHADOW WEAVER DUOLOGY BOOK ONE

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To the dreamers who turn nightmares into stepping stones, revealing the light that hides within every shadow. This is for you.

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PROLOGUE

THE MONSTER KNEW HE BELONGED TO THE DARK.

It was a tale crueler than his curse or his castle: monsters belonged to the dark, rotting in their ruin and misery, just as heroes belonged to the light, radiant and beloved in their goodness. Monsters deserved, as he did, to breathe foul, lightless air. They deserved to live and die where they would not be seen. Every myth and legend declared it. Every decent parent warned their children of it. Every glare that condemned him revealed it.

Monsters belonged to the dark—

And it made him *angry* .

He slammed a fist into the nearest wall, desperate to feel something other than the empty, meaningless pit that had become his life. His hand broke open at the force, bleeding shadows instead of blood. They poured down his skin, ugly and dark, rising to the air in a murky haze.

Hideous.

Anger clawed up through his throat, stretching and burning him like some feral animal until it replaced the pain he should feel instead.

“You mock me,” he snarled, sliding to the floor in a miserable heap. “You never cease to mock me.”

The dark could be beautiful, but it mostly felt painful. It might graze his skin like a brush of moonlight, but it could just as easily twist itself into something evil and foul. Darkness was more frequently a cloak of sin, a scream in the night, or a pair of eyes unseen. It could be lonely, too. Achingly, despairingly lonely.

The shadows crept toward him, rolling around his neck in a deformed cloud. Perhaps a minute passed. Perhaps a century. The monster couldn’t

tell. His breath felt cold, his hands heavy and numb as they bled shadows instead of blood.

It does not matter. None of this matters.

His mouth curled into an unnatural sneer. He wanted to laugh, but the rising sensation of doing so was uncomfortable. Still, a dry, half-dead chuckle shivered in his mouth, eager to stretch its long-forgotten limbs.

Laugh, damn you.

Laugh that you're still alive.

Laugh that the dark hasn't swallowed you whole.

The chuckle dropped hollow and silent in his throat, interrupted by an ear-splitting scream somewhere beyond his chamber.

"A trespasser," he muttered, pulling gauntlets over his ruined hands. He clinked the taloned fingers together as they snapped into place. "Truly, this is—"

Another shriek interrupted him, forcing his bedchamber to rattle and bend. Books stumbled free from their shelves, a chandelier creaked precariously overhead, and painted vases, overflowing with dry, dead things, shattered against the floor. He glanced at the mess. Cursed as if it mattered. Avoided stepping on broken glass as if he cared.

As the shrieks swelled past the monster's tolerance, he pulled a blade from where it hid inside his hand. He knew what waited for him in the shadows outside his door. The screaming creature felt what the monster did: the unease, the misery, and the cold.

And the hunger.

Oh, the hunger.

The trespasser threw itself into the monster's door *again* and *again* and *again* , finally splintering part of the wood. Two of its claws, stained dark with something rotten, pressed through. The monster raised his hand, summoning shadows that rose from cracks in his castle's ancient floor. They surged at his command, roiling toward the door and arching it into a crescent, snapping it in half.

And there it was.

Demon.

Its features were lopsided. Mud-stained horns dangled at crooked angles, and milky eyes drooped into a face wrought with scars. Thick, embroidered cloth draped across its armored shoulders, winding into the dark hallway behind it.

“Are you here to torment me? Or, let me guess—to demand what you’ve craved for the past few centuries?”

Silence.

“Speak,” the monster insisted, skimming his blade across the demon’s cracked lower lip. “I command you to respond.”

“*Let…me…out*, ” the demon snarled piteously, unable to string any other words from its ruined mouth.

“A demand, then. Should I adjust your fate since mine is already lost?”

The monster felt delirious speaking with the demon, asking it questions as though it could understand him. But there was something different about this one. Something in its eyes. Or in the way it stood, perhaps.

The way it refused to look away.

The monster turned, stalking toward a wall of fabric at the far end of his chamber. Once lustrous and radiant, glistening like a shadow-dark sapphire, the fabric existed now as a tattered, dirt-covered rag. A discarded memory of what once was.

The demon did not follow. It lingered in the monster’s doorway, shivering.

“Do you not have control over your limbs? *Follow me* .”

The demon stumbled forward. Its shoulder cloth, wound tight around its neck, trailed behind it like a panicked serpent. As the demon moved further into the room, its features turned clearer—and more unsettling—as the candlelight exposed them.

For a moment, the monster hesitated.

He knew he shouldn’t be doing this. He remembered so little, so *damnably* little, but he knew this wasn’t his purpose. And yet, in the wavering abyss of his soul, a truth flashed. It was one he had been loath to admit.

No longer did he care.

The curtain parted at a twitch of his hand, folding like a set of prehistoric wings. Nighttime wind burst through the gap, swirling the stale, too-old air of his chamber and lifting his things in a flurry of movement. He took a deep, steadying breath as he leaned over his balcony, battered by scents he would never again touch or see: the soft swell of blooming gardenias, fragrant dirt after a showering of rain, sun-warmed fur, and the spiced scent of pine.

Things always beyond his cursed reach.

“Leave this place,” the monster proclaimed, gesturing wildly at the ledge.

The demon shuddered, bowing as it held his gaze. Even if it was just a demon, the monster couldn’t remember the last time he’d been looked in the eye.

“I said *leave this place* !” the monster howled again, digging his sword into the demon’s chest.

The weight of the weapon forced the demon off the ledge. It thrashed as it plummeted, its long strand of cloth twisting around its limbs. If it made a noise upon landing, the monster didn’t hear it.

He sank to his knees. Watched as the moonlight curved around his hands.

Why did he let that one go? Why did he no longer care?

He couldn’t remember.

His eyes were heavy, and his shadow-bound heart was full of hatred.

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PART ONE
THE VEIL OF SHADOWS

I had a dream, which was not all a dream.
The bright sun was extinguish'd, and the stars
Did wander darkling in the eternal space,
Rayless, and pathless, and the icy earth
Swung blind and blackening in the moonless air;
Morn came and went—and came, and brought no day,
And men forgot their passions in the dread
Of this their desolation; and all hearts
Were chill'd into a selfish prayer for light.
- *Darkness* , Lord Byron

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CHAPTER 1

THEY SAID THE SHADOW BRINGER STILL LIVED.

I grew up under his wicked curse, taught to hate the monster so cold and so cruel that he forgot what it was like to be anything else. They said he was as hideous as he was horrible, a bloodstained monster lurking in the shadows of every dream.

But I, either bravely or stupidly, found it difficult to fear what I couldn't see. He was a phantom. A shadow. A ghost. A monster who haunted others but couldn’t hurt me.

Until my sister died.

Eden wasn’t buried with flowers in her hair. They did not clothe her in white, did not try to conceal the shadows under her eyes. Her coffin was a crude box of splintered wood, her burial clothes dirty and torn. There was blood in places I did not understand—under her nails, seeping from the corners of her mouth, lining the edges of her bare feet.

Corrupt , they whispered.

Corrupt , they damned.

Mother tightened her fist in my cloak. One hand was on my shoulder, the other clenched around my wide-eyed brother clinging to her chest. Her tears had dried hours ago; my father’s had not. He sank to his knees by Eden’s coffin, head bowed and arms trembling.

The Light Legion circled us, asking questions and demanding answers we didn’t have.

When did the shadows first appear?

What crimes did she commit in Norhavellis?

Was it greed?

Envy?

Gluttony, wrath?

And other, more troublesome questions. Questions my mother and father stumbled over.

You're Absolvers—why wasn't she given the elixir?

Did you value your youngest children over her?

The Light Bringer cannot bring her to Istralla and cleanse her soul—do you understand?

As the legionnaires questioned us, their golden armor became dim and dull by an approaching storm. They had frightened me at first, intimidating me with their masks and arrogant way of speaking. But that fear had ebbed into something else. Something angry and foul.

Corruption wasn't supposed to happen to Eden. It was supposed to happen to strangers. To people who were nothing more than names in a story.

Rain began to fall.

My brother began to cry.

And Eden was lowered to the earth in her box of splintered wood.

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CHAPTER 2

AFTER EDEN'S BURIAL, ACHING FROM THE DESPAIR THAT HAD CRAWLED inside my chest, I cried into my knees and cursed the monster who took my sister from me. The Light Legion said her soul was lost.

And where do lost things go?

Down to the darkest part of the Dream Realm—where the Shadow Bringer lived.

And what does a Shadow Bringer eat?

He ate Corrupted souls, weak and shivering as they wandered down, down, down to his shadowed lair, forgotten and abandoned by the light. He devoured souls buried deep beneath the dirt and its worms.

I bit down on my sleeve, letting my anguish run fast and deep. It had been my idea—not Eden's—to dream. I had decided that our village was stifling us, and I wanted to escape. I was sick of the darkness Corrupting our people and the duty my parents held.

Only once, I had begged.

Eden had considered my request seriously, glancing at the vial of liquid between my fingertips. "They check every day," she whispered. "They'll know we didn't take it."

"We can pour it out of the window."

Eden shook her head, dark curls like snakes upon her pale nightgown. "The snow would stain. And they'd hear the window opening."

"Down the floorboards, then. There's that crack, over there—"

"If we missed, they'd smell it on the wood."

Wind snapped against our window, rattling the glass. An omen, maybe. But if it was, we missed it.

Or decided to forget.

I threw off my blanket, a wicked plan forming. “We’ll pour it in my tea. In the morning, I’ll wash the cup like I always do. The color will hide it perfectly.”

Eden’s eyes had sharpened at this. Brightened, even in the dark.

“It will be only once. Please, Eden. Think of what we’ll see—what we’ll *do* .”

But *once* became a word forgotten.

At first the dreams were beautiful, filled with the adventure I craved and the comfort Eden desired. They made us feel alive—made us feel like we had a purpose beyond our desolate village in the middle of the woods. They made us forget a harsh winter and early spring filled with our brother’s cries and gave us nights to cherish after days filled with chores and our father’s tedious rules. But one day, for Eden, the dreams weren’t any of those things. They weren’t beautiful, lovely, or safe. They became what we were warned against.

I stifled a scream into my pillow, sobs wracking my chest. I was selfish. Horrible. *Unforgivable* . Worse than the monster that now had his claws around Eden’s soul. The Shadow Bringer hadn’t been real—not truly—until he was.

Then how does a girl get revenge?

She must wade through the shadows and kill the monster that lived there.

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CHAPTER 3

SEVEN YEARS LATER

DARKNESS ROAMED ACROSS MY SKIN, FINE AS A SHROUD OF SILK. IT SLIPPED into my eyes and wrapped its inky hands around my neck. Tonight it felt relentless. Needy.

Hungry.

I breathed in, guiltily relishing the familiar pull, and breathed out, letting it tumble through the air in a silent scream. It didn't matter that I took the elixir. They came regardless. The visions. The *dreams* .

A man silhouetted against a raging sea.

A flash of silver, rot, and ruin.

A wall of writhing shadow.

The pull on my skin faded, dissolving like smoke. It melted into the soft snores of my brother and the buzz of an insect under our dresser. I groaned in disgust, settling back into my pillows.

Again. I had let it—whatever *it* was—call to me. Again.

Pressing my palms into my eyes, I focused on their weight instead of something rising sick and deep in the pit of my stomach. I hadn't resisted. I had let the dream coax me under, just like I had that winter seven years ago. Willingly let it twist and seduce me like a fool.

And maybe I was.

Because at this rate, I'd be found by demons and fed to their lord before sunrise.

I turned to my side, dragging my hands down my face. I should be terrified, but some dark, terrible part of me *wanted* to be found by the

Shadow Bringer. I needed to find him, hurt him, and demand he release Eden's soul.

But another part of me wanted to curl up into a ball and cry.

Elliot slept heavily in the bed next to mine, chest rising and falling at rhythmic intervals. His face was mostly relaxed—though an eyebrow was slightly scrunched—and the threadbare arm of Chester, his favorite stuffed cow, peeked out from underneath an elbow.

Crskkk. Crskkk.

I stilled.

A misshapen form scraped at our half-open window, clawing at the glass in jagged swipes. I jolted upright, slamming into the bed frame—

"'smer?"

Elliot peered at me through the shadows, his brown hair a disheveled halo. He appeared small under his heap of blankets and discarded winter tunics, but he loved his ramshackle burrow. It helped him feel safe, veiled from the sight of humans and monsters alike.

I took a deep breath, attempting to erase some of my darkening thoughts. I needed to ground myself in reality, not lose myself in another fantasy. The shadow was merely a branch. A *branch* , for Maker's sake.

"Sorry, Ell. I didn't mean to wake you."

"S'okay." Elliot pulled at his pile of blankets, positioning them strategically around his slim shoulders. "But now you owe me a chocolate," he said, yawning. "Maybe even two chocolates."

My mouth lifted into a smile. "Fine. Tomorrow then, after we do our rounds?"

Elliot returned my smile, but his attention drifted past me. His gaze lingered on our window, where a clawed branch was indeed scuffling against the glass. "Better keep that shut. I don't want birds flying in an' taking my eyes."

"Now *that* would be a story for the tales."

Elliot shrugged, pulling Chester to his chest.

I sat up, noticing the genuine worry in his eyes. "Elliot, why are you thinking about birds taking your eyes?"

"It wasn't a dream, if that's what you're wonderin'," he said with another shrug. "Anyways, I'm goin' back to sleep. Busy day tomorrow. 'Specially if chocolate is involved."

"You sure you're fine?"

“Yeah,” he mumbled, reaching for the elixir at his nightstand. As he tilted it to his mouth, he frowned. “Hmm. Thought I had some left.”

“Here.” I handed him my vial, which still contained a dreg of amber liquid. “Just take mine. I should go check on Father anyway.”

“He’s patrolin’ again, ain’t he.”

“*Isn’t* he.”

“The Corrupt are gettin’ bad. You don’t think—” He paused, chewing his lip. “You don’t think that they’d actually get us?”

“No,” I said, firmly. Convincingly. “Not with Father watching.”

“Good. Father’s brave.” Elliot settled into his blankets, content. “An’ so are you.”

“Ell—”

“Just not around bugs, I guess. Fish, too. You *hate* fish eyes. An’ baths —”

“I do not hate baths.”

“An’ the way I speak. Ain’t nothin’ you hate more.”

Barely suppressing a retort, I pulled a sweater over my nightgown and crept downstairs to the sound of Elliot snickering. Father was sitting on the porch in his favorite rocking chair, taut and straight-backed even while dozing. The wind was strong, coaxing the chair to sway back and forth. It was a miracle the chair had lasted through the years, splintered as it was.

It bothered me, sometimes, how the most trivial objects could last for decades while the people who owned them never had the luxury. They grew sick, frail, and old, all while the object remained perpetually itself. Broken and faded, maybe, but never dead or dying.

I crossed my legs and leaned against the house, considering. Father looked exhausted. He was a cracked, overburdened vessel, leaking water when no one else was around. Maybe it was the row of torches, ringed around our property and flickering under the strength of the wind, casting the lines in his face with deep shadows.

Shadows like the markings of a Corrupt. Like Eden’s eyes—

I shook my head.

No, there was my father. Warm brown eyes were underneath his heavy lids. And though his expression was wretched and weak, he would wake with a smile, the smile he tried his best to give despite the burden of his labor and his duty as our shield. A wool blanket was fixed around his shoulders and a small elixir vial stuck out of his shirt pocket, items of care

left by Mother at some point in the night. Calloused hands rested atop the crossbow in his lap, and his work boots, stained and creased, were filthy from walking the property, lighting the torches, and scrutinizing any late-night visitors.

Visitors desperate for sanctuary against Corruption.

I moved to wake him, knowing he'd be upset at sleeping so heavily, but reconsidered. I had helped him before, during long nights such as these. Elliot had, too. I still struggled with certain responsibilities—part of me would always crave a future and a purpose far away from Norhavellis and its festering darkness—but I tried my best. After Eden's death, we *all* tried our best. Our home and our duty was all we had left.

I shivered, crossing my arms to ward off the chill in the air. Besides, it wasn't like I had much time left *to* help, anyhow. If my recent visions meant I was Corrupt or nearly there, my time was short. Splintered. Blurry. It was impossible to be useful if my mind was half-rotted by a demon.

I scanned the surrounding clearing, noting the weak torchlight. The flames ran precariously low, struggling to fight against the encroaching dark. I quietly gathered the materials I needed into a bucket, its handle as worn and as dented as the rocking chair, and positioned myself by the nearest torch. The flame wandered into life under my care, smoldering, glowing, then rising up to take a breath. It pushed into the darkness, defying the wind as its light filled the air.

I took a breath, too. Tried to squeeze all the darkness from my lungs.

Out of habit, my fingers threaded through the rising smoke. The warmth felt wonderful; cleansing, even. I eagerly stretched out my hands, closing my eyes as the smoke lapped against them.

Esmer.

Esmer.

Esmer.

Father didn't move. The voice was inside my head.

I swore softly, hands shaking as I relit the next three torches. Maybe a demon had finally curled itself around my mind, sinking its claws nice and deep as it waited to claim territory upon my soul. Maybe it would be better if I just—

"Heya, 'smer." Elliot stepped from behind me, grinning sheepishly. Rather than wear a sweater, he had wrapped himself in a blanket. "Thought

you looked kinda lonely out here, but it turns out you were talkin' to yourself just fine."

I lunged for him, pretending to be upset, but I couldn't stop the smile that leapt to my face. The voice hadn't been inside my head. It was Elliot all along.

He made a quick, dance-like spin, avoiding my hands. "This is how you repay me for helpin', huh?"

"That's the thing. I *didn't* ask for your help," I said, chuckling under my breath as I lit the next torch. It wouldn't take long to finish, but I secretly welcomed his company. "But if you want to be useful, you can carry this bucket."

A hand darted out from underneath his blanket, grabbed the bucket, then pulled it to his side. "Fine by me."

We made quick work of the remaining torches, saving the farthest for last. I watched the smoke as it rose, threading through the lower branches of an oak tree, and threw my arm around Elliot's blanketed shoulders. It was going to be okay.

I was okay.

"…help me…"

I inhaled sharply, whirling to meet the sound. Emerging from the forest and into the first ring of torchlight was a young man from the village. Thomas Radler halted, swaying like he was drunk, then fell to his knees with a whimper.

I ran to him.

The Radlers seldom showed up during visiting hours, and as far as I could remember, they never visited at night. They tended to keep to themselves and avoided interacting with us, making an appearance only when they needed to replenish their three-month stock of elixir. Strange that he'd be here—and stranger still that it was Thomas.

"Do you need more elixir?" I asked, kneeling next to him in the grass. I tried to mimic how my mother would approach this situation. What words would she say, and what would she do with her hands? "Or has your father fallen ill, perhaps? I can go inside and prepare whatever it is that you need __"

Thomas clutched the grass, steadying himself against the tremors moving through his body. I froze, noticing the discoloration on his knuckles. The feral curve to his back. The missing shoes. Something

metallic and foul caused his full red hair, customarily brushed into an impeccable coif, to become matted and dripping.

Two smears of shadow stained the skin under his eyes.

Corruption .

“Esmer. How pathetic of you to act like you care,” Thomas finally growled, lips peeling back in a savage grin. His teeth were red, stained bright by a cut splitting his lip. “You may be beautiful, but you're rotten on the inside. Just like that terrible mother and father of yours. What a *shame* .”

Elliot cried out from somewhere behind me, his voice a strange, piercing warning.

I stood, stumbling backwards. “Elliot, *run* —wake Father—”

Thomas followed me, shaking his trembling limbs into stillness. “I’ve come hunting for you and your family.” I spun around, making to sprint to the house, but Thomas was faster. He grabbed my face, squeezing his fingers around my throat before I could even register the movement.

Fast—*he was too fast* .

“I’ve come for you, your imbecile brother, your rotten father, and your useless mother.” As he dug his nails into my skin, something warm dripped from his fingers and trailed into my nightgown. “I’d have one more to hunt, but she’s *already dead* .”

Thomas pinned me to the damp, rot-smelling ground as his fingernails pressed harder into my neck. I clawed at his face, kicked at his shins, but it was useless, *useless* —

“Let her *go!* ” Elliot screamed, slamming his bucket into the side of Thomas’s head.

Thomas’s bloodshot eyes widened. I expected him to fall over—any ordinary person would have been knocked unconscious by the blow—but he merely stood up, spat some blood from his mouth, and grabbed the blanket that had fallen from Elliot’s shoulders.

“Oh, Elliot. You were going to be last.”

Thomas threw Elliot to the ground, easily overpowering him, and pulled the blanket tight over his mouth and nose. I staggered to the nearest torch, head spinning and legs threatening to give out. Elliot was going to die. Elliot was going to *die* and this boy—this *animal* —would kill me next without hesitation. Then he’d move to Father, exhausted and weak on the

porch. Lastly he'd find Mother, vulnerable in her bed and unaware of the horror her children were facing.

But first he'd kill Elliot.

I heaved the torch from the dirt, fighting to stay conscious even as my vision blurred. A half-crazed decision was rapidly forming in my mind, desperate to sink its claws in before fear took over and rendered me useless.

"Your mother and father damned us all," Thomas hissed, stuffing part of the blanket into Elliot's mouth and wrenching his arm away when he tried to pull it free. "Damned you, too."

But first he'd kill Elliot.

The sound I made was unlike anything I'd ever heard. Raw, furious, *primal* . It propelled me forward as I raised the torch and swung it hard at Thomas's face. I hit him again, this time lighting his cloak on fire. He immediately fell to the side, rolling in the dirt and as he fought to remove his cloak, but the fire was quicker.

"How could you?" Thomas suddenly said, voice breaking and stumbling into sobs as the fire hissed around his ears. Hatred and revulsion twisted his face, but his eyes betrayed raw, searing pain. "You lied to us. You made us believe. My mother—now I—"

Elliot cried in my arms, utterly horrified. I might have been crying, too, but I barely felt it. My vision was almost entirely dark, but I needed to get Elliot inside. I needed to wake Father—

"Esmer," Thomas moaned, kneeling while the flames ate at his body. "*No.* Did I—? What am I—?"

A whistle thrummed through the air.

A single arrow slammed into Thomas's chest with a wet, crunching *thunk* . His hands brushed against it, trembling, grazing the blood leaking from his chest. A second arrow hit, pinning itself into the soft flesh of skin between his left arm and collarbone.

Dawn was hours away, and the stars should have been bright and burning.

But darkness, leaking in through the trees, swallowed them all.

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CHAPTER 4

I WOKE TO THE SOUND OF SHOUTING AND THE PINCH OF A HAND CLENCHED over my nose.

Naturally, I tried to scream.

"Quiet, 'smer!" Elliot begged. He kneeled over me, eyes fixed on the window above my bed. "The Radlers are here, and they're firin' some mean words at Father. You've gotta stop snoring so I can listen."

The memory of last night slashed around in my head, angry, desperate, and howling. An animal stuck within the attic of a house on fire.

Breathe , Mother had said to me. *Put one breath in front of the other, Esmer. Please.*

Breathe in.

I inhaled, slowly counting to five.

Breathe out.

My exhale trembled at the edges. Still, I counted to five again.

Good, Mother had praised, giving me a gentle smile of approval.

After the attack, she sat Elliot and I by the stove while Father continued his watch. It was her attempt at coaxing us back into normalcy. She fixed a vegetable chowder with our favorite seasoning. She massaged a lavender salve into the bruised, aching muscles of our necks. She hummed a song as she brushed and braided my hair.

But it was useless. No matter what she did, I felt hollow, broken, and cold.

Far too cold.

Elliot tiptoed back into the kitchen once my hair was nearly braided, hiding a book of Weaver tales under his sleeve. The book was a battered,

stained thing with a peeling cover, but its pages were velvet-soft from years of exploration.

“I was going to read a story if you wanted,” Elliot said, cradling the book sheepishly. “I can do the speakin’. Thinkin’ the one with Nephthys and the sea dragon.”

“The Water Weaver again, Elliot?” Mother asked, glancing up from my hair. “You favor her.”

“It’s because her stories always have creatures in them. It’s not ‘cause I think she’s pretty or anythin’.”

As Mother continued to tease him, I swallowed my unease. I didn’t want to hear a tale from our kingdom’s perfect past. Not when the present was dark, twisted, and haunted by the shadow of what it used to be. What it was *meant* to be.

But for Elliot I agreed, and his face lit up.

Before Eden’s death, I enjoyed reading about the seven Weavers. Delighted in every heroic, wondrous deed they did for mankind, the gifts they gave to dreamers, and the worlds they created in the Dream Realm. Back then it had seemed possible—so very, achingly possible—that they would return, making everything right and true. But after Eden’s death, when a festering hate for the Shadow Bringer and his demons finally settled in, reading about the Weavers felt painful.

I propped my face into my hands, trying not to flinch as Elliot began to read.

Nephthys was one of seven immortal beings once tasked with creating intricate and prophetic dreams for all of humankind. The age, livelihood, or morality of the dreamer didn’t matter, because every person in the Kingdom of Noctis *could* dream. Even the filth-covered vagrants, scraping coins from the pockets of tavern-dwellers. Even the jewel-bedecked lords and ladies wasting beautiful, lazy days in their golden manors. Even the elderly. Even the children.

It didn’t matter. None of it mattered.

And while the kingdom dreamed dreams of prosperity, invention, and divine understanding, the Weavers held the Realm in sacred balance, overseeing dreams and destroying the demons that sought to taint them. Fear of Corruption was unthinkable because Corruption didn’t exist.

But this didn’t last.

Dreamers wanted more than the Weavers could give. They craved power and indulgence. Dreams were no longer enough—they wanted more, more, *more* . And so they betrayed the Seven in favor of demons who could satisfy their desires. Desires to steal, kill, and commit unspeakable evils. Demons, heralded by the Shadow Bringer, grew stronger, and humanity welcomed them. The price we paid—the price we *all* paid—was our right to dream without the consequence of death.

I watched the mist slinking through the Visstill Forest, saturating the morning air in a thick veil of grey, and I wondered if we truly deserved our fate. I wondered, too, what it would take for the kingdom to finally atone.

Thomas lay lifeless at the edge of our property, face buried in the grass. Crouched by his scorched body were two men: Abbott Radler, Thomas's father, who had draped a shroud over his son's face, and Alcott, Thomas's older brother. I hadn't seen Alcott in years; he was rumored to have joined the ranks of the Light Legion.

"—*no* right," Father was saying. "You shame me and everything I stand for."

Neither Abbott nor Alcott were speaking. They were looking at Thomas. At the long trail of blood and half-burned grass. At his arms, stretching in vain toward the forest's cover.

At two arrows jutting from his burned body.

Abbott's face, normally a stern mask, was contorted in anguish.

I had watched as Thomas fell. Heard his breath as it crept through ruined lungs. And yet—through it all—he must have found a way to cling to life. The scene spoke in ways that Thomas's purpled lips could not: he had retreated toward the forest, even with flames tearing him down.

"You murdered him," Abbott gasped, choking on every word.

"He would have killed my children had I not intervened."

"*You murdered my son* . Through arrows and *fire* ."

Father shook his head. "I did what any father would have done. I am no murderer."

But I am.

Elliot leaned his head against my shoulder, intently watching the scene as I ran a hand through his curls. Because of me, Thomas died before his soul could be purified. I should feel shame—I should feel guilt. Father would have subdued Thomas without resorting to fatal violence. Mother

would have pacified him with just a few well-placed sentences. So what did that make me? Not a savior or a hero, certainly.

No, I was a monster who damned another soul to perish under the hands of the Shadow Bringer.

Alcott's face, bearing a striking similarity to Thomas's, twisted in rage. "Where are your children, then? Where is your *proof* ? I should also like to talk to your guardsmen—"

"They took ill and are with their families. They've not taken their posts in a fortnight."

"Likely sick with Corruption, just like half of Norhavellis," Alcott seethed, eyes flashing. His hand ghosted over his hip as if he expected a weapon to be there. "You've let darkness taint this village. I have *never* seen a place so saturated in death and disease."

"Then perhaps Norhavellis is cursed. But that is no fault of mine."

Alcott made a sound of disgust. "Then you're either a fool or a criminal. Likely both."

Father's hands tightened on his crossbow. "To blame me for Norhavellis's ruin is to put Eden's death upon my shoulders. I will not stand for it."

Abbott lurched forward, tears streaming into his beard. "You damned him, Galen. He won't receive the Light Bringer's blessing."

"Away. *Back away* ." Father raised his crossbow.

"My poor boy," Abbot wailed. "You damned him to Hell when you killed him."

"You don't deserve the right to be called an Absolver," Alcott spat, moving to stand by his father. "Thomas had no signs, no indication—with all your training, you could have restrained him."

"Take the body—"

"You're a liar. A thief. A fool." Alcott ripped one of the arrows from Thomas's back and threw it at Father's feet. "The Light Legion will see you hanged."

My stomach sank. It wasn't my father's fault, it was *mine* . I should be down there, facing the Radlers' wrath. I shouldn't be cowering in my bedroom, nose pressed against the glass like a delusional child, but fear rooted me in place. I didn't want to face my fate or the darkness in our yard. I wanted to *run* .

"I said, take the body—"

“Thomas took the draught each night for seventeen years! And Becca—*what of my wife?* ”

I frowned. Thomas, and Becca, too, had access to the elixir. Compared to most families in Norhavellis, the Radlers wanted for nothing, least of all the one concoction keeping them from absolute ruin. So why had they become Corrupt?

Elliot tugged at my sleeve.

Norhavellis was fracturing at its seams, and we were caught within its ruined center.

NIGHT DESCENDED AT A CRAWL.

I stood in the kitchen, watching as my mother prepared dinner. The mixture was fragrant and hearty: rosemary, butter, and juniper melting around rabbit and potatoes.

It was a sickening contrast to the bile and guilt churning in my stomach.

Thomas would be buried by now, resting in a place that the Light Bringer couldn’t cleanse. His soul would rot in Hell alongside the demon that Corrupted him, unable to find its way back to the Maker’s light.

I clenched my hands together. Thumbed away imaginary dirt.

The Light Bringer was exalted across the kingdom for his ability to purify souls, but it only worked if the Corrupt was alive. If a Corrupt died before they were cleansed, its human soul would perish and the demon would be free to be reborn in the dreams and skin of another.

Just like what happened to Eden.

Wind rustled through the house, forcing the old wood to creak and groan, and I couldn’t help but picture a monster leering at us through the kitchen windows.

“When will Father be back?” I asked, trying to mask the fear in my voice.

“Shouldn’t be long.” Mother focused on her hands as she stirred our supper, adding a pinch of salt and a handful of dried plums. Her eyes were bloodshot, and her hair, wild and dark like my own, was scraped into a bun. “Are you hungry? Have some bread.”

Elliot wandered in, chewing his knuckle. “Why’s Father in the barn? He’s bein’ strange.”

“Not strange,” Mother said, eyes lifting from the pot. She grabbed our hands and squeezed them. “He’s working harder than you realize to change our fate. He wants to give us what we *deserve* . That’s why we’re leaving Norhavellis.”

“Leaving,” I echoed blankly. “We’ve never been able to leave.”

To leave Norhavellis would be to abandon it.

After Eden’s death, Mother and Father had petitioned the Light Bringer, begging for his aid against Norhavellis’s Corruption. For fair elixir prices. For medical supplies. For more trained guardsmen to protect us. But seasons passed, Corruption worsened, and seasons stretched into years. They never received a reply.

The Light Legion came only to restock our elixir supply and collect—or hunt, if they escaped—our Corrupt.

And so Norhavellis sank, year after year, into despair. Crops withered, buildings crumbled, and its people resorted to rage, greed, and deception. Corruption festered and bubbled over like an infection. But we couldn’t just leave.

Even though I deeply, *desperately* wanted to do just that.

I was sick of the darkness—sick of the despair. It clung to every interaction, scraping at the edges like a starved wolf.

“I know,” Mother said, exhaling. The sound was hollow and heavy. She brushed a strand of hair from my eyes. “But Eden was taken from us, and last night we almost lost you and Elliot, too. Your Father and I won’t stand for it any longer. We must claim a different future for ourselves.”

Sorrow ripped through me at the sound of Eden’s name. As it always would.

“But who will care for the Corrupt? Who else will manage the elixir?”

Mother shook her head, smiling sadly. Shadows from the fire danced across her face, carving out its most hollow parts. “Absolvers from our neighbors in Ystoven have agreed to share our burden. One will manage the duties of this place. Keep it safe with new guards until the Light Bringer selects our replacement.”

Wind threaded through the walls again, breathing out in a long, meandering sigh. A rattle sounded from the front of the house as it passed, almost as if someone was tapping lightly at the door. I tensed, looking at Mother and Elliot. They heard it, too.

Three uneven knocks. Two soft and dragging, one bolder and short.

Mother grabbed a candle and hid a knife in her skirts, motioning for me to do the same. “A precaution, of course,” she said, voice low. “It is likely just your father.”

“Father doesn’t knock,” I whispered back, incredulous. The knife felt wrong in my hands; I didn’t feel capable of using it.

The knocks subsided. There was only the wind, groaning through the crevices in the walls.

Mother gave each of us a fierce look. “Be unafraid," she said, setting the candlestick down and gripping the latch. “We cannot afford otherwise.”

As she opened the door, a sour wind blew in. I pulled my sweater over my nose, nearly gagging from the familiar stench.

“Good evening,” my mother said, voice cracking. “How may we help you?”

A woman and two children stood on our porch, miserable and pale. The woman, not much older than I, aimlessly caressed both her skirt and her children’s dirty hair.

“G-good evening, Mrs. Havenfall.”

Mother smiled, ever the proper host. “It’s fortunate you were able to make it this far without any trouble. The woods can be a dangerous place at night.”

“I know. I don’t like to come out this late, but they’re really sick.” She shot a nervous glance over her shoulder and continued, whispering conspiratorially, “I don’t believe the rumors, you know. About what happened to the Radlers and all. Please. I—I can’t lose them.”

Mother nodded knowingly. “Of course.”

“You remember my twins, Ronnie and Isabelle. Say ‘hello’,” she said, peering down at her children and coaxing them to acknowledge us.

Ronnie’s face was a blank slate as he looked up at his mother. His lips mouthed *hello* , but the actual sound didn’t come. Isabelle merely buried her face within her mother’s skirts, whimpering softly.

“Hello, sweet ones,” Mother said gently, patting them on their scuffed shoulders.

The children were barely past their third birth year, but a cloudy substance dripped from their lashes. It mingled with a thick, flesh-colored fixative that covered the upper half of their faces, forcing the skin to fracture in several places.

Darkness peeked up at us through the cracks.

“Beautiful, courageous children,” Mother said, bending at the waist so she was level with the twins. “Let’s make you better again, shall we? More concealment, perhaps?”

Concealment, because elixir would be futile. Corruption had no cure, just as the shadows on their faces couldn’t be scrubbed off.

Still, Mother guided the family into the apothecary and pulled several glass jars from the shelves. She worked quickly, mixing pigment from the jars with water and a touch of ointment. While I washed the children’s faces, Elliot entertained with a tale of Lelantos, the Air Weaver. It was a delightful story—one I knew well from the book of Weaver tales—but the twins seemed unfamiliar with it.

“An’ then, the mountain burst like an egg,” Elliot continued, throwing his arms open dramatically. “Lelantos *flies* from the rock, reborn with *wings* !”

Elliot jumped to his feet and pretended to soar around the room. Once he made a few passes, he knelt in front of the twins, an intense expression on his face.

The children broke into laughter. I struggled to focus on their smiles, not the shadows marking lines into their skin. They remained remarkably still as Mother finished her treatment, blending the thick concealment onto their skin until the shadows no longer showed.

Her concealment technique was a quick and inexpensive fix, but it would only last a few days at most. Just long enough to preserve the children’s dignity before the Light Legion came and took them away. And that was perhaps the cruelest part of all. Their souls would be saved by the Light Bringer, but their Corrupted bodies would still have to die.

Because once a demon claimed its victim, nothing could be done.

The demon would feed, slowly and *delightfully* , one dream after another, until the afflicted mind rotted and its body bore physical signs of its decay. It might take years if one was strong enough to resist, but few ever could. Demons preferred weak and wandering souls. The poor. The weary. Those without warm meals and shoes on their ruined feet. Those without parents who loved them.

Most fell into full Corruption within a month.

The tales told of a great ruler, one of Noctis’s ancient kings, who united the seven Weavers in battle against the demons. The Weavers fought valiantly, warring horrific fights that spanned both the mortal world and the

Dream Realm, but they were vastly outnumbered. The king recognized the inevitability of their defeat; his strength was failing just as the Weavers began to fall. As a final gift before his death, the king created the elixir, a draught that buffered Noctis from the Realm. With the last of his strength, and the last of the remaining Weavers, he sentenced the Shadow Bringer to eternal damnation.

Some said the king went mad after creating the elixir and sealing away the Shadow Bringer's body. They whispered that his queen lost herself to Corruption and his heir consorted with the very demons he sought to destroy.

I wasn't sure. And I wasn't sure that I cared, either—not when the elixir failed the ones who needed it the most. The king's cure no longer protected the kingdom; it protected the wealthy. Few others could consistently afford its cost without sacrifice. As a result, there were always men and women with the beginnings of shadows leaking into their cheeks and fingernails. And *children* .

I shuddered.

It was a cruel mockery for children to be Corrupt.

I closed my eyes, momentarily losing myself. This was the reality of the world: mothers who couldn't purchase the elixir for herself or her children. Even just a mouthful.

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CHAPTER 5

MITHRAS ATRELLE TETHEBRUM, LIGHT BRINGER AND NOCTIS'S HOLY sovereign, drank deep from a goblet of honey wine.

He drank so deeply, in fact, he nearly choked.

Mithras stifled a curse and rubbed his mouth, recoiling at the film of honey that clung to his tongue. The taste wasn't unlike the rest of his tent—overpowering and miserable. Still rubbing his mouth, he eyed the walls of his tent, which were draped in gold-threaded tapestries and shiny artifacts from across his kingdom. It all stank. Reeked of Noctis's finest, most cloying perfume.

Beyond his tent, his legionnaires were probably telling tales over roasted meat and mulled cider, relishing that their hunt was nearly through and their tents didn't reek of perfume and honey wine. One more village, a swift ride to collect two Corrupt, and they'd travel with pride and glory back to Istralla, victorious.

He hated it all.

A throbbing in his temple—*one, two* —told him they were close and there might be others, too. No matter. He'd deal with that when they arrived.

He could sense the kingdom's Corrupt as if they were festering wounds. It was his power and his curse. Knowledge of the Corrupted's existence assaulted him in waves, pulling at his throat or pricking his chest the closer they were. A cursed gift, but one he carved his life around.

A gift he was *worshiped* for.

It was why he usually hid or disguised himself when making rounds to the villages, though that was becoming increasingly more difficult as of

late.

He was contemplating ripping his tent into shreds when a hooded figure slipped into his tent, unannounced and unnoticed by his guards.

Mithras lifted his glass. “To what do I owe the pleasure?” He added, mouth twisting into a scowl, “Or to whom?”

Theia, immortal Weaver of the Future, settled beside him, arranging her legs atop a velvet cushion. Pale as bone, with eyes and hair to match, she moved like a ghost formed to life.

A haunted woman indeed.

“Mithras,” she acknowledged, pouring herself a glass of his wine. Her eyes, luminous underneath her hood, found his. It unnerved him when she did that. It was as though she saw something in his soul that he could not. “Your tent is as golden and as gaudy as ever.”

“Mmm,” Mithras agreed, idly swirling the liquid in his own glass. The more he drank of it, the more sour it tasted. “Surely you didn’t come here just to insult my good taste.”

Theia frowned. “To business, then, if you prefer.”

He lifted his glass in a mock salute. “To business.”

“There is something telling in the air tonight. And it is not your legion’s roast pig,” she said, her gaze roaming to his tapestries as she took a drink. She gestured to the nearest tapestry, a depiction of the Seven’s banishment of the Shadow Bringer. Seven Weavers formed a ring around the Shadow Bringer’s broken body, sealing him with chains of light. At the center, shaping the final seal, was Mithras, clad in golden armor up to the ends of his golden hair.

“We are nearing five-hundred years. The tide is shifting, Light Bringer.”

“What have you seen?” Mithras asked, forgetting his goblet and leaning forward on his knees.

She stilled, considering him. “A girl, singing the song of one left to the dark. It is promising. Soon you will see her, and soon you will know.”

“He is restless. She will not be safe.”

Theia nodded, lips tightening. “But she will be his lock and his key. If you can manage just a bit longer, I’m certain we can—”

A sudden pain lanced through Mithras’s skull, doubling him over. It was a specific pain—one that spoke of death and hatred. It felt like shifting skies, the crush of bone under an iron fist, and the insufferable stench of

something masking its rot. Theia caught the look in his eye, at the shifting of his expression.

She retreated quietly, tucking her face into her hood, and slipped into the night.

Alone in his tent, unseen, Mithras’s goblet slipped from his fingers. The last of the wine spilled out, yellow, sick, and slow.

He did not try to stop it.

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CHAPTER 6

FOR THE THIRD TIME THAT NIGHT, ELIXIR SAT SOUR AND WRONG ON MY tongue.

Sleep taunted me, toyed with me—wrapped its hands around my eyes and *called* to me—but I couldn't settle. Unease descended in a black, horrible cloud, prying my mind into pieces.

Irritated and exhausted, I took a fourth mouthful and fell back into my pillows.

But nothing happened.

Again.

Well, nothing except for the sensation of long-limbed insects dragging their bodies over my legs. I shuddered and sat up again, reaching for the vial. I would take a longer drink and count backwards from a thousand. A hundred thousand, even. I would bar Thomas's corpse and the leaking eyes of two three-year-olds from my mind. But when the glass grazed my lips, only a small rivulet of liquid trickled out.

I stared in disbelief at the empty vial.

How could I have used so much? Our family's supply wasn't endless like the villagers believed. And here I was, wasting a quarter of a vial in a *single night* .

Disgusted with myself, I stormed downstairs to our personal elixir reserve. I didn't have a choice; if the tonic wasn't immediately taken before sleep, my soul might drift into the realm of demons. But this was another reason the average family—the average *person* , even—struggled to maintain an elixir supply. A stomach tight with hunger, fear, or discontent

made sleep difficult, but most couldn't afford more than one or two mouthfuls per day.

I searched the dark recesses of our kitchen shelves, expecting to graze the smooth glass of elixir vials, but I felt nothing but dust and shadows.

Strange.

I peered through a window at our barn near the woods, noting the tell-tale glow of candlelight. But the more I stared, contemplating if I should risk making the trek to where my father or mother might be, the weaker the light seemed.

Norhavellis's supply, tucked away in our apothecary, silently beckoned.

The elixir trade curtailed Noctis's susceptibility to Corruption, and Absolvers were required by law to document the elixir consumption of families within their assigned territory. My mother and father were healers, farmers, elixir suppliers, and Absolvers—overseers of Corruption. But secretly, and sometimes not so secretly, the Norhavellians despised them. They assumed we had an endless supply of elixir all to ourselves, and they hated us for it.

If only they knew how we suffered.

Darkness pushed into the apothecary, bloating the walls with thick shadow, and plants cascaded from the ceiling, pressing against curtain-drawn windows. They felt serpentine, more akin to slimy, writhing beasts than harmless vegetation.

I quickly searched for a spare vial, ignoring the sensation that something was watching me, lurking just beyond my vision. Once I found what I was looking for—a small portion of elixir, suitable for a few mouthfuls—I hurried upstairs, drank from the vial, and settled under my blankets, fully prepared for an unremarkable night of dreamless sleep.

I FELL.

Wildly.

Relentlessly.

My hands clenched around wet, slimy things. Cold mud. Decaying leaves. I was a doll, a stone—useless, *useless* —slamming into branches and the sharp underside of tree roots. By the time I stopped moving, I didn't recognize the gasping, pitiful breaths that stumbled out of me.

Slowly, I opened my eyes.

Trees swayed overhead, glistening softly in the twilight. Still reeling, I absently noted the dark, wet soil between my fingers. The papery leaves as they pressed against the back of my head. I sat up, gently stretching out my joints. I must have been delivering elixir parcels with Mother and Father. I must have fallen from the cart as we made our rounds.

Yes, that was it.

They must be so worried.

The whisper of a melody caught my attention, the only indication of any life beyond trees, mud, and a rapidly darkening sky. The song was beautiful—simple and carefree. It reminded me of a time when Eden and I were finally allowed to go into the Visstill Forest by ourselves. We were on a mission to collect a certain herb, but the job itself didn't matter. We spent that whole morning pretending we were warriors, sparring with branches and dancing through the tall grass as if nothing could ever hurt us.

I sang along to the tune, making up words as I went. Time lost itself as I walked, but I continued to sing, deep in my thoughts and my made-up song, until I heard the crunch of quick footsteps moving through the leaves. I had only an instant to grab a fallen branch, its tip curved and sharp, before they were upon me.

A group of men materialized from the brush, covered in oily fur and the stench of unwashed flesh. They slunk around me, silent except for muffled panting. Their costumes were terrifyingly intricate; there were no seams in the material.

Performers, then.

My palms felt hot around my makeshift weapon. Humans, even if they were just performers, shouldn't *ever* look the way they did. It was unnatural. A mimicry of life.

"What do you want?" I asked, my voice uncontrollably shrill. "My father and mother are the Absolvers of Norhavellis. They're somewhere near—" I didn't know where to look. They were everywhere, forcing me backwards. Where were their *eyes* ? "*Get away from me!* "

Were they from Norhavellis? Did the Radlers send them in revenge for killing Thomas? The more I considered the idea, the more hysterical I felt. Was I to be killed? Tortured? Left to starve in this maze of decaying trees?

One performer stalked toward me, growling out puffs of air from slits in the mask's nose. I lurched backwards and tripped, collapsing to the ground.

They were wretched. Absolutely *wretched* . My head was burning—white dots sparked across my vision.

I shut my eyes tight.

Then, I realized. Remembered.

I was *asleep* —I was *asleep* , and this was a *dream* —

My eyes flew open. The men weren't performers. They were *demons* , grinning at me with maniacal glee. Saliva oozed from between their cracked lips, sliding into their fur. If I didn't escape, they'd force me into Corruption.

Dragging myself to my feet and blindly picking a direction, I ran for my life.

I still had a purpose.

I had to *live* .

DO everything in your power to run or hide from the demons. You cannot fight them.

Surprise or harm your body enough to force it into consciousness.

Seek shelter in one of the Weaver's domains; they are no more, but their domains stand firm.

THE VOICES of my mother and father rang through my head, reminding me of each rule and every dire, deadly warning. But I knew with sickening certainty that I couldn't outrun a demon, I didn't have the bravery to harm myself when everything felt so real, and I had absolutely no chance of finding a Weaver's sacred domain. I wasn't capable of *any* of those things. Still, I ran deeper into the woods, attempting to change my fate. The trees shifted around me, branches gleaming like dark, iridescent fish scales, just as the forest melded into a vision of jeweled hues and emerald hills, shimmering leaves spiraling to meet fragrant, glowing flowers.

Beautiful.

I nearly laughed. No one told me that damnation could be *beautiful* .

"*Girl .*"

I stiffened. They found me.

“*Girl* ,” repeated the voice, raspy and hollow like bones being dragged across gravel. “*What is a mortal doing within the Shadow Bringer’s domain* ?”

A figure, vaguely masculine, stepped into the clearing, filthy and solemn. He looked as though he recently clawed his way from the very depths of Hell to stand there, digging through layer and layer of earth until he finally broke free. Thick cords of hair wilted from his scalp, hanging at crooked angles, and mud clung to most of his body. A tattered piece of embroidered cloth clung to his shoulders, trailing into the dirt behind him, and his eyes matched the state of his hair, grey and sagging.

“*Look around* ,” the figure said, stilling itself. “*Do you see?* ”

The demons moved to surround me, forming a loose circle within the glistening trees.

What do I see? I see demons. I see ugliness. I see filth.

But I also saw a clearing, bursting with luminous trees and glowing flowers. I saw darkness settling over the emerald grass like a velvet cloud. I scanned the space again, finally settling on something in the distance that was murky and irregular.

“*Yes—you have found it,* ” the creature sighed.

The massive shape of *something* unfurled before me like the husk of some newly discovered creature. The form of it slipped in and out of focus, sometimes taking shape, other times whisking away into the air as though it was nothing.

Is that a fortress? Some sort of mountain?

Breathe. I needed to breathe.

I took a lungful of perfumed air, willing my mind to clear. I examined my hands, staring at my tear-blurred skin until it sharpened. Satisfied with the clarity of my fingers, I took a final breath, steadying myself.

I looked up.

A castle loomed overhead, casting a thickening darkness over the land. It was a goliath of lofty spires and obsidian walls, and stars dappled the expanse of sky just beyond it, mingling with the last dying thread of day. Moonlight reflected in the stained-glass arches of the upper floors, illuminating the glass.

It was a palace of shadow and starlight.

I could feel the power it held; so deep within the gilded woods, it seemed to foretell a presence that waited in silken, shadowed corners and

watched. When I finally tore my eyes away, I was alone. Gone were the demons and the grey-haired being.

Pressure formed within my stomach, willing me to move, so I walked to the castle's sprawling courtyard, unable to keep from admiring its uncanny beauty. Lush floral arrangements bloomed from sapphire vases, dipping into starry water that poured from stone fountains. I ran a hand along a vase, alarmed that it felt so *real* . I could touch the surface, glossy and dark, and feel the twilight air upon the glass.

My acute sense of touch also told me that my hands were shaking, which was a problem.

Demons sensed fear like animals smell blood; they could latch onto your weakness and gnaw on it until they consumed all of you. Or at least that's what the tales claimed.

"Pleasant thoughts now," I whispered, swearing to banish 'gnaw' and a few other choice words from my current mental vocabulary.

As I neared the castle's colossal iron doors, my smallness became painfully obvious. I was utterly insignificant here, not at all capable of battling demons or the wicked lord who ruled over them all.

But despite my fear, I felt the urge to knock.

Knock.

Knock.

Knock.

My hand tapped the cold metal three times. A metallic, unnatural noise rang out, echoing throughout the courtyard. The doors quivered in time with the echoes, rippling as its surface changed; every inch of the dark material carved away at itself, forming into thousands of meticulously detailed sculptures.

I tried to examine the images, but they escaped me, flitting from my vision like spinning grains of dust. Was that a person? A white-haired monster? Nothing at all?

The shadows stained everything—I couldn't see.

I can't see .

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CHAPTER 7

I SAT UP IN A PANIC, KICKING AT THE TANGLED BLANKETS AROUND MY LEGS. They felt like arms, legs, *fingers* . Barely suppressing a scream, I stumbled to my dresser, hands trembling as I lit a candle.

I was Corrupt.

This time I *had* to be.

Breath lodged in my throat as I examined my fingers, too terrified to begin with my face. Delaying the inevitable was pointless; the earliest sign of Corruption was bruised skin under the eyes. Still, I searched every finger for purple skin clinging to my nails. Then my wrists, the inner crook of my elbows, and the sore skin of my neck.

Nothing, nothing, *nothing* .

I should be relieved, but what if my face looked like Thomas's, feral and distraught? I would need to conceal my skin. Mask it with paste and powder.

I gripped the edge of the dresser, shuddering as I imagined being haunted by the dream demon's sagging, grey face for the rest of my short life. No longer would I sleep and sink into the comfort of darkness. From now on, even if I took the elixir, I would dream of the demon who had found me.

I finally forced myself to meet the eyes in my reflection.

I saw dark hair winding into messy curls, arched eyebrows framing bloodshot eyes, and lips raw and red from biting them in my sleep.

And the skin under my eyes was clear.

Clear .

I crumbled, knees hitting the floorboards.

But wait—

The *elixir* .

I took it before I slept, but not from our personal supply. No, our supply was empty, so I had taken a vial from the village's. I took the vial from my nightstand and examined it by the candlelight. It didn't taste, smell, or look any different, but how else was I able to dream so vividly? I clutched my throat, the ghost of Thomas's fingertips bruising my skin.

"*You've damned us all* ," Thomas growled against my ear. His curved, feverish body loomed over me. "*You lied to us. You made us believe.* "

"Esmer?" Elliot ventured, sitting up from his pile of blankets. I nearly jumped out of my skin at the sudden movement. "What's wrong?"

"Just feeling a little sick to my stomach," I offered weakly.

Elliot stared back, considering. What did he see when he looked at me? How much did my eyes reveal? "Please don't lie to me. I know somethin' ain't right."

I hesitated a second too long, unable to wield the right words to deny the question.

"That's—" he began, squinting at the vial in my hands, " Village-marked."

I bit the inside of my cheek. "I didn't have a choice."

Footsteps echoed from the stairwell, jolting us both to attention. I tossed the vial under my pillow just as Father entered to wake us, bringing with him the scent of smoke and soil. His rough skin, burnt dark from years in the sun, was wet.

Tears? Sweat? Blood?

The dancing shadows, cast by the candlelight, made it difficult to tell.

THE MORNING WAS mild as we rode through the Visstill.

Sunlight spilled over the trees, casting a milky glow through the branches. It spread over roaming, coarse-haired animals slinking back into their dens, over leaves lifted into the air by an early morning wind, and over my father and mother.

Father, hair clean and combed, wore newly oiled boots, a dark wool tunic, and a crossbow strapped to his back. Mother rode beside him, holding the reins of her mare with precision and grace. She had chosen a patterned

dress with ruffled sleeves that skimmed the top of her gloves. It was something I hadn't seen her wear in years.

Mother and Father, the possible reason behind an entire village's Corruption, dressed in their finest.

You've damned us all . You lied to us. You made us believe.

"Why's your face look all scary, 'smer?"

My hands flew to my eyes. I must have overlooked the markings of Corruption. He knew, he could see—

"What're you doin' now?" Elliot gave me an even more perplexed look. "Spider fall on your head?"

"Wh—what?"

"Spider? Fall? On? Your? Head?" He puffed out each word dramatically.

"No," I said, forcing myself to roll my eyes and stretch my arms. "Just lost in thought. And *you* just happened to scare me."

"Hmm. Doubtful." When I didn't respond, Elliot rode closer and tapped my shoulder. "Sleep on a rock? Forget to pack your favorite dress?" He frowned, chewing on his cheek. "Though I guess you only have two or three, huh? So it's not so much to worry about, really. Unless you didn't pack any 'sides the old one you're wearin'."

"Definitely not worried about that," I replied, aiming to sound as nonchalant as possible. "There will be plenty of fancy dress shops in Istralla to replace all my old dresses. I'll be looking like a queen before long."

"Sure ya will," he said, grinning. We both knew I didn't have money for things like pretty dresses, but it was fun to indulge in the possibility. Pretty dresses, a comfortable home by Istralla's equally glorious sea, delicious food, bottles of elixir—it was an unreachable dream. A beautiful, unreachable dream. "It's excitin', huh?"

I returned his smile, doing my best to take long, even breaths, and relaxed into the rhythm of my horse. The motion lulled my senses into something mimicking peace, and I forced my wandering thoughts to settle. Surely I was just overthinking things. With the rot of Norhavellis behind, there was only hope and possibility left.

"We should prepare for our entrance into Istralla," Father remarked suddenly, breaking the silence we had settled under. "I imagine we will be escorted to take audience with the Light Bringer."

Elliot yelped. "The Light Bringer!"

“Well, if we can—”

“An’ then what?” Elliot broke in. “What’s Istralla like?”

Mother laughed, a soft, delighted sound. “Be at ease, Elliot. You’ll find out soon enough.”

“But Esmer an’ I don’t know a whole lot about Istralla,” Elliot trailed off, looking hopeful. “I just thought we could talk about it.”

“All right, all right. I can tell you a bit about Istralla first. But only if it will quicken your pace,” Father said, looking oddly pleased. It was as though he *wanted* to tell us more. “Istralla is the City of Dreams. And, as legends tell, where the Weavers and their disciples once held court.”

“Uh-huh,” Elliot confirmed. “I knew that.”

Father gave Elliot a sidelong glance. “But do you know that the Weavers are still there, locked in their tombs beneath the city?”

Elliot’s mouth gaped open. “No way. I thought they were lost.”

“Could be a rumor, for all I know. But think about it.” His eyes began to take on a strange light. “All those Weavers, defenseless underground.”

I contemplated that word: *defenseless.*

Dark thoughts rose again as I looked at Father, likely giving him an expression he wasn’t used to seeing from me. I wanted to grab him by the shoulders and shake him, demanding answers to unimaginable questions.

What are you hiding from us?

Why did I dream of demons after taking elixir meant for the village?

My horse yanked against the reins, jerking its head to the side. He snorted loudly, pawing at the ground until he was nearly horizontal on the path. I clutched the reins, attempting to right our path, but the gentle creature didn’t—or couldn’t—obey. My parents’ horses were in a similar state of nervousness, entirely unresponsive to their commands, tender or otherwise. Elliot’s horse, a gelding old and hard of hearing, just stared ahead in the direction we were originally traveling in.

“*Quiet* ,” Father hissed. “Right your horses. Come on, now.” His eyes were wide and wild, mirroring those of the creature below him.

Despite the glow of the morning sun, shadows thickened and curled from the Visstill’s depths. I strained to hear what the horses could hear, but all I could make out was the rasp of leaves against the branches that held them. Just silence and the sun beating persistently against my neck. It reminded me of my dream—of being surrounded by an unknowable enemy intent on evil.

A single rider emerged from the shadows.

His clothing was immaculate, interwoven with layers of white and gold, and his cloak, as brightly hued as his horse's white hide, swept across his back in a brilliant drape. A gilded mask partially hid his face, leaving only his tan jaw and golden hair exposed.

"Hold," the rider commanded, voice threading powerfully through the trees.

Father cursed. It was a wretched, defeated sound. "We hold. Please don't hurt us."

As the rider drew nearer, he began circling, studying each of us in turn.

"Dismount."

We did as we were told, moving so that our shoulders pressed together. Elliot grabbed onto my cloak, the faded maroon cloth quivering underneath his fingers.

"What is the meaning of this?" Mother demanded, stepping forward to face the rider. "You dare harass an innocent family on their way to the capital?"

The man assessed her, lips failing to reveal any slip of emotion. He then swept an arm into the air, uncurling his fist so that each of the fingers on his gloved hand was upright.

"You are not being harassed."

The forest rustled in unison around us.

"You are not innocent."

Men and women in golden armor, masked like their leader, trickled out from the shadows as if they were waiting for us all along.

The Light Legion.

I flinched at the recognition, fear jolting down my spine.

The Light Legion were famed across the kingdom for hunting Corrupt. They would not be here without reason. They were *never* in Norhavellis without reason.

"You are hereby charged with high larceny against your kingdom and sovereign, unlawful escape from your crimes, and the murder of the innocent people under your care." The man continued as his voice, now enveloped in violence, rose in strength and volume. "Surrender, Galena and Elena Havenfall, or die like the worms you are from where you stand."

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CHAPTER 8

NORHAVELLIS WAS MORE ALIVE THAN IT HAD BEEN IN MONTHS.

No, *years* .

Doors flung wide on their hinges, opened by villagers clamoring to get the best possible vantage point. They gathered as entire households, and they were *furious* . It was impossible to ignore the teeth, the stench, the snarls. Teeth gleaming within dirty faces. The smell of mud and rotting things. The growls. The curses.

Villagers spit at Mother and Father as we passed, not entirely ignoring Elliot and I, and hurled fistfuls of dirt and stone through the air, pelting our skin and soiling our clothes. Legionnaires surrounded us as we moved, but the crowd surged against them regardless, worming their bodies forward.

“Devil worshippers!” an old woman cried, barreling her fists against a legionnaire’s raised shield. He pushed her away, but she persisted. “Rot in Hell with the Shadow Bringer!”

“Damn you, Absolvers!” howled another, holding up the remnants of a little girl’s tattered dress. “Damn you all! You *killed* her!”

“Heretics!”

“*Murderers* !”

Anger and shame burned in my stomach. Anger at the accusations. Shame at the sea of bitter, disgusted faces. Anger at not knowing. Shame at what little I *did* . They accused Mother and Father of selling weakened, watered-down elixir to the people of Norhavellis, causing them to fall into Corruption at an unnatural pace.

What was it, then? A lie or the truth?

Elliot’s face, dirty and tear-streaked, was tucked tightly against his shoulder. It was clear he couldn’t believe that Mother or Father would betray anyone, let alone the entire village of our birthright.

I felt sick to my stomach.

What did I believe? What *could* I believe?

BY THE TIME we reached the torch-lined clearing of our home, the sky was dark and the air had chilled, creeping in from the depths of the lengthening shadows. The commander motioned for the torches to be lit, and the flames —more red than usual—sparked crimson light into the space. Some legionnaires entered into our storehouse, dragging out sealed boxes of elixir, medical supplies, and burlap bags filled with seed; others ransacked our home, pulling out vials of elixir, books, furniture—there appeared to be no order to their selection—and began sorting through it, burning some items and packing away others.

The commander walked over to our family, a hand resting firmly atop the sword at his side. The glow of the torchlight made his mask gleam red. “We have confiscated your elixir supply,” he said. “The Light Legion will monitor you tonight; tomorrow you will stand trial.” He looked at Elliot, then settled his gaze on me. “Though we have not yet decided *your* fates.”

“So, we are damned,” Father said. It was a simple statement, not directed at anyone or anything other than the dirt at his feet.

The commander shook his head. “It is a pity—truly—that someone in your station could be filled with such wickedness.” He shook his head again, slowly stepping around us. Even off his horse, the man exuded power and something else. Something I couldn’t give words to.

Something not of this cold, dark world.

“Lower and unveil them.”

They shoved Father and Mother to their knees. Legionnaires heaved over a trough of sloshing barn water, groaning under the weight of the particle-filled liquid, and dropped it with a heavy *thump* atop the grass. Then they knotted their fingers in my parent’s hair and shoved their heads under the surface.

Mother and Father thrashed. Violently.

The men worked meticulously, washing and peeling away their skin. Only—no, it was not skin at all. It was *concealment* .

“No,” I said, absently. I didn’t even realize I was speaking. “No. No, *no* __”

Dark bruises marred the delicate skin under my mother’s beautiful blue eyes, a mirror to Eden’s. Veiny black threads intertwined with the wrinkles on my father’s tan skin. But before they could speak—or Elliot and I could string a coherent sentence from our lips—we were dragged backwards through dirt and grass toward our home. Time slowed to a trembling crawl. The only sound I could hear was from the commander as he condemned my parents to Hell, his eloquent voice reverberating like poison in my ears.

No. No. No.

They had already ransacked our room. Paper, clothes, and blankets lay strewn about the chipped wooden floorboards, and a smell—a smell of something *other* , something not of our family—seeped through the space. Elliot rushed to his bed and curled against the wall. He grabbed for his stuffed cow—usually tucked away from prying eyes—and held it near to his chest as tears spilled down his cheeks.

He must have forgotten to pack it .

Two men stationed themselves at our doorway, positioning their bodies so that they could see both inside the room and downstairs into the foyer. Their faces, partially covered by masks, appeared to lack emotion or a single distinguishing feature.

“Are we expected to *sleep* now?” I asked them, incredulous. I felt dizzy with something resembling amusement. Everything felt false. A distant, crazed vision never meant to last. “What will happen to our mother and father? When will they be cleansed by the Light Bringer?”

The legionnaires didn’t respond. I couldn’t tell if they even acknowledged my presence—their masks cast such dark shadows over their eyes.

“We will need elixir, first. Even if our parents are Corrupt, Elliot and I require it.” Words spun around in my mind, forming aimless, murky sentences—sentences I didn’t wish to bring into existence. And that word—*Corrupt* —tasted like bile on my tongue. “Your commander said that our fate wasn’t decided. We need the elixir. As is proper.”

More silence. They did not so much as twitch a muscle.

“I said—”

“No.”

The rough burst of sound startled me. “What?”

“You will not drink elixir, girl. It wouldn’t serve you, anyway.”

The strange feeling of amusement stopped, instead replaced by a vision of Elliot, Corrupt and rotting from within, dark marks running like wounds from his eyes.

“Where is your commander?”

The legionnaires were silent.

“Did you not hear me? He said our fate wasn’t decided. *Where is your commander* ?”

“Our lord is none of your concern,” the shorter of the two said.

“Your lord is very much of my concern—”

The taller legionnaire crossed his arms, clearly irritated. “Lord Mithras, our *holy Light Bringer* , decides when and where his concern is placed.”

“Even better,” I laughed. The sound felt unhinged in our destroyed bedroom, silent except for Elliot’s muffled cries.

Of course the commander would be the Light Bringer.

He rarely made himself known when performing Corruption rites, preferring instead for his legionnaires to bring the Corrupted directly to him. Because of this, I had never seen the Light Bringer in the flesh. Still, it seemed logical. Golden hair, a powerful presence, an army of devoted followers.

“He out of anyone would allow us to drink the elixir. You must allow it, or else—” Or else what? I’d throw them in the imaginary dungeons of Norhavellis? Cook them into a stew? Banish them from our property with the pointy end of a spade? “—or else I’m certain the Light Bringer will punish you.”

The shorter legionnaire leered at me. His beady eyes shone in the faint candlelight. “Our lord will do no such thing, as you do not even know him.”

Dark thoughts, once nameless and without force, rose to meet me. The Light Bringer would cleanse Mother and Father’s souls, but the process would destroy their mortal bodies. It was what happened to all Corrupt. Left unchecked, Corrupted men and women would commit unspeakable, violent crimes against their friends and neighbors.

Against their families, too.

But where would Elliot and I go? How would we survive in a village our family betrayed? The bitter truth laid itself bare: we had nowhere to go. How *could* we survive?

I sat next to my brother, wrapping my arms around his slight shoulders. He leaned away from me, burying his face in his hands. I stroked his hair, settling into what I hoped was a calming rhythm. It took all my focus to avoid looking at—or thinking about—the two sentries at our door.

If it was true—that Mother and Father were wholly Corrupt—then anything that happened to them wasn't really hurting *them* . The woman and man that thrashed under the water, gasping for air as they nearly drowned, were just puppets filled with the shadow of a demon. Within the presence of the Light Bringer, their souls would travel somewhere else. Their true selves would be safe, held within the Maker's light.

That's what we'd been taught, at least.

But then there was me.

Was I not already on the path to Corruption? Were demons not roiling under my skin, waiting to take over my soul? I held Elliot tighter. This time, he didn't resist, and he sank against me, sobbing into his elbow.

And that's how we fell asleep—tired, scared, and more alone than we ever were before.

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CHAPTER 9

MY BACK WAS FREEZING. STILL, I CLENCHED MY EYES SHUT. THE DAY could wait.

Yes, it can wait.

But a wind, damp and bitter, wound its way into my flimsy dress, demanding otherwise. I grabbed a bit of my dress, tucking it around my exposed feet, and settled miserably against the pillows behind me. No, not pillows.

A *wall* .

My eyes flew open.

I wasn't in my room. No, I was leaning against a very familiar *castle* .

Ornate carvings were on the castle doors this time, though they were nothing more than blurry shadows before: flowers spiraled into delicate willow tree branches, a young boy rode a cloud shaped like a chariot, and king and queen held court with a sophisticated, beautiful grouping of nobles.

But the more I looked, the more I didn't want to see.

The carvings shifted, transforming into violent, terrible things. The flowers began to burn, shadows bubbled from beneath the willow branches, and the figures' smiles twisted into gaping screams. The boy's cloud spun into a surging tempest of shadow, eating him alive.

I cried out in surprise, wheeling back from the carvings, but I had nowhere to go: a familiar mud-covered creature with a tattered cape was lurching toward me from the castle's courtyard, trapping me.

"*You can see—you can see!* " the figure cried. "*Horror, beauty, dreams, life. Oh, but what will you do now?* "

Shadows fell from the grooves in the carvings, forming into grotesque monsters. They rippled on the surface of the iron doors, moving so quickly that it was difficult to distinguish one from the other. Hooked claws, serrated horns, lips peeled back into malicious grins—I could feel their hatred as they poured out. Hundreds of eyes glared at me, seething with malice. It didn't look like they had the power to break free, undulating against the door as they were, but I didn't want to find out, either.

The mud-covered figure was moving quicker now, stumbling every few paces with his uneven gait.

"Stay away from me!" I screamed, edging closer to the monster-infested castle doors.

"*Must you stare with such disgust?"* The demon held out its arms, inspecting the grey, wrinkled flesh. *"These bodies aren't our own."*

I glared at the figure in return.

"You're making me self-conscious, looking at me like that. "

"Then leave me alone," I hissed. I couldn't believe it. I was conversing with a demon—and a deranged one at that.

"*My mortal body died during—what do you call it?"* It paused, looking at me. I didn't respond, so it continued. *"Forgive me. It's been some time since I walked the true earth or exchanged words with a human still within it. Does your kind acknowledge you by a name? "*

"You will not trick me, demon. I've heard many tales of your deception."

"*Well, if you wish to be ignorant, so be it. "* It tossed the cloth that trailed from its shoulders and bent at the waist, mimicking an aristocratic bow. It stood again, a smile upon its cracked lips. The light of the moon, looming over the castle's many spires, glowed in its eyes. *"Best find haven within the castle walls, or I will devour you. "*

Then it started walking, steadily closing the gap between us.

I turned to the castle doors. The images were disturbing—this was *very* true—and yet something called to me from within.

It was as though someone—or *something* —was tugging on a single, invisible thread fixed tightly around my ribcage and needed me to go beyond the doors of shadows and monsters. The call didn't feel evil, exactly, but it reeked of hatred and despair. It felt familiar, somehow. I stretched my hand out, tentative, prepared to have it violently ripped off by the monstrous carvings. But as soon as I reached their snapping jaws, the

creatures slid away, leaving just enough room on the metal for two carved handles inlaid with onyx stones.

Behind me, the demon shuffled onward, nearly to the base of the castle stairs.

I took a deep breath, steadying myself. If the entrance was locked, I would turn and face the demon. But if I could somehow pry the doors open, I'd lock myself inside. Much to my relief, as soon as my fingertips grazed the handles, the doors swung inward, sliding slowly against a marble floor. The creatures on the doors stilled, shifting their eyes to the abysmal darkness that coaxed from within.

So, not a parlor filled with chandeliers and teacakes, but a gaping maw of oblivion.

Fantastic.

I didn't have time to deliberate my choice. The demon was climbing the stairs, so I hurried into the castle, flinching as the doors crashed shut behind me.

It sounded like the toll of a death bell.

I pulled at my sleeves, stretching the cloth as far as it would go around my wrists. I squinted through the black, hastily trying to make out a light, a shape—*anything* .

"Hello?" I ventured softly. Had I been wrong? Was there no one here, not a single soul living in this shadowed place? Surely someone would come out and—

Something snarled in the distance; the noise hovered in the musty air, raising the hairs on the back of my neck.

I spun around, meaning to race toward the entrance and face the limping demon instead, but there was a significant problem: the doors were gone. I lunged blindly in the general direction of where the doors should be, but found only more space, more open air.

Damn the stars, I was *not* about to become demon fodder.

Inching forward, I finally ran into something solid—a corner. Not a door, but something, at least. I slumped against the stone, legs threatening to give out, but the growl rang out again, low and guttural. Unhurried, even.

As if it knew I couldn't escape.

I shivered as my eyes adjusted to the darkness. The vestibule was cavernous, adorned with dark, opulent furniture and sprawling, gold-framed paintings and mirrors. And the colors—the colors within the space, slowly

emerging, were unlike any I'd seen before in Norhavellis: indigo like the sweeping night sky, emerald like a forest floor at dusk, burgundy like a bruised plum left to settle in red wine.

I clenched my teeth, attempting to muster some courage. I needed to fight. Whatever came—I *had* to fight. If I didn't resist the demons intent on Corrupting me, I'd be just like Mother and Father, hollow and forced clean underneath layers of cloudy water.

And Elliot would be left alone in a world that preferred him rotting in an unmarked grave.

But the vestibule, even with its sumptuous décor, was more like a moonlit cavern than a castle, and as I searched for a weapon—preferably something extra sharp for whatever it was that wished to devour me—I found nothing of use.

Apparently, the lord of this miserable castle never thought it useful to invest in a weapon rack.

I was deliberating over a small table, wondering if I could use it as a shield, when a sudden wind ignited a series of hidden candelabras set deep into the walls. As they burst alive, their ghostly flames appeared in every gilded mirror, casting the paintings in an uncanny glow. Light filled the space, toward where it grazed—but didn't quite reach—a haze of darkness atop a staircase cut in the center of the room. The stairs towered higher than the vestibule's massive ceiling, winding away into the upper floors.

It was there, from within that cloud of shadow, that something began to descend.

He was the most striking—and terrifying—creature I had ever seen.

The young man was beautiful, if beauty was a thing of darkness, hard edges and hollow lines that were stained and cruel. Cloaked in black armor that clung to his body like a second skin, he moved as if he were a shadow or a ghost. His cape trailed behind him, mist-like, and across his brow was a crown of onyx, twisting through a halo of moon-white hair.

"You aren't of the demons or the darkness," he said to me, his low voice dripping with contempt. "Perhaps I should consider you a gift sent by the Weavers for me to kill."

Undulating shadows sparked from his clawed gauntlets, attacking as a current of snakes and forcing me to my knees. I thrashed against the snakes' constricting bodies and bit my tongue, focusing on the pain.

“Wake up,” I hissed at myself, biting harder. “Wake *up* —” I flinched, tasting blood.

Blood?

No one had taught me that a dreamer could bleed.

“Masking your abilities is pointless. I’ll draw them out one way or another,” the man said, each word vibrating richly through the chamber. He continued gliding down the stairs, leading with pointed, armored boots. “Come, let me see your power. Show me which of the Seven commands you.”

“I have no abilities. I have no *power* .” His words felt deliciously irrational. What abilities? What *power* ? The ability to knit the seams of Elliot’s shirts back together? The ability to tremble in the face of danger? “*Let me go* .”

He was nearly to the bottom of the staircase now, scowling at me. The snakes around me tightened, constricting my lungs with their shrinking bodies. “Don’t treat me like a fool,” he warned, his voice firm and unyielding. “Lies and mockery won’t serve you here.”

“I’m not *lying* . You’re mistaking me for someone else.” It was getting difficult to breathe, let alone form words. I withered under his stare but did not look away, searching for courage I did not feel. “Whoever you’re seeking isn’t here. I am *no one* .”

The nameless man tilted his head, looking vaguely thoughtful. “No one? That’s doubtful. Are you their servant, or perhaps a scholar they’ve cast aside?” he sneered, eyeing my clothes with disdain. “Your dress is in a deplorable state.”

“Coming from the man wearing feathers,” I snapped, some of my fear twisting into irritation. “In comparison, I’d say I’m dressed quite practically.”

His silver eyes narrowed. “They aren’t feathers. They’re *scales* .”

As he circled his shadows, the metal scales atop his shoulders, indeed carved to look a bit like feathers, gleamed. They cascaded down his back, settling atop the thick material of his cape, and jointed talons, made of the same carved metal, encased each of his fingers. When he was close enough to touch, the man tightened his hands. The snakes obeyed, squeezing my chest and binding my arms.

“I can’t breathe,” I gasped. The shadows loosened slightly, allowing me to fill my lungs. “Your land and this—this *castle* —appeared to me in a

dream. A *dream* .”

His eyes, resembling shadowy pools of silver, grew darker. They danced between silver and grey, it seemed. “Then leave. Wake up, if you can.”

“Gladly,” I hissed, taking another small scrap of air. “I want nothing to do with you or this miserable place.”

“Truly?” With a half-smile that sent shivers down my spine, he whispered, “Then I think I’ll keep you here with me.”

I gritted my teeth, thrashing against the snakes. “Absolutely not.”

“It is the price a trespasser must pay. The darkness will become you, just as it has done with me. It will consume you, drain you of your light, and leave you cold and empty.” He held his mouth over my ear, smiling cruelly. The desire to bite him hard and make him bleed was overwhelming. “But let’s make a deal, since I’m feeling charitable.”

“This is you feeling *charitable* ?” I muttered.

“To earn your freedom,” he continued, not hearing me, “simply open the door to my castle and let me free.”

“Open it and free yourself,” I snapped. I really, *really* wanted to bite him. “Let me go, *demon* .”

His smile dropped. “I’m no demon.”

“Of course you’re a demon. Your powers are monstrous, and you want to kill me for some reason—”

“You’re all the same,” he snarled. “You just see me as a monster unworthy of living. A monster who isn’t any different from the beasts that roam these halls.”

“Are you any different, though?” I countered, meeting his hate-filled stare with one of my own. His clawed hand felt cold, biting into my neck and making me forget the snakes at my ribs. “You’re everything we’re taught to hate and fear. *You are no different* .”

The great hall, save for the flickering candlelight and my erratic breathing, went completely still. A thread tugged at my ribcage, calling me back into consciousness.

Strangely, I didn’t want to follow it.

I wasn’t ready to face what awaited me at the other end of that thread. I didn’t want to see my mother and father, even if they no longer carried souls, forced away by the Light Legion. I didn’t want to see my brother shattered and without humor or happiness.

I was a coward. I’ve never been strong. Not like Elliot thought I was.

But the thread insisted, pulling at my mind with sharp claws. I couldn’t think, couldn’t move. The pain clawed, burned, *demanded* , muffling the man’s voice and dimming his features.

I don’t understand—help me understand—

Then the shadows exploded, bursting outward in a blaze of light.

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CHAPTER 10

I WOKE UP TO SOMEONE SHAKING ME BY THE SHOULDERS. FINGERS, SMALL and desperate, digging, digging—

"Get up, Esmer!" Elliot screamed, eyes wild and face contorted with anguish. Tears slid down his cheeks, running into his mouth. "Please get up, *please get up—!* "

For a moment, I was unable to comprehend. *Refused* to comprehend. Then the shouts—the shrieks—rose up in a hellish chorus, giving me no other option but to face reality straight in its horrible face.

"We got to hide—they're tryin' to kill us," Elliot wailed, grabbing me by the arm and pulling me up. "It might be too late, but I didn't want to leave you."

As my feet found the floor, I faintly registered a numbness shifting over my limbs. *Fear.* I wanted to hide. I wanted to do nothing *but* hide. But it was too late for that.

I couldn't hide. Not any longer.

"Elliot, who is trying to kill us? The Light Legion?"

"No, the village," he wailed miserably. "*The entire village* ."

The tendons in my knees felt liquid, weak, but I moved toward the windowsill anyways. The sun was hours from lifting over the horizon, but it was not darkness that met my eyes. No—darkness was far from what wrapped itself around our home. Torchlight, dancing fiendishly across our property, stabbed at the night air. The Visstill was alive with glints of metal and crazed, hate-filled eyes. Dozens of eyes, hollow and feral. And they were moving in a frenzied mob toward our home.

They were gathering in front of our *home* .

“I saw—I saw—” Elliot shuddered, his small shoulders curling inwards. “I think Mother and Father are dead. When you didn’t wake up, I thought you might be dead, too.”

“Elliot—”

“I think they’re dead,” he howled, not hearing me. “An’ I don’t want you to end up d-dead either!”

I looked at Elliot’s beautiful, innocent face, and my stomach roiled. Thick, curling lashes clumped together with tears. Eyes a soft, warm brown, now black with grief. Dark hair curling over his ears and neck, now knotted with tangles. I reached out to hold him, to put my arms around him and will the world away, when a crash resonated from the stairs.

A masked legionnaire stumbled up the stairs into our room, clamoring on his hands and knees as something grabbed at his foot from behind. He glanced wildly at Elliot and I as he struggled, kicking again and again—but whatever it was at the foot of our stairs began to pull, dragging him downstairs. As he fell, he grabbed for the railing, clutching the wood with all his strength.

“A little—*help* —would be nice!” the legionnaire yelled, throwing another violent kick at the attacker that I could now see was a Corrupt that resembled a nearby farmer. The young man’s golden armor was streaked with blood, and his cape, now trailing along our floor, left behind darker marks of red. “A knife, a hammer—” He paused to take another kick, groaning with effort. “A chair, a vase—*something* !”

Elliot and I ran frantically around the room, seizing the first objects we saw. Elliot threw a heavy winter blanket, which tangled around the Corrupt’s bloodied body, and I flung a landscape that Eden painted, which ricocheted through the air before it slammed against the Corrupt’s sneering face. The Corrupt fell back, howling, and landed in a heap of unnatural angles at the bottom of the stairs.

The legionnaire jumped to his feet, immediately wincing. “Ah, that stings a bit more than expected,” he hissed, clutching a wound in his side. “Though I do have my legs back, thanks to your valiant…” He trailed off, looking at the lifeless heap at the bottom of the stairs. “Blanket and art throwing. Never seen that one before. Nice.”

“If you’re here to take us with you, we refuse,” I announced, desperately wishing I had an actual weapon in my hands. Corrupt were horrifyingly strong and notoriously difficult to outrun. If we didn’t escape

now—and preferably armed with a weapon or two—we wouldn't stand a chance against the growing mob. "Elliot and I had no part in Norhavellis's Corruption, and you owe us for saving your life. Give us your sword and let us go."

"A shame. You'd stand much more of a chance if you stuck with us." He pulled his mask off, wiping the sweat off his dark brow and stubbled jaw with a swipe of his forearm. He was young—and handsome. Wounded and smeared with blood and dirt, but hardly a year or two older than I was. He didn't put the mask back on. Instead, he clipped it to a holster at his side. "We legionnaires are actually quite honorable, you know. You have nothing to fear from me or anyone else for that matter."

"Two of your *honorable* men refused us the elixir last night. You're trying to tempt us into Corruption like our parents."

He shook his head, frowning. "No—*no* . That's not at all how this works."

"Silas! Silas, where are you?" called a musical voice from somewhere downstairs. "Silas—oh." A masked young woman, clad in the armor of the Light Legion, appeared at the bottom of the stairs, nearly tripping over the Corrupt's body. "I thought this one had you for certain. How fortunate you aren't dead." She glanced between Elliot and I, pulling off her mask and placing it at her side so as to take a better look. Her kohl-ringed eyes, framed by waves of dark red hair, were curious and slightly judgmental. "Ah, the two ruffians. Are these your rescuers?"

"It's great to see you too, Mila," Silas muttered. "And yes, they are."

I drew myself up to my full height, sending the woman the most imposing gaze—not unlike the one the Light Bringer gave my family—that I could muster. "We saved your comrade's life, so you will let us leave at once."

"Let you leave?" Mila asked, clearly perplexed. "You'll need weapons, first. Which do you prefer? Knives? Spears? An axe, perhaps?" She hopped over the Corrupt and bounded up the stairs. Once in our room, she looked around, frowning at what she saw. "Why, you're not fighters at all, are you? Especially, *you* , little boy," she said, gesturing absently at Elliot, who made a face back at her. "What shall we do with them, Silas? Can't have them running around with wooden spoons."

The Corrupt at the bottom of the stairs shuddered and groaned.

Silas and Mila shared a pointed look.

“Now, this probably isn’t the *best* time for this—”

“Mila,” Silas said, a hard edge to his voice.

Mila jumped back down the stairs, ignoring him, and analyzed the Corrupt’s ruined face. “Our Lord of Light would be *very* pleased with this sample.” She pried open the Corrupt’s eyes with a gloved hand; they sharpened into focus under her touch, nearly appearing lucid, but rolled back before its next breath. “Yes, yes. All the right features. Half-conscious, not *too* strong, though he did almost get you—but you’re not much of a fighter either, are you, Silas?” She pulled a line of cording from around her hip, artfully tying knots around the Corrupt’s wrists and ankles. “There, there. Help me move him.”

Silas grunted in reluctant agreement. “Quickly.”

The Light Legion were tasked with collecting—*capturing* , really—all living Corrupt. Citizens who refused to take the elixir, willfully consorted with demons, or were too impoverished to afford it. In the Light Legion’s eyes, all Corrupt, no matter their origin, were one and the same.

I shuddered and crossed my arms, debating on the risks of jumping out of our window and running for the woods as Silas and Mila argued back and forth. I turned to Elliot, who looked just as aghast as I felt. We didn’t say what we were both thinking—that Mother and Father would be sharing the fate of this Corrupt. Their souls would be spared by the Light Bringer, but the demons inside them would be destroyed.

Along with their mortal bodies.

“Elliot, come on,” I whispered, backing slowly toward our window.

Silas didn’t turn, too preoccupied with the wild-eyed woman and the crumpled demon-man at the foot of the stairs, and we slipped out onto the roof without effort. Outside, the fighting and clanging of metal on metal muffled what little sound we made, so we carefully moved to a quieter, darker side of our home. But just as we were considering the best way to climb down, two figures squeezed out of our window.

Silas and Mila scrambled after us, capes catching in the jagged texture of the roof. They crouched forward, balancing against the uneven surface.

“We gotta get away from these crazy guys!” Elliot yelped, shuffling faster toward the edge.

“You both—stop! Stop—*running* —and listen!” Silas yelled, his voice betraying the degree of his wounds. “You’re going to die if you go down there—it isn’t what you think, it’s—”

“Well, would you look at that? They’re running away at an even faster pace.”

“Would you just—”

“What a pain,” Mila sighed, moving at a confident, agile pace that outmatched Silas’s. “Esmer, Elliot. Noble Havenfall siblings—forgive me for earlier. I’m certain you’re both strong in your own way. Care to stop for a chat?”

I faced our armored pursuers, ignoring the plummeting feeling in my chest that I was very, *very* in over my head. Mila was right—I could be strong in my own way. Capable, even. First, I would trip them. Shove them, if I had to. Then, as they sat on the ground with broken ankles and discouraged resolves, Elliot and I would make our escape.

But then I saw the bruised fingers of three Corrupt grasping at the edge below our feet.

“Uh—‘smer!” Elliot screamed, grabbing my hand and yanking me closer to our two suddenly less worrisome enemies.

The Corrupt pulled themselves up until their elbows were pinned to the roof, feet kicking against the side of the house for leverage. They grinned at us—the three of them—and let out a chorus of gleeful snarls.

“Children! How wonderful that you’re still alive,” one rasped. It was Norhavellis’s baker. *Edgar* . His dripping mustache leaked a substance darker than the rings around his eyes—eyes that were no longer of the kind, warm-eyed man who always made do with sparse ingredients, bringing light into Norhavellis where there was scarce any to begin with.

I recoiled, horrified, as I recognized the faces of the others: Muriel and Anna, Edgar’s wife and child.

Their strength—and the unnatural resonance to their voices—must have come from the demons within them. The demons who were now *them* .

“Yes, better for us that they’re not already dead!” Anna bellowed, clambering over the edge before the rest. She was a slim girl near Elliot’s age. If we had the luxury of a schoolhouse, they’d be in the same year. Tears streamed down her cheeks, reflecting in the torchlight, and she headed straight for us, eyes aflame. “You *ruined* us.”

“That’s not true,” Elliot insisted, on the verge of tears again. “We always tried to help.”

“Traitor!” Anna screamed, lunging with a snarl and throwing herself into Elliot’s side with such quickness, such viciousness—before I could

react.

Mila sprung from behind, flipping the girl to the roof with a practiced sweep of her boot. Anna leapt back up—far too quickly—and rolled under Mila's foot, diving for Elliot again. But Mila was quick, too. She knotted a fist in the girl's cloak and flung her away in one fluid, forceful movement, leaving her sprawled on her spine and sliding backwards down the roof. Edgar and Muriel grabbed for Anna's flailing limbs, still struggling to worm their own bodies over the edge.

"Let go'a me! Let *go* !" Anna shrieked.

But the more they grabbed, the more Anna lurched backwards. She slid off the edge, dragging Edgar and Muriel with her. It was Elliot—not Edgar, Muriel, or even Anna—who cried out as they fell. After they hit the ground, they did not move.

"T-they sounded almost—almost *themselves* ," Elliot sobbed.

"Corruption levels aren't always linear," Silas offered. He shifted on his feet a bit, attempting to straighten his posture while balancing on the uneven surface. "It's sometimes impossible to even *see* Corruption. When the demon is skilled at mirroring its chosen, we see what we want to see. And the demons use this against us."

Elliot looked at me, mouth open.

"But it takes time to fully descend into Corruption. How do you know when—? How long did my parents' demons—?" I trailed off, unable to finish my questions. *How do you know when you're dealing with a demon and not the person you've known and loved your entire life? And for how long did my parents' demons watch us from behind their eyes?*

"It's difficult to say," Silas said. He looked grim. "I'm sorry."

"Right, well, enough of this sideways-chitchat," Mila said, grasping us lightly by the elbows and ushering us back to our open window. "We're not safe up here."

Reluctantly, I let her guide me. There was nothing else we could do. Elliot and I didn't have a chance out there—not against the red rage of the Corrupt or the cold precision of the Light Legion. We moved quickly through our home, pausing only to step over the fallen Corrupt at the foot of our stairs, and trailed Silas and Mila as they took us outside again.

Maker.

Fire-burnt wind lashed my face as I beheld the clearing of our property, our *home* . My only world for nineteen years. Next to me, Silas and Mila re-

fastened their masks. They were silent.

But the Corrupt were *loud* .

They thrashed like monsters against the Light Legion, throwing their rage behind the makeshift weapons in their hands. Blacksmith tools, dirt-crusted pitchforks, jagged rocks—anything that extended their reach. The Light Bringer, along with a few of his more ornamented followers, stood apart from the fray. He held a large scepter in his armored hand, and he wove it through the air, chanting as smoke billowed from its crevices. Undulating smoke coiled against my tired skin, freely drifting, rippling, encircling.

The sensation felt ancient and nostalgic.

It was the scent of wet earth, of mud soft from a rainstorm. It was dried, sweet leaves on a warm forest floor. It was security and comfort and dreams. The feel of unbidden promises and primal secrets.

Music thrummed out with the smoke as it spread, led by the Light Bringer and the men and women around him. Voices blended with the low hum of accompanying flutes, and the melody rose in strength with the smoke, growing stronger and more brilliant with every passing moment. The smoke and the music seeped through cracks in my skin, and I exhaled, scarcely conscious, and collapsed backward into the mist-drenched grass.

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CHAPTER 11

I CRASHED INTO A BONE-NUMBING LAKE.

Cold water rushed over my head, burying me. For a moment I was stunned into stillness, suspended and floating.

Incredible.

Water mingled with light and darkness, casting an endless array of luminous shapes over my arms, and the gleam of something iridescent floated through it all, rotating and spinning like a thousand moving stars. It swept over my skin and danced along the lines of my dress, nearly making me forget who I was and where I was supposed to be. A familiar melody hummed in the distance, drifting faintly—ever so faintly—through the water. It repeated itself twice before threading into nothingness. And as the sound faded, so did the light.

At once, the source—the *meaning* —of the sound slammed into me. It was the song from the Light Bringer and his legion.

No—no. I shouldn't be here. I'm not supposed to be here. I'm supposed to be home. Home with Mother and Father. With Elliot.

I clawed to the surface, crying out for breath the moment my mouth met air.

"It's *you* ," a familiar voice snarled.

The nameless man stood at the edge of the water, hate glittering in his eyes. Wet glass the color of twilight arched above him, twining with vines and crumbling stone. The space might have felt oppressive if it weren't for a jagged hole cut through the entirety of it all, allowing the glow of the moon, reinforced by flecks of starlight, to pour in.

“Yes, *me* . Stop haunting my dreams,” I snapped, unable to decide if I should swim to the edge—where *he* was—or remain where I was, suspended in a bottomless pit of icy water. I brought a fingertip to my eyes, wagging it back and forth.

It seemed real enough, for a dream.

“A foolish demand, considering you’re the one trespassing. A second time, no less,” he said, fixing me with a stare equivalent to the temperature of the water. He clasped his metal-encased hands together, drawing a stream of billowing, inky darkness from somewhere within himself. It draped across his shoulders in a languid pile, likely waiting for his orders to capture or maim me in some way. “I tire of your presence.”

“And I tire of yours, too. Help me wake up and we can just forget this ever happened.”

His silver eyes narrowed. “Impossible.”

Shadows rushed from his shoulders, rampaging in fierce, erratic loops over my head. A few separated, springing out from the cloud like a swarm of serpents, and rustled around in my hair, picking, prodding, and pulling. I screamed, clawing at them, but they fell against my neck regardless, pricking at the skin with a depraved eagerness.

“Strange. I’d expected their stain, but there is none.”

“I am not *stained* , you bastard.” A shadow slipped beneath the water, pinching my side with a deft clip of its…*teeth* ? Were there *teeth* on these things? I blindly swiped at it, horrified, and watched as the entire swarm released itself from me, nestling back into place at his side.

“Perhaps you aren’t of the Weavers after all. A pity.” As he considered this, the shadows atop his shoulders roiled in unison. It bore a slight—very, *very* slight—resemblance to laughter. But whatever it was, laughter or amusement or something else entirely, was gone before it could solidify, replaced instead by darkened eyes and a scowl. The shadows stilled. “Still, this is an unforgivable breach,” he continued, more forcefully this time. “And if you aren’t of the Weavers, then why are you here? I’m beginning to think I didn’t scare you enough the first time.”

Cold water continued to lap against me, swirling my dress into tangles. I kicked against the clinging folds, aiming to untangle the fabric from my legs, all the while trying everything in my power to keep my expression neutral. If he knew that I was struggling, he’d likely use it against me. I had no doubt he’d force me under the water, leaving me to suffocate on the

dark, swirling liquid. And with the Light Bringer's power still echoing in my head, I didn't know if I would wake up.

At least not right away.

And with everything feeling as real as it did, I'm not sure I wanted to find out.

He noticed something in my expression—something distracting. He tilted his head. "You're unable to swim. Odd. Especially for a dreamer."

"Don't mock me, demon." I sucked in an angry breath, indeed struggling to maintain my position above the water.

He bared his teeth. "Careful."

Something grabbed my flailing ankle, *hard* , and pulled me under.

At first, I thought it was him—that he manifested some ugly, clawing darkness again for the sheer purpose of punishing me. But as I twisted, thrashing, and choking, I saw what was squeezing my ankle so roughly that it was burning, screaming—close to snapping. The thing had golden eyes, a ruined, gaping mouth, vaguely human features, but it wasn't a human at all.

A monster. A *demon.*

It peered up at me through the water, its too-wide mouth trembling open and shut. I fought hard, kicking a heel into the demon's bony neck. It stretched to grasp the hemline of my dress, but it couldn't quite reach. The cloth danced out of its claw, tumbling through the water like a frightened animal. The demon gurgled out a screech so piercing and full of madness that its entire body quaked.

Then it grabbed my ankle with both claws, dragging me down with it.

My arms moved in ways I wasn't conscious of—jerking, swirling, reaching—and my lungs filled with a brutal, suffocating flame. I was dying. I was going to die. And it felt so *real.* This was a dream, but the fire burning my lungs and breaking my ankle was *real* .

The thing fixed its yellowed eyes on me again.

Was *this* what it felt like to fall into Corruption? To be taken, destroyed, ruined from within?

The water shifted into darker and colder hues as we dropped, clouding my vision and settling over the scarred face of my captor. Its yellow-gold eyes were incredibly swollen, bulging out of its skin like that of a giant, misshapen river fish.

Was this what Eden, Mother, and Father felt—the panic, the horror at being so weak—as they lost themselves?

I looked up, frantic. *Him*. He saw me slip under. He *knew* that I was drowning, dying. He had power—incredible, raw power—that could likely destroy the monster beneath me. This was his chance to prove what he claimed: that he wasn't a demon.

So why wasn't he doing anything?

The claws at my ankle slipped, sinking deep into my boot, and pulled it off, forcing the monster off-balance.

Now . I had to move *now.*

I tore my way to the surface, blind, without breath, and hating myself for being so damnably *useless* at swimming. My shin knocked against something—another monster? No, a *ledge* —and I stepped on it, not caring that my left ankle was shrieking at me, most likely sprained or broken. I breathed deep, relieved—so *pitifully* relieved at what would likely be my full last breath before the demon took me under again—and splashed my way to the edge, a bundle of flailing limbs and fear so strong it nearly made me gag.

The nameless man stood as he did when I last spoke with him: armored arms crossed, onyx-crowned face set in a scowl, grey eyes lifeless and cold.

"I have no further use for you, dreamer," he said, pinning me with dead, empty eyes, "but perhaps the demons do."

Damn you , I tried to say, but the words wouldn't form between gasping, heaving breaths.

He turned without another word, scale-lined cape billowing out from behind him, and left the chamber—just as the demon, still clawing my discarded boot, broke through the surface behind me. Along with several more just like it. All human-like, but marked by horrific, deformed additions. Additions that made them *other* .

Demons, all of them.

At that moment, something snapped within me.

A sensation pulled itself taut behind my eyes, connecting me to something outside of the cavern—perhaps the nameless man. A rush of power interwoven with pain, anguish, and a few final, pathetic shreds of courage poured through me, pooling in my mind like a feral sea. It felt familiar and yet unfamiliar. It felt overwhelming and yet *not enough* . It felt like a blanket of soft silk. It felt like a squeezing cage of iron. It felt uncomfortable.

It felt *glorious* .

For a moment, the rush made me forget my bleeding, injured ankle. It made me forget my grief—grief at seeing Mother and Father, shadow-marked and hated. Grief at seeing the corrupted citizens of Norhavellis fighting and dying. Grief at imagining my family's future—our *lack* of future. Grief because of my weakness. Grief because of my *world* .

Then the shadows burst in.

They churned around me, spinning and rotating as a furious whirlwind, flashing and sparking like daggers of obsidian. The shadows were more powerful—more *demanding* —than the languid pile that had draped itself over the man's shoulders.

It fell upon the demons in a fury.

I could scarcely see, scarcely *breathe* as the dark ripped skin, forced itself down throats, wrenched heads into the water—until it finally moved into a towering cage of impenetrable black, pinning the demons to the chamber's glistening walls. The demons—or what little were left that could move—prodded weakly against the smothering black. One by one they stilled, and the roaring, shadow-drenched power faded from me like smoke forced away by the wind.

A crashing noise echoed from somewhere behind me.

The nameless man had returned.

He swept into the room as if he was death embodied, blood leaking from his nose and marring his pale skin. It slid down the column of his throat, pooling at the top of his armor.

"How *dare* you—" he gasped, materializing a dark blade from his palm and charging into the water after me. "How *dare* you—"

I staggered backwards, forgetting about the pain in my ankle. I tried to fling the shadows up and around me for protection, but the darkness fluttered, sputtering, and went out entirely, dropping the demons into the water.

"You think you know my power? You think you can control it—control *me* ? " He grabbed the cloth at the front of my collarbone, roughly twisting it in a taloned hand. He jutted his blade under my chin. "The Seven already destroyed my life when they ripped out my soul and shaped it into rot and ruin. No one has any right to anything else."

His tone and stance were filled with hatred, but his eyes, a dim shade of grey, felt cold and hopeless—miserable and without any light or soul. I pulled at his hand, trying to weaken his grip, but the metal on his gauntlets

was impossibly sharp. Touching him was like grabbing a rose by its thorns or a snake by its fangs. Impossible and painful.

"*Enough of this .*"

And he made to separate my head from my body.

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CHAPTER 12

THE MONSTER STOOD AT HIS MIRROR AND WIPED BLOOD FROM HIS THROAT, his chin, and his lips. It soaked into the cloth, staining it crimson.

Maker, it is everywhere.

He had forgotten he could bleed.

How *dare* she.

How dare she enter *his* castle, *his* fortress, and try to manipulate *his* power. He had sensed it when they first met. The shadows had bent to her will, loosening around her throat when he had meant to keep them taut. He looked at the handkerchief in his hands—he had scarcely remembered he possessed one, finding it draped over the side of a neglected shelf—as if the creases, wet with red, wet with his *lifeblood* , could tell him something. Anything.

No memory dared speak.

Instead, it was the vision of *her* that drifted to the front of his consciousness. Her, standing in the middle of that cold pool, moonlight pouring through the ceiling and gleaming in the water, in the stone of the cavern walls, in her *eyes* . Her dark eyes, filled with—what was it? He wasn't certain, couldn't recall what those emotions were named. All he knew was that he didn't want to hurt her.

How dare she.

And he didn't even know her name.

He brought the cloth to his nose. He needed to wipe away what he felt or else he'd go mad.

The monster drifted to his balcony before he could consider otherwise, pulling back the curtain with a clumsy tug. The deepening night now

cloaked most of the moon and stars. It was dark. So incessantly dark.

His feet led him to the balustrade anyway.

For a time, he did nothing but stare at the shadow-drenched landscape. The power that usually thrummed in his veins was weak, gasping. It did not answer him when he called for it. Perhaps it would return, or perhaps that girl had eternally cleaved it from him. Either way, his strength was dwindling.

A bottomless roar echoed from somewhere within the castle, and he tried to keep from thinking of her. He hated to admit it, but she stirred his curiosity. She mirrored him in ways he'd never dreamed possible, even from before he was locked away, and for that, he wanted to keep her safe until he was stronger and ready to question her. But he might not even have the chance.

She has damned me. I will end.

If he existed much longer in this weakened form, the demons would overtake him. How *easily* they'd overtake him. Even with the regenerative nature of his castle, the wards he'd set would splinter.

But perhaps release would be…

"Welcomed," he murmured, the hoarseness in his voice betraying a raw, all-consuming exhaustion.

He settled his weight into the banister, watching the stars fade until the night had devoured them all.

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CHAPTER 13

BREATH CLOUDED FROM MY NOSE AS I EASED INTO THE BED OF MY NEWLY appointed room. Earlier, I hadn't wanted to be near it—let alone actually *touch* the thing. The bed was a skeletal, flimsy monstrosity, draped with a blanket that resembled more cobweb than cloth.

Still, as I had found, a hard bed and thin blanket were better than lying on the ground.

Far, *far* better.

I learned that lesson quickly enough, finding that the crack at the bottom of my door was just large enough to watch slinking, shadowy things pass by. Things that paused at the door. Scratched at it. Whispered fragments of sentences in broken, hollow voices.

"*Let…us…out* ," one had pleaded.

I hadn't answered it.

Curling into the bed was also better than staring at a window filled with nothing but shadows or the nub of a candle melted down to its final dregs of wax. My room would be dark soon, and I had no means of giving it any light. It was this thought that made my chest clench, making it difficult to breathe.

How long has it been since he locked me in here?

I turned away from the door, shivering. The nameless man despised me —wanted me gone. He had made that clear enough when he nearly beheaded me, and he made it clearer still when he locked me up, stalked away to some other Maker-forsaken part of his castle, and chose not to return.

So why hadn't I woken up?

“*Let us out* ,” hissed another demon at the door.

“Letusouttletusouttletusout. ”

THE CASTLE WAS A LIVING NIGHTMARE.

Two days had passed, but I felt no hunger or thirst. My chilled skin had dried, and my wet, tattered dress had re-stitched itself. My ankle had healed at some point—though when, exactly, I didn’t remember—and it no longer burned. The candle had also restored itself. It sat by the window, its creamy wax tall and unblemished. The castle reset itself each night, arranging its innards back to the beginning of some unholy, endless cycle.

No hunger, no thirst, and no sense of time. No wonder he's a raving lunatic.

I slumped against the wall—a cold slant of stone—and cursed every piece of the leaking, miserable room and the bastard that ruled over it. I cursed until my mind was raw and fraying.

“*Let us out ,”* a demon howled at the door.

“I can’t!” I screamed back.

I tried everything to escape. I called the shadow-filled power back to my palms, but it ignored me. I bargained with the demons in the hall, but they had no understanding of what I was asking. I tried sleeping, willing myself back into reality with every last shred of my soul, but I couldn’t focus, couldn’t *think* .

“*Let us out* ,” repeated the demon.

This castle was Hell. Not a living nightmare, but *Hell* .

I WOKE UP SLOWLY. The moisture in my eyes had dried overnight, leaving them sand-crusted and unfocused. I pressed my face into my palms and tried not to hyperventilate.

For some reason, I thought of Elliot and his blanket burrow. How he’d hide from the world and all its monsters under a heap of warm cotton and wool. How he’d tuck Chester the cow into the crook of his elbow, its tufted brown fur was always knotted, its button eyes polished bright.

No, no, no.

I willed my tears to stay where they were: in my *head* , not running rampant down my face. But they slipped away regardless, falling in long, meandering lines down my cold skin.

Curse it all.

After a time, I opened my eyes. I had no choice; images of Elliot, Chester, and *home* were on the insides of my eyelids. The images were comforting, but false. I looked around my room, noting the dim light, the dirty ground, the stuffed cow in the corner—

A stuffed cow slouched against the corner of my room, its bright button eyes staring upwards.

I nearly fell out of the bed.

“Chester,” I whispered. The stuffed cow’s name felt odd on my tongue. Gingerly, I picked it up, thumbing the knots in its fur. “What are you doing here?”

Other things appeared. A wooden kitchen chair, scuffed and peeling where Eden had painted flowers on it years ago. The bookshelf in my room. Our beds. A favorite linen dress, its cloth soft and practical despite its fraying edges. A plant-filled wall from Mother’s apothecary. The beamed ceiling from our living room. Our front door, its window bright with morning light. In seconds, my room doubled, tripled in size—unfurling and shifting. It was a creature growing into its second set of skin.

I circled the room in awe.

The more I saw, the more I felt, and the more I remembered. The space shifted with my thoughts, readjusting and rearranging its innards until it more closely resembled what I knew to be home. Gone was my room in the nameless man’s castle. This was *home* .

“Elliot?” I called. “Mother? Father?”

I ran from room to room, frantically searching—but my home was silent. It looked like home, but there was no one there to fill it.

Outside, I sank into the ground, scarcely feeling the whisper of grass upon my legs. The morning light pressed its warmth into my neck, birds soared overhead, woodsmoke mingled with pine and lilac bushes, trees swayed in the breeze—but it was still lacking. All of it, *lacking* .

Where is everyone?

At the familiar clinking of pointed boots and taloned gauntlets, I turned around.

There was the cause of my despair, descending the wooden steps of my family's front porch. His white hair and dark clothing were a stark contrast against the vibrant color around him; he looked unfit to be in the middle of such an earthly setting.

I lurched to my feet. "How long did you plan to leave me to rot? Until I was so old and hateful that my hair turned white like yours?"

"What have you done?" he asked, ignoring my questions. Despite how odd he looked on my family's property, his eyes were curious, lost on the earth, the trees, and the sky.

What have you done?

Memories of the last few days rose up, cold and terrible. I hated his castle. I hated *him* .

The ground suddenly cleaved apart at his feet, sending him sprawling face-first into the grass.

Did I do that?

I tensed, expecting him to rise in a fit of rage, but he merely rolled to his side, picked a wildflower, and spun it between clawed fingers.

"What you've accomplished goes against the laws of my castle." He tore his eyes from the flower, dropping it. "How did you do it?"

I crossed my arms, frowning at the hint of genuine wonder in his question. "You'd need to set me free before I can answer that."

"What makes you think I can—or would—free you? You're clearly not an ally of my enemy. You know nothing."

"I've been telling you as much from the beginning," I snapped, exasperated. "You really are—" I stopped, noticing something misshapen and dark forming behind his back.

Wings.

Two wide, velvet-black *wings* unfurled from him in a burst of feather and shadow. He glanced at them, surprise briefly registering in his face, before taking a powerful leap into the sky. Within a few beats he had disappeared into the mist beyond the clearing, leaving gusting, swirling patterns in the air behind him.

"What in the *Maker* ," I hissed.

As the wake he left ruffled my dress, every sensation sharpened. I could feel the prickliness of the grass beneath my feet, the cool spot of mud pressing into my heel, and the edge of a stone touching my toe. Small, life-like sensations. Memories.

After some time, he reappeared through the mist.

He fell from the sky, not pausing to catch his balance, and collapsed into the grass. He ripped off one of the metal gloves that armored his hands, shaking as he did so, and clutched at the ground with white-knuckled fingers.

It was more unsettling, perhaps, than when he considered beheading me.

"...little," I heard him murmur. He placed his brow against the tangle of grass at his knees, pausing as if to draw in a deep breath, then rose to his knees again, still grasping the ground. "Your world is so little."

"Of course my world is little. I don't have much of a say in the matter," I responded, eyeing him warily from where I sat. "My parents are Absolvers. We have a duty to the people of Norhavellis."

"So this is truly all you know? A town—no, a village infested with ruin and rot. That is Norhavellis? And then five miles at most beyond that—an uneven perimeter around your home. That's all?" He paused to look up at the sky, almost as if he was uncertain about saying anything else. But then, as quickly as he had descended into that strange pit of sorrow and contemplation, he shifted—jolted upright as if branded by fire. "There has to be more." He stormed over to me, his lifeless eyes now burning. "Give me your arm."

I made to move away, to scramble back across the porch into the house, but the edges of the clearing had blurred, melding into smeared pools of pastel. I stumbled to my feet, swaying as he grabbed me by the wrist.

Trees shook as the sky darkened.

Wind tangled my hair and hissed past my ears. Sparks caught the side of my face, falling like dust around us, and I looked on, numb, as my home erupted into flames. Shadows of people, donning the garb of the Light Legion, marched from the depths of the Visstill, eyes haunted and faces hollow. Others ringed the shadow-scorched edges of a burning pyre, looking down, looking empty, as they stared at the—

At the—

"They're burning them," I said slowly, tasting the foulness of both the words and the air heavy with the smell of fire. It was the burning of all things—grass, root, pine, hair, flesh—it was all there, burning, mingling. *Wrong* .

He tightened his grip, pulling me to him. "You can't go to them. They will not see you."

“But this is my home,” I protested. “I need to find Mother—” I twisted away from him, fury growing wild in my stomach. “Father—” I ripped free. “Elliot—” I stumbled into the clearing. Wave after wave of warm, fire-fed air pushed into me, drying my eyes and heating my lungs. My home was an inferno of flame and smoke, cracking and groaning so violently it was as though it were alive.

Dying, but *alive* .

The nearest legionnaire was tucked into the shadows of the Visstill, the golden metal of his breastplate charred and streaked with blood. He was gazing past me—eyes fixed on the pyre, the smoldering house, sparks exploding across the sky—and made to turn away, moving deeper into the trees.

“Stop!” I screamed, running toward the forest and clawing my way through the smoke that drifted between us. “Please—stop!” As I ran, darkness began to cloud the edges of my vision. “*Stop!* ” I screamed again, crying out so forcefully that my voice cracked.

The legionnaire paused, turning back toward the clearing—just as an explosion of red flame and dark, all-consuming smoke thundered behind us.

My home had collapsed into itself, releasing its innards to the earth.

I staggered sideways into the legionnaire, gasping, wild-eyed, and suffocating on both the smoke and my own panic. I should have fallen against the man’s metal front, but I fell *through* him instead, crashing to the ground as he walked forward and through *me* .

This isn’t happening.

I stumbled to my feet, lunged forward, and grasped for the legionnaire’s shoulder, only to pass through him in a wave of shadow.

This can’t be happening.

The nameless man broke free from the flame and smoke, ringed by shadow and wielding his sword. Soot marked his skin, curving from his eyes and wrapping around the hollows of his jaw. I expected the legionnaire to notice, but he continued walking, completely oblivious to the man’s powerful, inhuman presence.

“Where are they?”

“I don’t know,” I answered, miserable and aching. “I can’t find them.”

I looked toward the pile of burning bodies. If they were burning the Corrupt, then would Mother, Father, Elliot—?

He interrupted before I could finish that thought. “No, not your family. Who caused this? This is a warped dream based on your current reality. There has to be someone at the root of it.”

The Light Bringer.

“Then Mithras, the Light Bringer. The Lord of Light.”

“Mithras?” he repeated, eyes flashing in recognition and revulsion. “*He is no lord* .”

Another explosion shook the ground around us, igniting the air in wood, stone, and debris.

And the fire rained down.

He threw up his arms, letting his blade fall to the earth, and from his hands he summoned a protective shadow that rose like a mountain and sank down like a storm-battered sea. It crashed upon us quickly, swallowing us before the fire hit. For a few silent, darkened moments, we were alone in the void, listening to the muffled crashing of my world—my burning, ravaged world—falling against it.

“We’re dead, aren’t we,” I finally managed. “We died in the fire, just as my family did.”

“No, not at all.” He looked past me, eyes cold, as if he could see past his wall of darkness. “What you saw was merely a half-truth, as most dreams are. It held parts of your reality, but not the whole. This isn’t real. Your family will be safe.”

I looked at the shadows, trying to see what he could see.

“You’re lying.”

“I’m not,” he said simply, shaking his head.

“This is exactly what I left behind before I fell asleep and dreamed of you.” I cursed, a familiar rush of sorrow and fear ripping through me. Around us, the sea of shadow roared louder and louder. “They’re *dead* . They’re gone. I can *feel* it.”

Something snapped in me again, a familiar pulling of my ribs. Only this time, instead of connecting me to something past my reach, it connected directly to *him* . He turned toward me, brow furrowed and eyes wild. His hair had curled against the damp of his skin, melding with the soot that marred it. He looked positively beautiful—and monstrous.

“Again,” he asked, alarmed. “How are you able to call on my power? What are you?”

There was something in his tone that gave me pause.

“What are *you* ?” I echoed.

How had I not already realized it? The signs were all there, laid out before me in a horrible, ruinous pattern. He was more than a demon—more than a monster.

“Enough.” He held me by my shoulders, pinning me to a tree with a grip of iron. His sphere of shadow unfurled its hold around us, falling back and blanketing the scorched, ruined land around us.

“You’re the Shadow Bringer.”

It made sense. There were his powers—the way he could control darkness and make it bend to his will. Then there were the demons that lived with him, tormenting his castle with their screams. The tales had said his eyes would be red and body fiendish, but he possessed many features that made him cold and cruel nonetheless.

The man standing in front of me was the origin of the plague that ripped apart families, destroyed souls, and isolated humanity from dreams. And what did it mean that I could harness some of his power? Was I a monster, too?

“*Enough* ,” he repeated, the color fading from his skin, his eyes, his lips. “Please.”

He looked at me with wild desperation.

But I couldn’t stop. The shadows roared.

“Deny it!” I screamed. “Devil—demon—*monster* !”

His expression forfeited what his silence could not.

“*You killed my sister! ”*

Emptiness ripped at my stomach and cleaved my heart in two. It laid bare the space where I had a family who loved me and a home that protected me. Mother and Father, uncorrupted. Elliot, safe and without tears. A future and a hope for a better life. Without realizing it, my eyes closed. I was screaming, sobbing, begging—for what, I didn’t know. For this vision to be a lie. For the Shadow Bringer to end it all.

And the dark roared louder.

When the chaos settled, the shadows dropped, clinging to the ground like a low-lying fog and leaving the Shadow Bringer and I exposed in its center. To my disgust, he was still holding my shoulders, and I was unintentionally leaning into him, face pressed into his chest. A quick shove sent him sprawling; his shadows had drained him, scattering to the wind and skimming the grass instead of returning to his body.

The sensation of being watched—and not by the Shadow Bringer—snapped me to my senses.

Mithras, ringed by his Light Legion, was standing across from us, shoulders dark with ash and boots marred by the Shadow Bringer's low-lying shadows. His eyes, golden and predatory, betrayed an expression of abject shock, and the legionnaires that had previously ignored us were now staring, wide-eyed and open-mouthed.

The Shadow Bringer, half-crumpled at my feet, cursed.

"You're the Havenfall daughter. Esmer," Mithras began, taking a step forward. Light threaded around his fingertips, dissipating some of the shadows that clung to him. "And who is the monster at your feet?"

The Shadow Bringer staggered upright. The fog began to move, darting around ankles and rising to meet his outstretched hands.

Mithras's face paled. "You aren't meant to be freed, yet."

"It's been a long time, Mithras," said the Shadow Bringer, his shadows beginning to hiss. "Perhaps your death will finally give me peace."

"You'll never find peace," Mithras spat, the color beginning to return to his skin. "Monsters like you aren't worthy of it. You will be returned to your castle immediately."

"Nonsense," the Shadow Bringer said, smiling brilliantly. And in an instant, his shadows became serpents, grabbing legionnaires and yanking them to the ground. He laughed and the darkness rose, swallowing the rest of them.

"*After them!* " Mithras shouted, but the majority of his followers were either incapacitated or drowning in the shadows.

I side-stepped a legionnaire that fell from the dark, blindly swiping a serpent from his throat, only to catch an elbow to the ribs from another. I bent over, gasping. Fire shot through my ribs, stinging my lungs as I tried to catch my breath.

It was here, in the midst of the fray and my pain, that Mithras found me.

He held his hands behind his back in a false show of civility, but his eyes were murderous. I stumbled backwards, nearly tripping over one of the Shadow Bringer's serpents.

"Did you free the Shadow Bringer, Esmer?"

"Of course not. I was his prisoner," I gritted out, wincing at another sharp wave of pain from my ribs. "Why were you burning my home? Where is my family?"

Mithras made a sound of disappointment. “As an Absolver daughter, you should know better than to question your Light Bringer. To burn is to purify. If their souls aren’t purified, they’ll be reborn in the Shadow Bringer’s castle as one of his demons.” He held himself very still. “But perhaps you are right to be afraid. You were found consorting with our kingdom’s greatest enemy, after all.” He raised a hand, light simmering, and I flinched. The shadows nearest to me mimicked the movement. Mithras cocked his head. “And manipulating the darkness yourself, no less.”

“I’m not manipulating anything,” I insisted, voice cracking. “My sister was *killed* by the Shadow Bringer. I’m not what he is.”

But Mithras was not swayed. His hands glowed bright, drawing nearer to me like flames on the pyre—and the shadows around me shot forward, slamming him to the ground.

Oh, hell.

Mithras rose, eyes glinting. Blood dripped from his mouth, staining the top of his armor. “It’s now becoming clear. Only the foulest of beasts can be held in the Shadow Bringer’s castle. Are you saying that is what you are, Esmer? I don’t think you were held captive, I think you sought him *willingly* .”

“I didn’t mean to hurt you. *That wasn’t me* .”

“I beg to differ,” Mithras snapped, making a point to raise his burning hands. To my horror the shadows flared up, sensing my alarm. They hovered by my waist, ready to strike. “You represent the worst of humanity. And to think I was ready to bestow mercy upon you.”

The light in his hands burned brighter and hotter, just as his eyes began to glow, aflame with unspent fury. His mouth curled up, showing blood-stained teeth. A predator’s smile before landing the killing blow. The shadows at my waist rose higher, breaking into several serpents of varying sizes. A small one clung to my wrist, strangely comforting in its weight. If I didn’t stare too closely, it reminded me of Elliot’s hand.

Mithras raised his fist and charged, sending a powerful blast of light at my head.

The shadows around me hissed, throwing themselves into the light, but they were instantly destroyed, shattering as soon as their bodies met the Light Bringer’s blinding flames. The serpent on my wrist tightened, yanking me down a second before the blast could touch me. I quickly rose,

making to sprint toward the tree line, but the serpent pulled me back, almost as if it was tied to something—or someone—else.

The Shadow Bringer.

He looked as horrified as I felt, trying to flick the serpent from his wrist that tied us together like some unholy rope. It was clear he wanted to charge forward—at the Light Bringer—but I refused to let him. I had conflicting feelings about the Light Bringer and his legion, but that didn't mean I wanted the Shadow Bringer to eviscerate them.

The Shadow Bringer and I grabbed the serpent-rope at the same time: I yanked left, he yanked right. He was glaring daggers at me, clearly distracted, but managed to send a blast of darkness at Mithras, sending him flying. Taking advantage of the momentary chaos, I hurled my weight toward the woods, desperate to break the bond that tied us. Unfortunately, the Bringer came with me, plummeting into my side. I kicked him, but the shadow only tightened, bringing us closer together.

"Why are you doing this?" the Shadow Bringer breathed, chest heaving. "*He's so close*, Esmer. Let me go so I can have my revenge."

It was the first time he'd said my name, and it ignited something strange in my chest.

Disgusting.

"To let you free would be to spit in the face of everything I stand for." I tested the shadow again, but it didn't budge. It sat tight on my wrist, looping up and around my forearm in the same manner it clung to the Shadow Bringer's. "I wish for nothing but to see you die at the hands of the Light Bringer."

Or me.

If I could kill Thomas without guilt, surely I could do it again. And wasn't this what I always wanted?

"Do you *want* to share the same curse as I? Because that's exactly what will happen if you don't let me go. He will bind you to the dark like a monster."

"He would never. *You're* the monster, not me. This is just a misunderstanding."

"You think so?" The silver in his eyes flashed. I had clearly struck a nerve. "Then know that your version of reality is built on lies and deceit." His riotous gaze fell to his gauntlet-covered arms; he flexed them, anxious to be rid of the serpent, but it clung on. "But that doesn't matter anymore—

soon I’ll be rid of you. For good. Your Light Bringer wouldn’t have it any other way.”

The dark began to rush back to the Shadow Bringer, surging to his hands and under his skin. What was left rose behind us in a threatening tempest, filling half of the sky in a pit of starless night. The sudden influx of shadows left the clearing in front of us empty, void of anything but the Light Bringer, his legion, and—

The Corrupt from Norhavellis.

They stared at us in horror and recognition, clutching their necks and tripping over themselves to retreat. Some begged for mercy, others begged the Light Legion to kill us. Mithras pointed a deadly charge of light our way, screaming at the legionnaires to strike—just as the Shadow Bringer brought the tempest down, swallowing us all.

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CHAPTER 14

EYES HEAVY, DARK, ACHING.

They creaked open, straining as the world wobbled alive.

Golden light worked through the air, and for a moment, I thought I was still dreaming. But the light fanned out, lapping against dust, cobwebs, and panels of worn barnwood. I felt sun-warmed hay itching my hands. Smelled woodsmoke and the musty leather of horse tack. Heard the warbled cooing of our chickens, their coop connected to the barn by way of a small earthen tunnel.

Home. I was *home*—

"You're awake."

A wisp of a legionnaire stood before me, half-clouded by the swirling light and dust. Her fingers were white-knuckled on a bucket.

"I need—w-water," I croaked, my tongue struggling to find purchase.

The woman swallowed, eyes wide. "I can't. Lord Mithras must know you've awakened."

"Please," I coughed, once, twice. The third cough was wet; it flecked the hay in red. I tried to wipe my mouth, horrified, but my hands were bound. "Why am I *bound* ?"

Flustered, the woman bent into an awkward bow. "F-forgive me."

She fled from the cellar, forgetting to slide the door shut behind her. Indistinct sounds seeped from beyond the frame, but they were distant and unknowable. I winced, leaning back into the wooden slats behind me. My head hurt. Badly. If someone told me that my skull had been pried open with a knife, I'd believe them.

"I'm telling, you, she—"

Mithras, Silas, and Mila, all unmasked, walked into the cellar, their once-gleaming clothing mangled and dirty. Their faces held a riot of emotion: unease, disgust, and something else. Something suspiciously similar to hatred.

Hatred?

Mithras loomed over me, leaving Silas and Mila to wait a few uneasy paces behind. Dark blonde hair fell to his shoulders, escaping the band that bound it. He looked younger than he had appeared in the dream, but something aged him in his eyes.

“So, you’ve returned to us after all,” Mithras began, mouth slanting into a frown. I couldn’t decipher his expression. Disgust? Regret? Every breath made it harder to tell. “Do you have anything to say for yourself?”

A fourth man, wearing the garb of the Light Legion, stormed to where I sat, shoving past Silas and Mila. He was a mirror to his younger brother: high cheekbones, willowy build, and red hair smooth and full.

“The truth will come to light,” Alcott began, his voice hard and unwavering. He clenched his teeth, fighting against a tremble in his shoulders. “Lord Mithras saw everything. You will not escape justice.”

“Alcott,” Mithras said simply, a warning.

But Alcott was already moving, leading Silas and Mila to an adjoining part of the barn and leaving Mithras and I alone.

“I believe I asked you a question.”

I inhaled sharply, prepared to answer, but my throat had closed up again. A muffled *wheeze* croaked from somewhere within me. Mithras unhooked a leather flask from beneath his cloak. He brought it to my lips, and I drank deep.

Water. Blessed, blessed water.

“Where is my family?”

Mithras sighed, leaning against the barn. I noticed now that a faint scar split his brow.

“The Light Legion does not tolerate the Corrupt. Unmanaged, they will destroy a village. Unpunished, they will destroy a kingdom.” As he talked, he adjusted his gloves. A spray of old blood marked them. “Corrupted are known deceivers. They worm their way into the light when they’re still rotting from within.” He looked up, nearly smiling. “Fortunately, our Maker is a forgiving god.”

“*Where is my family* ?” I repeated, on the verge of screaming.

“Where do you expect them to be?”

I halted. “What?”

He gave me a strange, inquisitive look. It was as though he was weighing something—or considering a new possibility. Whatever it was, the expression passed briefly, replaced by his regular, mask-like stiffness. “We began our purification ritual, but it was breached. A severe transgression against your sovereign and the laws we fight for.”

A deep, bruising ache dragged along my scalp and ended between my shoulders, forcing me to bow my head. Thoughts swirled around in bizarre fragments. Memories clouded in on themselves. Even reality itself—the reality of Mithras pinning me with eyes of burning, golden embers—felt distant, somehow. I centered my breathing, focusing on the barn’s scent of woodsmoke and leather.

Mithras placed a gloved hand atop my shoulder, grazing the edge of my neck with his fingers.

“You paint a convincing picture of your innocence,” he murmured. “Silas and Mila certainly believe you to be. But they have not known your kind as I do. They did not *see* you as I did.” I tried to respond, but my throat was dust, my teeth carved from chalk. And even if I could speak, I didn’t think the words would come. They were stuck to the walls of my mind, clinging to the shadows. “Even so, we agreed that you would be treated justly,” he continued. “Your punishment will be suitable for your crime.”

Again, Mithras offered his flask, and I drank.

“I have no reason to be punished,” I managed, rubbing away the haze that shrouded my eyes and clung to my every thought. Had he truly seen the Shadow Bringer and I together? Had the dream been real after all? “I want to see my family.”

“You will,” Mithras said simply. He tilted forward, prying my hands from my eyes. As if a curse had lifted, the pain instantly ebbed. “Right before we take you to your new home. It should be a pleasant stay for you, considering you’ve already been lurking there.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” I leaned away from him, trying to peer out of a crack in the wood. I couldn’t see much, but it was clear that there were no fires, fighting, or Corrupt armed with pitchforks.

His mouth twitched up in a tight, forced smile. “Then you’re either delusional or a liar. Either way, it won’t matter for long.” Mithras lifted me to my feet, fixing me pointedly with his too-bright eyes. “You have five

minutes to speak with your family. Then we will be on our way.” He smiled that cold smile again. “Choose your parting words carefully. You’ll not get another chance.”

“Parting words,” I repeated flatly, not understanding.

Mithras’s smile thinned.

Before he could speak again, Mother and Father entered the barn. They were led in by a different set of legionnaires, tied with ropes and visibly anguished. Elliot entered separately, his dirt-streaked face streaked with tears.

Elliot tried to run for me, but the nearest legionnaire yanked him back.

“Say it ain’t true,” he begged, stumbling over his words. “Tell me that wasn’t actually you in the dream. The flames were gonna get me, but then I saw you, an’—” His face scrunched up, shifting into something closer to anger. “You were with the *Shadow Bringer* ! He’s the worst monster—an’ you were *with* him!”

“No—no. I wasn’t with him,” I insisted, the words falling from a tongue that felt too numb, too dry. Had they *all* experienced the dream? If so, then they all had seen the Shadow Bringer and I together, bound by shadow and defying the Light Legion. “He captured me against my will. I was trying to escape him.”

“This is all our fault,” Father began, shadow-marked eyes welling with tears. He sounded like himself, which meant the demon vying for control over his body was subdued. It was like that in the early stages of Corruption; only in the most heated moments did the Corrupted’s nature begin to twist. “We forced you to walk this path. We drove you to seek the Shadow Bringer.”

My mouth fell open. “What? *No* . I didn’t walk *any* path. I was captured, I—”

“That doesn’t even make sense,” Elliot cried.

“Elliot, please. We don’t have much time,” Mother pleaded, dampening some of Elliot’s anguish. Like Father, she sounded like herself. “If we hadn’t altered the elixir—hadn’t watered it down to make it last—then perhaps it wouldn’t have come to this. And for that, we will always be guilty.”

A chill ran down my skin, sliding over it like rain. So, another part of the nightmare really was true. Mother and Father had diluted the elixir, forcing Norhavellis to rot into Corruption.

“Before you’re taken from us, I want you to know the truth,” Mother began, eyes beseeching me to listen. “It began the winter Elliot took fever. You remember. We lived as though we were unworthy of it.”

Of course I remembered. I remembered Elliot, eyes sunken and dull, skin paper-thin and stretched tight over his bones. I remembered mice skittering over the floorboards and being hungry enough that I contemplated eating them. I remembered the dark. I remembered the stench of decay.

“The cost of his medicine broke us. We no longer could afford it,” Father added. “Not without sacrifice. And the elixir was down to its last shipment, with all of winter ahead of us.” His eyes fell in shame. “We kept the purest elixir for you and Elliot. And we diluted the rest of the village’s supply to raise enough funds for his medicine.”

“How long did you do this?” They didn’t answer right away, and horror flooded me. “A month? A season?”

“You have to understand that—”

“That winter was *five years ago* .”

“But for a time, it worked. We couldn’t risk losing one of you, not again __”

“You ruined their supply for *five years* ?”

“You should’ve just let me die,” Elliot wailed miserably.

“You don’t mean that, Elliot.” I squeezed my wrists, willing myself not to be sick. “Don’t *ever* say that.”

“But then none of this would have ever happened,” he sobbed, wiping his eyes with the back of his hand. “Everything’s broken now.”

“And not because of you. *Never* because of you,” Father said, clearing his throat. Pain darkened his eyes, mirroring the shadows of Corruption that marred the hollows of his face. “As your parents, we ruined more for you and Norhavellis than we'll ever be able to atone for.”

“We’re so sorry,” Mother whispered. Tears slid freely down her face; she could not stop them. “We just wanted you to be safe.”

The Shadow Bringer’s words rang in my ears: *What you saw was merely a half-truth, as most dreams are. It held parts of your reality, but not the whole. This isn’t real. Your family will be safe.*

Maybe there was a chance I was still dreaming.

I pinched the inside of my palm, wincing at the bite of my nails. Pain could be felt in the Dream Realm, too, but this sensation was sharper and

more realistic.

“It is time,” Mithras said, nearly filling the barn’s entryway with his armored mantle. “Now that you’re awake, no time can be spared. You will be personally escorted to the Tomb of the Devourer while your family—and every other Maker-forsaken Corrupt still alive in this village—will be taken to our holy base at Citadel Firstlight to complete their purification.”

What?

“I’m not leaving. I’m not going *there* .” Panic bloomed in my chest. The Tomb of the Devourer was rumored to hold Shadow Bringer’s body, locking away his physical form. What place did I have *there* ? “The Shadow Bringer tricked me—he locked me in his castle for *days* until I was able to escape. I’m innocent—you haven’t even heard my story.”

“Oh, but your story has already been told,” Mithras said softly. “You have earned your fate. Now be strong for your family and face the justice given to you.”

Mother nodded, solemn. “The Light Bringer is right, Esmer. We have all earned our place. Our only regret is that it came to this.”

“What about Elliot?”

“Since he will soon be the equivalent of an orphan, he has agreed to become a servant at the Citadel. But don’t be concerned. If he impresses, then perhaps in five years he will begin preliminary training in the Light Legion.”

“He should have a right to choose,” I said, horrified. “This isn’t *justice* . None of this is just.”

Father’s face fell. “You will help the Light Legion battle Corruption by going to the Shadow Bringer’s tomb, and Elliot will be taken care of at the Citadel. What other form of justice is there?”

“He’s right,” Elliot agreed, sniffling. He looked so tired—so defeated. “It’s okay, ‘smer. I’ll be okay.”

A legionnaire joined Mithras at the entrance, a mask resting firmly atop his face. I decided that the masks made them look like ornamented vultures.

“We should begin our leave, my lord. I’ve word that people from the surrounding settlements are traveling here. They are uneasy.”

Mithras gave a curt nod, then turned to me, expectant.

“Take me with you to Istralla,” I begged. *Take me with you so I can be with Elliot.* The request sounded pathetic and whiny, like that of a child, but I didn’t care. “I’ll clean or serve however I can.”

“What you wish for does not matter. Lest that *wish* speak of Maker-given goodness.” Mithras’s face was impassive, but wisps of fury lurked underneath. He held me by my bindings, gripping the rope hard enough that I wouldn’t be able to run. “Finish your goodbye. You will not get another.”

Light and shadow, mingling with dust, leather, and woodsmoke, billowed through the barn as my family embraced me. The goodbye was horrible; it was an impossible attempt at finding meaning in what would likely be our final moments. Mother and Father, Corrupt, would be purified and buried in Istralla. Elliot would grow up alone and become a member of the Light Legion.

And I—

My fate was hopeless and heavy. A wretched sentence that involved the Shadow Bringer’s grave.

Dread roiled in my stomach, cold and sick. I shoved the sensation aside, unwilling to confront it, instead trying to focus on my family—Father, Mother, Elliot—and failing at that, too. My head was throbbing, spinning in a thousand different directions.

Outside, the Norhavellis Corrupt were tied and gathered in a single-file line, ready to be marched to Citadel Firstlight. Norhavellians, wide-eyed and furious. Eyes wet with tears. Eyes burning with newfound anger and hopelessness. Dark eyes—shadowed eyes. *Dead* eyes.

I swallowed a scream.

I had thought that the Shadow Bringer’s castle was a hellish nightmare, but that wasn’t even close to the truth. *This* was Hell. *This* was a nightmare.

And this was now my *life* .

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CHAPTER 15

THE LEGIONNAIRES DIDN'T TRUST ME. THAT MUCH WAS EVIDENT.

We had been traveling for hours, but they remained silent, sullen, and wary. Not a single one of them tried to speak with me. Earlier, Mithras had divided his force into thirds: one third was commanded to monitor Norhavellis until the new kingdom-appointed Absolvers arrived, another third was tasked with escorting the Norhavellis Corrupt to Citadel Firstlight, and the last third, the unlucky few, were meant to take me to the Tomb of the Devourer—where the Shadow Bringer's body was kept. It was similar to pulling teeth, watching the legionnaires decide amongst themselves who would be traveling with the majority and who would be forced to accompany me.

Wicked rumors meandered among them—whispers that I was Corrupt and might change into the Shadow Bringer himself, ravaging our small party before anyone else in the kingdom knew otherwise. If that happened, they said I would spread Corruption like a ravenous, open-mouthed fire. I would not stop, the legionnaires claimed, until Corruption consumed Noctis whole.

Pleasant.

Dusk settled in as we rode, tickling our hair and necks with a cool, pine-scented breeze. Something shifted in the Visstill, too; nighttime sounds bloomed in the shadows as wind wended itself through the ancient trees, *whooshing* between bough and root as though the land was its hollow plaything.

The Light Legion set up camp in a crescent-shaped glade, murmuring furtively amongst themselves as they gathered firewood, righted their tents

and bedrolls, and tended to the horses. Before long, armor had been carefully removed, hastily wiped down, and the group was largely nestled around a roaring fire, lounging in matching tunics and woolen pants.

I prodded the ground with the toe of my boot, still bound and relatively unsure as to what I should be doing or where I would be sleeping. At the rate I had been ignored—or suspiciously glared at—it was likely that there wouldn't even *be* a place for me to sleep. Feeling miserable and out of place, I wandered to the edge of camp, slumping into the curve of an unearthed tree root.

Silas, likely ordered to watch me lest I make a run for it, stepped from the fire to join me.

"All the way over here by yourself?" he asked, kneeling next to me. His face, a deep, beautiful brown, was freshly scrubbed, and his eyes, typically gentle, were sharp despite his casual tone. Earlier, while the other legionnaires were occupied with setting up camp, he made an effort to speak with me. He wanted to shed light and optimism on Elliot's future at Citadel Firstlight, but I was too uneasy to give him my full attention.

But now, in the lonely, lengthening shadows of twilight, I wanted to talk.

Or maybe I was just too tired to care anymore.

"I wasn't about to make a run for it, if that's what you're implying." I raised my hands, still bound by rope. "Wouldn't make it far, anyways."

Bound hands made things difficult. Walking, running, avoiding obstacles—but especially moving through a forest such as the Visstill. I had learned that truth quickly enough when I was sent to relieve myself earlier, tripping over a branch but unable to catch my balance. I didn't have access to a mirror, but I was pretty sure my face was scratched and my hair was a mess.

"Ah, hell." Silas had been smirking, but the expression slipped. "You're an enigma—and a perceived threat that we all bore witness to. We have to remain cautious."

"Right," I said, sighing. As quickly as I had felt like talking, I wanted to be alone. In fact, something had been bothering me. Something that I was just beginning to realize. "Mithras said I interrupted your 'sacrificial ritual'. What does that mean?"

Silas took a swig from the flask at his feet, clearing his throat. He looked out at the fire. "We cleanse the world of the Corrupt, and, in doing

so, we reunite their souls with the Maker. It is our duty. Our holy task."

"I know that. The Light Legion has collected our Corrupt for years. We're taught that you bring them to the Light Bringer to be purified."

"Well, those who survive the journey are kept at Citadel Firstlight to fulfill various duties to the kingdom. Farming, mining, tending to elixir production—all monitored closely, of course." He added, voice low, "But yes, once their sentence is fulfilled or they become too violent, purification occurs. It's necessary to save their souls."

"I've never understood why a soul can be separated from the demon that claimed it, but the person must die for it." *People like Mother and Father.* I drew my knees to my chest. "Or why Mithras can't save the soul of someone who died of Corruption prematurely."

Someone like Eden.

Eden died before the Light Bringer could cleanse her. If her soul was truly lost, wandering through some endless abyss for eternity, I didn't want to think about it. It was too cruel a fate.

"You condemn the Light Bringer as though he is the cause of Noctis's Corruption. He is an extension of the Maker's grace and mercy for us, not your enemy."

"You're right," I agreed, forcing myself not to snap. The Light Bringer was not *merciful* , but Silas was my only chance at getting any of my questions answered, and I needed to remain composed. Even if I was burning on the inside. "But the ritual, the smoke, the song—you put all of us to sleep. For what purpose?"

"Questions, questions," Silas teased, the ghost of a smirk on his lips. When I didn't smile in return, his slipped away. "The sleeping smoke is merely a precaution we take for groups of that size. It allows us to safely bind the Corrupt in preparation for their journey to the Citadel, or, if they've proven themselves too far gone, Lord Mithras will purify them on the spot. It's more humane if they are sleeping and do not know the purification is coming."

I remembered the smell of that smoke. Its cloying sweetness, wet earth mingling with the dried leaves on a warm forest floor. Its comfort. Its promises.

"But we were *all* put to sleep—even those of us who weren't Corrupt." My voice began to rise in severity, hinting at the turmoil roiling underneath

my trembling facade. “Who is to say that you wouldn’t have harmed people who weren’t fully Corrupt?”

“Lord Mithras can tell. When we rode through Norhavellis, he sensed the villagers’ nature.” He paused, deciding whether or not it would be wise to tell me more. “We were tasked with assessing the village after your family was secured, but they attacked before we could.” Silas trailed off, looking back to the fire. “They were vicious. It is overwhelming how quickly the afflicted can fall into Corruption.”

Overwhelmed myself, I followed his lead and looked into the flames.

“Many of us have had Corruption in our own families,” he said, continuing. “We’re familiar with it in ways I wouldn’t wish upon our worst enemies. And we *definitely* have an enemy or two.” His smirk was back, but it felt empty. “Your fate will ultimately help us defeat the Corrupt. Maybe even save a few in the process. Some legionnaires may hesitate to approach you, but it’s only because they’re afraid of what you might be.”

At my silence, he faltered.

“Esmer. There is—there *was*— no other way. Our way is humane.” He hesitated, made as though he wanted to touch my arm, then drew his hand back to his side. “In Istralla, alleged Corrupt are brought to us before we even need to take action. We don’t have to hunt them like animals. There has never been a battle like what happened last night.” He added, taking a quick drink from his flask, “Last night changed everything. The Shadow Bringer isn’t supposed to be roaming dreams with someone like you by his side.”

Silas offered me his flask, holding it steady so that I could easily partake. It was a warm, bubbling cider, and it instantly eased some of my tension. “You really could see me in that dream, then.”

“It—yes. Yes, we could. The sleeping smoke gives the Light Bringer and his followers the ability to walk between reality and the Dream Realm. He was in the middle of purifying the most severe Corrupt when we saw you.” He raised his face to the sky, closing his eyes. “I’d ask questions, but Lord Mithras has already decided your fate. Nothing you tell me can change that.”

“And my fate, then, is what? To be locked in the Shadow Bringer’s tomb?”

Silas kept his gaze from me. “That’s the gist of it. Lord Mithras will tell you the rest.”

It felt strange that he was revealing all of this. Perhaps it was because I was going to die soon. The dead were quite efficient at holding secrets.

Mila joined us, red hair full and immaculate despite our long journey, and leaned against another upturned root. It was a massive thing, nearly reaching her shoulders. “Silas, Esmer is probably starving. Did you think to bring her any food?”

“I’m not hungry,” I protested, but then, as if on cue, my stomach let out an unnatural growl. When had I last eaten? Yesterday morning?

Mila looked proud of herself. Silas looked mortified.

“See?”

“Let’s move closer to the fire then,” Silas said, unfolding himself from the ground. He offered me a hand up. “There’s plenty of food and drink.”

“Well, I’m not sure if that’s the best plan,” Mila said, trailing off. She rummaged through a pack at her side, fishing out a canteen, some bread, and a roasted duck leg wrapped in cloth. She handed them to me, giving me a sad half-smile. “For our unexpected enemy.”

“Thank you,” I managed, taking a bite of the duck leg. The rope was just loose enough for me to eat, though it wasn’t comfortable by any means.

“Lord Mithras says we’ll arrive at the tomb within two days or so.” Her eyes glittered in fascination. “It’s a strange place. You’ll feel its presence before we even arrive.”

I frowned, mid-bite. “And then what happens?”

Silas and Mila exchanged glances.

“Well—”

“Oh, you’ll see soon enough. We do enjoy the drama, the mystery.”

“You mean *you* enjoy it,” Silas snapped, then turned to me. “Lord Mithras will explain soon. Nothing he does is without purpose, including your sentence.”

Mila bounced back to the fire and returned with more food and drink, her arms overwhelmed with a jug of steaming cider, two jars of smoked pine nuts, and bits of roasted poultry. All from the village, I found out—small gifts for their Light Bringer. We ate hungrily, licking the salt from our fingers, and relaxed into a somewhat regular pattern of conversation as Mila and Silas traded stories of their travels. I eased into the conversation, thoughts of Corruption ebbing from my mind the longer we spent together, and even managed a smile at one point.

A smile.

As the fire burned low, the legionnaires began the whispers of a song, their voices growing louder and more haunting as it looped, repeating for a second time.

Suff'ring in the silver'd pool
Alongside his shadow'd ghosts
But darkness fell, devour'd them all

Beware, the Shadow Bringer comes

So burn the light brightly and
Sing the song boldly
For we fear not shadow nor the night

For beware, beware, beware, beware
Beware, the Shadow Bringer comes

The shadows they drown him
The light doth surround him
Bound to his darkness evermore

So beware, beware, beware, beware
Beware, the Shadow Bringer comes

Beware, the Shadow Bringer comes

They moved into a few other songs, some spirited, some somber, but I kept thinking of the first. It had a strangeness to it, that song. It made me feel uneasy, exposed.

I didn't like it at all.

As the legionnaires sang, distracted, Mila slipped me a vial of elixir. "From the untainted stores, don't worry," she said, a soft smile upon her lips. "Lord Mithras's power shields us, so legionnaires don't use it. Still, doesn't hurt for you to feel safe."

So *that's* why Elliot and I were denied elixir? Because Mithras's very presence was supposed to protect us? I shifted, a shiver coursing down my arms. It made my hair rise. Because even with the elixir, even with Mithras's protection—three times I had dreamed.

"They could have told us that earlier. My brother and I were denied it by two of your legionnaires."

"Likely trying to prove a point, the fools." Mila shot a look of annoyance at what I assumed to be the guards that had watched over Elliot and I—I didn't recognize them with their masks off—and looked back at me, her smile returning. "Lord Mithras should have assigned Silas or I instead."

Silas groaned. "Right. Could have probably avoided *this* ." He motioned toward his leg, which was bandaged from where the Corrupt had clutched at it. "That Corrupt was stronger than most. Could have been a legionnaire, had the timing been right."

"Perhaps," Mila drawled, then fixed her attention to me. "They seem to be losing interest in their songs, and I'm exhausted. Let's get you ready for sleep."

I politely declined to sleep where Mila wanted me to—sharing her tent—and nestled back against my tree root. We weren't *friends* , I reminded myself. And it felt more comfortable, somehow, being in the open air.

The legionnaires were unbothered by my choice; two legionnaires stood guard along the camp perimeter at all times, watching me and the woods for signs of anything unusual.

I arranged my rope-bound arms over my knees as best as I could, trying to appear nonchalant and insignificant. Between my connection to the Shadow Bringer and his demented world, my involvement in an entire village's damnation, and my fate to likely rot in the Tomb of the Devourer—it was too much to handle, too much to comprehend. I settled my face in my hands, trying not to cry. What purpose could I possibly have in this?

Surely there had been a mistake.

Eventually I dozed off, lulled by wind threading through the branches above me.

But something began to feel wrong.

I woke to an extinguished fire, embers cold and dark. Light threaded from the sky, escaping in part from the moon. It danced with shadows cast by twisting storm clouds. It fell over the legionnaires, who were sleeping

and silent. All of them. Even those who had been assigned the first watch. Only the wind, whispering through the Visstill, and swirling clouds, racing past the moon, made any motion or sound. The wind picked up, hissing through the trees and bringing with it the smell of rain and wildflowers crushed underfoot. It forced the clouds to part as it *whooshed* through the sky, revealing—and then concealing—the moon and stars. It made the scene confusing and dream-like.

But when I tried to stand, I only fell backward.

Sinking.

Sinking.

Sinking.

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CHAPTER 16

WHEN I OPENED MY EYES, I EXPECTED TO BE GREETED BY SWAYING treetops and the smell of breakfast roasting over a fire. Instead, I woke in a sprawling room layered with ancient tapestries, dusty bookshelves, and the barest hint of candlelight. It smelled of night, rain, and old things. Of dust and things left in the dark for far too long.

The Realm had found me once again.

I steeled myself for whatever was about to come my way—be it more demons or the Shadow Bringer himself, I'd be ready.

And that's when I saw him.

The Bringer was sleeping in a canopied bed, cloaked in shadow and obsidian armor. Silvery fabric curtained the frame around him, floating loosely in the cold, dusty air. He appeared frozen in sleep, silver-white hair adorned by an onyx crown and pooling on the pillows below him.

I was in his room.

I was in the Shadow Bringer's *room* .

Creeping backwards, I felt for a weapon while keeping my gaze locked on the Bringer. I was unsettled by his silence and lack of movement. Was he dead? I considered testing this theory, perhaps feeling for a pulse or a sign of breath, but quickly decided against it. Something told me that he was very much alive—just burnt out from using whatever power it was that stemmed from him.

I found a steel fire poker leaning next to a cold fireplace, weighty and sharp despite the dust it left behind, then carefully slid within arm's reach of the Shadow Bringer's massive bed. Strange, that such a degree of

extravagance could be found consorting with an equal amount of rot. The mix of luxury and decay was uncomfortable.

Intolerable, even.

I drew the fire poker up, holding it over the Bringer's exposed throat.

Demon. Monster. Killer.

Hate surged through my veins, nearly choking me. This man, the horrid origin of Corruption, damned my sister, cursed my parents, ruined Elliot's future, and wrecked all chances I had at living a life of any normalcy. A life away from Corruption and the darkness that plagued me from the day I was born. If I killed the Shadow Bringer now, perhaps Corruption would end, the demons would be destroyed, and all captured souls would finally rise to meet the Maker's holy light.

The poker ghosted the skin below his jawline. One swift thrust, and it would all be over.

Grrrrssschk. Rrrssschk. Rrrssschk.

I froze, listening intently. The wind, perhaps.

Grrrrssschk. Rrrssschk. Rrrssschk.

Quickly realizing that the low, guttural noises beyond the Shadow Bringer's bedroom weren't from the wail of wind or the growl of branches scraping against stone, I jolted upright.

Demons.

It was the sound of *demons* .

"*Let us out* ," they howled, snarling and groaning and crying from the depths of their ruined souls. "*Let…us…out* ."

Something heavy slammed against his bedroom door, causing me to flinch and lose my balance from where I was precariously teetering over the Shadow Bringer's sleeping form. The fire poker slipped from my hands, sliding off the bed and crashing to the floor.

His eyes opened, depthless and aching.

"*You* ," he rasped, lips close to my ear. He put his gauntleted hands over mine, cold and sharp, and my traitorous heart stuttered. "You don't need to panic—I can manage them. I always have."

He rose to his elbows as I felt myself slipping.

His hands were iron.

Then clay.

Then dust.

The demons repeated their chant as they threw themselves against the Shadow Bringer's door. The screams began to layer together, rising and echoing in a hellish chorus.

"*Let…us…out .*"

"*Let…us…out .*"

"*Letussoutt. *"

"*Letussouttletussouttletussoutt! *"

The last scream yanked me back into the dream. I was still in the Shadow Bringer's bed; he was still holding me by the hands. He let out a slow breath, fixing me with eyes that began to shift from aching and depthless to something sharper and aware. I shifted, a horrific blush creeping up my neck, only to feel his armored hips shift under my legs. We looked down at the same time, realizing just how close our bodies were.

Too close.

We scrambled backwards as shadows roiled around us, tangling in their eagerness to obey each of our panicked wills. This was a mistake—a shadow looped around the Bringer's wrist, and my will must have called it forward, for it curled around my wrist, too, and pulled itself taut.

He cursed.

I cursed.

And the demons roared louder, bending the door to his bedchamber.

"They aren't usually this persistent." The Bringer shoved himself off the bed, cursing again when the movement yanked me sideways into his shoulder.

"*Letussouttletussouttletussoutt! *"

"I thought the mighty Shadow Bringer would have more control over his demons," I said angrily, putting a step between us. We were near the door now—too near, for my liking—and the Bringer was assessing its current condition. It seemed sturdy enough, but the demons were relentless, slamming their bodies into the wood. Two horns suddenly broke through, piercing the door. When the demon tried to retreat, the horns stuck, rattling the frame. "Or do they hate you so much that you *can't* control them?"

He glanced back at me, mouth slanting into a scowl. "I've never been their master—merely their keeper. So yes, they hate me. Perhaps you're familiar with the feeling."

"I'm not a monster, so no."

The fire poker was too far away to be grabbed, but maybe I could manipulate the shadows to my advantage. I concentrated, willing them to rise and wrap around the Shadow Bringer's throat like a pair of hands, but they merely wavered in place, useless and without form. It was wishful thinking, then. Of course they wouldn't harm him.

"So then your Light Bringer accepted you without hate or fear? You woke to find him and his followers singing your praises and not condemning you to a monster's fate?" At my silence, he turned his attention back to the door, running a hand over one of the smooth, alabaster horns that pierced it. The demon flinched at the touch, splintering more of the wood. He added quietly, "If you hadn't interfered, you would have avoided all of this. I don't know why the shadows listen to you."

"Probably because they'd rather be with me than with a brooding villain like yourself." The shadows that trailed behind him now trailed behind me, lapping against my ankles.

"Would they, now?" the Bringer countered, arching a brow. "Interesting."

"What, you don't think they would?" I implored, another flush making me scowl in irritation. Maybe it was just my imagination, but the shadow-tether between us seemed tighter. He was too close, too tall, too *attentive* . He had never looked at me like this before, and I didn't know what to make of it. "Then you're forgetting what happened in the water chamber. Maybe I'll try that again on the demons outside your door."

"You will *not* try that again."

"Of course you don't want me to hurt your precious demons. You're their keeper, after all—"

"You are very, *very* vexing," the Bringer bit out, touching his throat. I remembered the swell of blood that had pooled there, leaking from his nose and mouth. "The demons in the hall are much older and far more powerful than the fledglings in the water. What you accomplished in the previous dream won't work on them."

The horned demon began to twist, throwing itself into the door with a renewed fervor. If we didn't do something soon, the door would burst.

"You really should try to wake up," he added. "This isn't going to be pleasant."

"It can't be any less pleasant than what I'd wake up to. I'm being marched to your tomb, Shadow Bringer."

His pale brow furrowed. “What do you mean by—”

I cut him off, willing the shadows at my feet to rise up. I didn’t know what I was doing, not really; I’d intended for them to form a wall, sealing us off from the demons, but they rushed forward, too quick—and cracked the door wide open. The shadows disintegrated at the contact, sinking back to the floor.

Demons—dozens of hideous demons—stood in the hall, gaping at us.

“Like I said,” the Shadow Bringer growled, yanking the tether so that I stood behind him, “you are very, *very* vexing.”

The shadows rose at a twitch of his fingers, churning in front of us like a condensed thundercloud. A blink later and the cloud surged forward, pouring over the demons like a midnight tempest. The creatures tensed as the shadows surged over their broken bodies; they weren’t being attacked, exactly—but it seemed like they were being purged of something terrible. Shadows crawled from their eyes and mouths, joining the dark around them, and their mouths remained frozen in silent screams.

When the cloud finally settled, the demons were sated. Their rage and panic had cooled; the fight had left their hollow eyes. Eventually they slunk back down the hall, seeking solace somewhere else.

The Bringer’s shoulders sagged. His shadows were mere wisps now, settling under furniture and sliding beneath rugs. Even the tether that had bound us had disintegrated, sliding inside a nearby vase.

“Wretched creatures,” the Bringer muttered, crossing the room in a few quick strides. He made it to his bed and quickly turned around—as if forgetting I was there, too—instead choosing a book-covered desk to lean against.

His room was opulent but uncared for. A tomb left untouched for centuries.

I examined a vase overflowing with dead flowers, flinching when they disintegrated. “How can you live like this?” I felt myself asking. “You’re the lord of nothing but dust and monsters.”

“It wasn’t always this way.” He added, almost to himself, “But now I’m cursed to rot in a castle that no longer feels like mine, unable to leave and unable to purge it of its shadows. Most would say it is a fate most fitting.”

A dark laugh rose in the back of my throat. “Then perhaps you shouldn’t have forced Corruption upon Noctis. You cursed an entire kingdom to live in fear and die in ruin. Your fate *is* fitting for such a crime.”

His hands squeezed the edge of the desk, cracking some of the wood into dusty splinters. “My *fate* was torn from me the moment I was banished here. Time was stolen from me—my life was stolen from me, and—”

“My entire *family* was stolen from me. *You* stole them from me.” I took a step toward him, teeth bared.

“I did no harm to you or your family.” Shadows flashed in his eyes, but he did not move. “Believe what you wish, but that is the truth. I’ve witnessed a great deal of loss, too.”

I nearly laughed. A monster justifying his monstrosities by what he’d lost was pathetic.

“You lament your past and present, but what about Noctis’s future? What about *my* future?” My hands trembled. There was nothing left for me. I should have my entire life to look forward to—decades filled with purpose and joy. Perhaps even love. A family of my own, a house of my own, a *life* of my own. The Shadow Bringer was rotting in his castle, but I was rotting, too. And I didn’t have a choice.

I was inches from the Shadow Bringer now, glaring up into half-dead eyes spinning with whorls of silver and night. I hated him. He was the enemy of Noctis, the harbinger of Corruption, Eden’s killer, and my future’s cruel thief. The tales made him out to be wicked, soulless, and cruel.

So why did he look so achingly sad?

I had wanted to shove him. Wanted to grab him by his stiff shoulders and scream with the same agony and intensity as his demons.

Instead I said fiercely, “You have a responsibility to make things right. If you’re truly as miserable as you look, and insistent that you’re not at fault, then change your fate and your future. If you can manage that, then maybe you’ll be able to change mine, too.”

He looked surprised, eyes searching my face. “It’s possible that Noctis can be salvaged, but I’ve no sense of where to start.” His voice lowered, heavy with regret and longing. “I don’t remember everything, but I do remember having a sense of purpose. My power once called to the dark, and dark things were drawn to it—drawn to *me* . I once thought I could contain all the demons here while I waited for an absolution that never came.”

This was new. The Shadow Bringer harboring demons to *protect* humanity while imprisoned was unheard of.

“But the demons aren’t fully contained. Many roam Noctis freely.”

“No,” he agreed. “And perhaps they never were, if what you’re telling me is the truth. The demons in my castle aren’t Corrupting anyone; they’re as trapped as I am. Which leaves those roaming the Dream Realm to their own volitions.”

Grrrrssschk. Rrrssschk. Rrrssschk.

We turned at the same time; a demon leered at us through the broken doorway, its shoulders so wide that it had to adjust itself to fit. It lunged for me, moving quicker than what should be possible, its grin wide and hair-covered arms outstretched. The Shadow Bringer threw himself in front of me, shadows up in defense, but he was either too distracted or too slow—

The force behind the blow was staggering, slamming the Bringer into the fireplace with a sickening crunch. The Bringer snapped to his feet, but the demon was faster. It grabbed the discarded fire poker, raising it to the Bringer’s exposed throat.

“*Let…me…out* ,” it rasped. “*Five hundred…years.* ”

For a moment the Bringer’s eyes widened, but he quickly shook his head, clearing whatever thought had passed through it. He brought his hands to his throat, shielding it from the spike. “The curse has no end, demon. Put the spike down before I impale you with it.”

“*Five hundred…years* ,” it repeated. “*He…is…coming* .”

“You’re delusional and broken, just like the others,” the Bringer said sadly. “Pitiful.”

And then he grabbed the fire poker, spun it around, and shoved it between the demon’s eyes. It lurched back, poker protruding from its forehead, and lunged for me again. I spun to avoid it, diving for a half-open curtain at the far end of the Bringer’s room.

A balcony.

Curse it all.

Lit by a dusting of stars and a pale yellow moon, the balcony looked straight out of the pages of a storybook—perfect for romance or reminiscing, but not for outrunning demons. The ledge was too far away from the forest that sprawled beneath it.

To fall would be to die.

“*Let me out,* ” the demon snarled. It tried to pull the fire poker from its skull, but it only managed to snap it. It wielded the broken piece like a dagger, poised and ready to strike me down. “*You can free me.* ”

My back slammed into the balcony. The creature had cornered me—backed me into a place it knew I couldn't escape from. "If I free you, then you'll just devour innocent souls. Not happening." And then I willed the Bringer's shadows to race down my arms, covering them in thick, writhing darkness.

When the demon took another step toward me, poker raised to strike, I sent the shadows flying. They became swords, lances, pitchforks—and assailed the demon, sending it reeling into the Shadow Bringer, who had followed us to the balcony. They crashed into the other side of the balcony, assaulted by shadows both knife-sharp and corporeal. The demon took the worst of it, moaning from its injuries, but the Bringer was halfway off the ledge, cape pinned by spikes and blades. The part of his body off the ledge—his right arm, shoulder, and head—began to smoke, burned by an invisible force.

I had never heard the Shadow Bringer scream, but now he did, writhing in torment. His metal gauntlet sunk into his arm, melding with the skin underneath, and his moon-white hair began to smolder, just as his smooth skin blistered and peeled. He tried to push the shadows away, but they wouldn't listen, wouldn't bend to his will. Whatever force was burning him was also keeping him from using his abilities.

He had told the truth, after all.

The Shadow Bringer truly was imprisoned by his own castle. He wasn't some devilish ruler feasting on souls, commandeering armies of demons, and living a life of glory and power. He was a miserable, broken monster, but perhaps he was the only monster who could *do* something about it.

And I was killing him.

I didn't know what death meant in the Realm, but something told me the Shadow Bringer might not wake from this. And if he died—and the demons *didn't* die—what then? I'd have to face the demons alone. They'd riot, overwhelm me, and escape, plaguing Noctis with a rush of Corruption. I pried the shadows away, frantic and horrified, sending them spiraling into the night.

The Shadow Bringer broke free at the last moment, and the force of it sent the demon plummeting off the ledge. It howled as it fell, but its echoing wails were soon silenced.

Dropping his hands, the Bringer crumpled. He sat perfectly still, eyes closed, leaning his half-melted body against the balustrade. His skin had

already begun to heal, resetting back to its original state, but it wasn't quite restored.

"I'm tired, Esmer. I'm tired of living like this."

I froze where I stood, uncertain. "I—"

"There are no captured souls here beyond my own. There are only demons, pulled here by my wretched power, and darkness. Nothing but rot and my ruined soul on display." His eyes fluttered open briefly before closing again. "The Weavers trapped me here, claiming I was the evil plaguing Noctis, but it wasn't me. It has never been me."

"How can you expect me to believe you?" I hissed, tears springing to the corners of my eyes. I hated how I felt. It was a mixture of grief, doubt, and shame. "What you're saying goes against everything I've been taught. It's a path that I've walked my entire life."

"Then let me convince you otherwise," he rasped. "Help me find my freedom and purpose and I will return the favor a hundredfold."

I raised my face to feel the wind. It swirled around us, fragrant with the scent of the sprawling wilderness below, and threaded through our hair, caressing it with smooth fingers. "The tales say nothing about how to defeat the demons or free you. They scarcely mention your fate at all."

The Bringer let out a heavy sigh and opened his eyes. The shadows were back, but they felt empty and dull compared to how they were rioting earlier. "You said Mithras was marching you to my tomb. If they seal you there with me, you'll never leave. You'll share my fate, bound to this castle and unable to watch your loved ones grow up. You'll live here as Noctis sinks further into ruin, blind to the waking world and numb to the passage of time. Don't let them take you."

"It's already too late," I said, shaking my head. "But at the tomb I can wake you, and—"

"You can't wake me," he interrupted. "If you do, there is a chance this dream will collapse and the demons will run free. They remain imprisoned because of my will."

"But isn't that what you want?" I blurted, desperate to understand why this monster no longer seemed so monstrous. "They'd spread your Corruption like wildfire. They'd overtake Noctis, and—"

"Do I *look* like that's what I want? To rule the Dream Realm like some twisted king?" He stood, gripping the balustrade for support. His onyx crown, which had partially broken apart in his hair, dropped to his feet,

rattling against the stone. It, unlike the rest of him, had not begun to patch itself together.

“Then why did you do it?” I found myself asking, joining him by the ledge. “Why did you form Corruption, if that isn’t what you wanted?”

“I—” the Bringer began, his brow furrowed. “I don’t fully remember.” He turned to face me, expression haunted. “But what I will say is this: there are many things in this world that I hate, but I don’t hate the innocent. If Corruption is truly as bad as you say, then it would be irredeemable for me to cause such a tragedy.”

Strangely, I believed him.

I believed the Shadow Bringer.

He reached for me, and I found myself reaching back. But just as my fingertips met his, I was ripped away, his hands and castle spiraling into nothingness.

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CHAPTER 17

DARK.

Empty.

A void.

And hunger. A deep, roaring hunger. A thirst and longing so consuming it broke him. *Maker* , his throat was burning and crumbling and falling down and down—his mouth cracked, a bloodless vault.

The Shadow Bringer was dust and stone and decay.

Anger rose up, coursing through the Bringer's cold, marble skin and igniting it in a lightless fire. It spread through his fingers, down his hollow, brittle bones. Smoke rose from his skin—*he could feel it!* —and he knew this, knew this, knew this.

He knew this darkness, this feeling, this bitter thing.

He let the smoke drift over his bones, curling through the holes of his cracked lips. And he remembered, then. *Esmer* . The girl who shared in his power but did not cower from it. The girl who called him a monster but saw purpose in him regardless.

Esmer.

Esmer.

Esmer.

The dark coiled over him, righted his limbs, poured out from his eyes. The Shadow Bringer wanted it to consume him. Carry him. Take him—somewhere.

Where?

His mind was empty, useless, hollow as his bones.

Esmer.

Esmer.

Esmer.

Shadows consumed him, becoming him. They wanted him to wake up.

So he did.

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CHAPTER 18

I STARED PAST MY STEAMING BOWL OF PORRIDGE, SCARCELY ABLE TO believe what I was seeing.

The legionnaires were awake.

And *cheery* .

They moved about the camp in an efficient morning rhythm, none the wiser to what had happened in my dream. The demonic chorus, the wail of demented release—it took most of breakfast before my stomach stopped churning. Still, the dream lingered.

Letussouttletussouttletussoutt.

The Shadow Bringer's breath against my ear, his eyes as they lit up, searching me—

Does he face those demons every night?

I took another mouthful of oats, awkwardly maneuvering the bowl in my bound hands.

Is he facing them now, alone?

All of what I knew about the Dream Realm stemmed from Weaver tales and Norhavellis's small collective knowledge of both demons and Corruption. And, as I was very aware, that knowledge had been twisted, challenged, and wrung out to dry due to a few recent events. Still, sensical or not, the Shadow Bringer was indeed trapped in that castle of his, unable to control the demons that stalked it.

His world of shadow, dust, and darkness.

I shook my head, remembering when he had once called my world 'little'.

When he told me that, I assumed it was because he mistook my small understanding of the world for a lie. That in managing to craft a dream of my own, complete with my home, Norhavellis, and a part of the Visstill, I changed things to hide my affiliation with whatever enemies he claimed I allied with. Mithras, probably.

But my world *was* little.

And when he had called my world ‘little’, he sounded haunted—and surprised, maybe—by a yearning I didn’t understand. There was mistrust there, sure, but there was something else, too. Something that may have manifested from a man who hadn’t been outside his shadows in many, many years.

By the time I finished my breakfast and was lifted atop a horse, I had convinced myself that the Shadow Bringer was someone who could, in some ways, be pitied.

Definitely not trusted, exactly, but pitied.

WE RODE into the late afternoon, wandering through the Visstill in what seemed like aimless, looping circles. As the sun arced above the treetops, shadows lengthened, blanketing the root-spattered ground in patches of thick darkness. Mithras dismounted on occasion, conferring with his legionnaires. They examined patterns in the dirt, traced markings etched deep into crumbling stone, and spoke in tones that fluctuated between mildly amused and vaguely hateful.

I stretched my aching muscles, stifling a yawn.

It was our third day of travel, of haunting songs, and wondering why I hadn’t dreamed of the Shadow Bringer since the night in his bedchamber. I chewed on the inside of my cheek, running through a mental inventory of everything I knew about him. Even with his half-lies and vague insults, it was becoming more and more difficult for me to perceive him as evil.

I found myself wondering what his true name was. Or if he even had one.

“Ugh,” Mila sighed, earning a few semi-annoyed glances from the legionnaires. “Where is this dreadful tomb? You’d think since we visit it yearly that it wouldn’t be so utterly impossible to find.”

Alcott, who had dismounted with Mithras to analyze a stone that looked suspiciously similar to one they had examined earlier, didn’t react. Silas,

who was riding next to Mila and I, however, rolled his eyes.

“Enough with the dramatics, Mila. You’re going to frighten our horses into oblivion.”

Mila scoffed. “Oblivion? Surely you mean insanity. We’ve been traveling in damn *circles* . This tomb is a pest.”

Silas looked uncomfortable. “Lord Mithras wouldn’t knowingly misguide us.”

“There you have it,” Mila said, shaking her head. She wore an array of small, golden earrings, but they were barely noticeable in her hair. “*Knowingly* .” She turned to me. “You don’t suppose we’ve been traveling in circles, do you? If anyone knows their whereabouts in this massive and dull forest, it would be you.”

“I’ve never ventured out this far,” I answered, bristling. The Visstill was somewhat uniform in its appearance, but it was hardly dull. In fact, I considered it rather beautiful after the hellish occurrences of the past few days. “It does feel like we’re circling something, though. The stone they’re looking at is very familiar.”

“I knew it,” Mila said with a groan, then shifted into a whisper, her voice conspiratorial. “The cross, the chip in the corner—it’s the *same rock* we saw yesterday. What do you suppose they’re getting at?”

“Save for finding the tomb, they’re not getting at anything,” Silas snapped, his mouth tight with exasperation. “And what really makes you think you can spot the difference between one chipped stone and another, especially from a distance? They’re *rocks* , Mila.”

“Because I’m not spotting differences. It’s where they’re similar that matters, you utter chicken-head.” Silas made to fix the top of his hair but caught himself. A flush crept through the tips of his ears, and Mila grinned, pleased with herself.

From our angle, we could see that Mithras and Alcott were debating something. Alcott was nearly smiling, but it came across as a grimace. Mithras was half-smiling too, his gloved hands raised in a victorious gesture.

Mithras, glorious Light Bringer and sovereign of Noctis.

But in the Realm, the Shadow Bringer considered Mithras a bitter, vile enemy, worthy of me being banished to the depths of his castle for just being *associated* with him.

I shuddered, remembering the cruel, long days spent in that space.

Mithras was likely spinning a web of his own. It was that possibility—perhaps more than any other—that was beginning to terrify me.

“Light Legion,” Mithras began, projecting his voice over the traveling party. “Dismount and tether your horses. We continue on foot.”

Legionnaires spoke in low voices as they worked to quickly secure their equipment and horses. A few hesitated, opting to remain behind and take watch over the supplies, but Mithras refused; he commanded that they all walk, single-file, down a nearby hill.

So we did.

My boots stuck into the hillside as we descended, squishing and pulling against mud left undried from a previous rainstorm. Leaves were strewn everywhere, and the early evening air began to take on a chill, forcing the hair on my neck and arms to rise.

“The Tomb of the Devourer is ever the trickster,” Mila mused, gliding down the hill. She outmaneuvered us all, delicately side-stepping fallen logs and hollows in the earth. It looked as if she was dancing. “Hidden away in some moldy forest in the middle of nowhere.”

I nearly tripped, sliding forward on a patch of wet undergrowth. My skirt snagged as I slid, ripping part of the hemline.

I don’t want to be here—I don’t want to be here.

Silas reached for me, holding out his arm for support. It was warm and steady, a solid anchor against my panic. He searched my face, noting the fear there. “Don’t worry, I’ll guide you down.”

I was afraid. Deeply so.

And strangely, not of the Shadow Bringer.

His unseen tomb, however, was a different story. The tomb was the Shadow Bringer’s earthly grave, unknown and unseen to everyone save the Light Legion. Over the past few days, I’d been told that the Shadow Bringer’s physical body was still alive, but Mithras couldn’t kill him. The Weavers entombed him in the Realm with the souls of demons only he could contain—and devour. To kill him would be to release a horde of demons into the world and make everything far worse than it already was.

Part of this was true, I knew, but I wasn’t so sure about the whole ‘devouring’ part.

As if on cue, a structure—the tomb—emerged before us, shrouded by a copse of ancient, clawing trees. Its body, which rested behind an entrance so dark it seemed partially open, was dug into the innards of a second hill,

obscuring its size. And the light seemed dimmer here—the air heavier, colder. A slow, steady mist clung to the damp earth, threading out from the shadows and clinging to the tomb's dark, overgrown walls.

I fell into silence with the rest of the legionnaires.

Mithras, mask affixed and sword drawn, approached the entrance. He reached for the stone slab marking the entrance, but something caught his attention.

"My lord," a legionnaire warbled, breaking the silence. He cleared his throat to give his words more purchase. "My lord, the tomb is nearly open."

I had blamed it on the light, on the adjusting of my eyes, that the tomb door seemed so dark, so seamlessly hidden. I thought the slab was a part of the shadows, not an empty, gaping hole. But as our eyes adjusted, the truth was laid bare.

The tomb was *open* .

Not enough for a body to fit through, exactly, but close. Extraordinarily close.

At first, Mithras said nothing. Then he murmured, so softly that it sounded like a shift in the wind, a crunch of someone's boot against the leaves, "May he rot."

"My lord? The tomb—"

"*May he rot* ," he repeated again, louder, stronger.

A legionnaire—I didn't see who—tossed a stone into the gap. It sailed past the archway, disappearing into the shadows with a faint, echoing *crack* as it landed somewhere far within.

The legionnaires flinched, some taking a step or two back into the forest.

Mithras turned around, facing us. Rage burned in his golden eyes, spilling over his taut, too-stiff body and trembling in his clenched fists. It trickled from the dust still floating from his hands. Without warning, he tore his mask from his face and hurled it into a nearby tree. It sank deep into the wood, narrowly missing one of his men.

"What do you use your eyes for?" He directed this question at the man who spoke of the half-open tomb. "For what do we use our senses? Our sense of taste, touch? Of scent and sound?"

"I-I use my eyes to see, my lord," the man stammered. His skin shone with sweat. "And I use my senses for the Light Legion. I use them for you, my lord."

“And what of the rest of you? Can you sense the darkness?”

The legionnaires nodded, a mixture of duty and discomfort splayed across their faces.

“Can you all sense it?” Mithras implored again, louder, more insistent.

“Yes, my lord!” the legion echoed.

“And can you find it, even if it walks among you?” He arched his hands through the air, motioning at the depths of the forest. The shadows had lengthened, drawing attention to the encroaching darkness.

“Yes, my lord!” the Light Legion repeated, its voice rising as one.

“And would you drag it out of the shadows and bring it to the light? Bring it to me?”

They nodded grimly and bowed. “Yes, my lord.”

“Always,” Alcott added, crossing an arm over his chest in a vague salute.

“We must walk in the shadows,” Mithras intoned.

“To walk in the light,” they answered.

“Good. Set up camp,” Mithras ordered. “We will avenge this wrong and reunite the Shadow Bringer with an eternity of damnation. He will not escape.”

The legionnaires exchanged glances, clearly uneasy. The Tomb of the Devourer stood partially open, a staggering reminder of the man that laid within.

Or nearly without.

Mithras’s gaze lingered to me for a moment. And as the legionnaires scurried away to their various duties, fading into the dark, I noticed that he was the only one without fear in his eyes.

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CHAPTER 19

THE SHADOW BRINGER HATED MITHRAS.

Hated the words he chose, hated the way he carried himself. Hated the arrogance in his diseased eyes. Hated that his armor shone obscenely bright, hated every lie he told.

Mithras wore a skin that was not intended for him.

His thoughts spiraled as he listened to him speak, wandering into dark, perilous places. Places where he wasn't weak or in a state between life and death. He ignored the urge to slam his palms into the sockets of his eyes. His limbs were still so numb, so creaking, so *hollow* . He could scarcely feel them. It took everything within him to land each footstep, to align each part of his body so that it made the movement it was intended for.

He knew Esmer was out there, hidden within Mithras's followers. He wanted to avoid thoughts of her, wanted to forget his intent for her—*he was so close* —but his attention drifted to her regardless. She would soon despise him like he despised Mithras. But with her, he could be free.

Free .

Free to pursue answers, seek vengeance, and reconcile with his past.

But at what cost?

The Bringer untangled himself from thoughts of her, looking past the half-opened door to his tomb. It was objectively dark and dismal outside, but to him it looked wonderful. It was real and *true* , and it surprisingly made him want to live. It didn't matter what they desired. They were enemies, all of them. They were trivial, unworthy. Useless, save for one.

Esmer.

A life for a life—a life to reclaim his strength. A life to restore his memories, his purpose. And once he was finished, he'd come back for her. If he succeeded, her future and her purpose would be restored, too.

He'd make sure of it.

He nearly smiled, then, as what little power he had left smoldered at his fingertips, disintegrating into the air as if it were nothing at all.

IT HAD TAKEN him hours to open the stone slab, but now he was free.

Free.

An hour ago, the Light Legion was ablaze in panic. Now they were silent among the ashes, hearts beating a slow, steady drumroll. The rhythm became the Shadow Bringer's warsong, leading him back into his tomb.

Just as it would lead Esmer.

The Tomb of the Devourer greeted him with an ancient breath as he stepped back inside, draping his limbs in dust and shadow. It was an abyssal, gaping structure, all carved into the body of a hill, and he soon found himself at the central staircase that descended deep into the earth.

"Almost," he murmured, breathing deep the cold, earthen air. He traced the walls, observing the obsidian that gleamed there. The tomb was hewn from shadow—from dark, unnamed things—and it battled the moonlight that did little to illuminate it. "But first, I—" He trailed off, forgetting.

Something held his memory, cradled it, shook it. But he could not remember.

He descended the stairs with greater strength than he had felt in days, stomach full from scraps he found around a half-dead fire, but he still felt weak and a bit lost. Perhaps he could just forget Mithras. He could forget Esmer, too. The girl who haunted him and clawed through his dreams.

But he reached the bottom of the stairs first.

And he saw the bones again.

Two sets of bones, two skeletons, slumped against the lower walls of his tomb. The Shadow Bringer stopped, watching as moonlight and shadow warred over them. He didn't know why the skeletons were there. Or why they sat so dignified, so *near* to the inner chamber that had held him. He stared at the forgotten bones and told himself that they were nothing. That they were the bones of Mithras's followers, bodies that had no place in his tomb of shadow.

But suddenly a memory rose, sharp and clear.

“LEAVE—I’M begging you. Your lives are not worth this.” Erebus’s voice faltered, hoarse from screaming. He had not slept for days. “Leave while you’re still whole—while you still have the choice. Your purpose has never been to die for my sake.”

At Sorren and Ceveon’s silence, Erebus finally cracked.

“Leave!” he howled. “I command you—leave!”

His two loyal followers met his wild eyes, their expressions dark with sorrow and words left unspoken. They looked to their leader, their broken lord of shadows, and they bowed, long and deep. Their capes fluttered against the floor, the only sound in that cold and terrible place.

“We will not forsake you, Erebus,” Ceveon vowed, crossing his forearm over his chest. “No matter what they say, we will never forsake you.”

They were coming. They had such little time.

Sorren shifted, uneasy, sensing the change. “May it be a fortnight or a year—they will realize the truth soon enough.” Sorren stopped, motioning toward the tomb’s innermost door. Towering and ominous, it rested at the bottom of the stair they had carved deep into the ground. “We must seal you before they find this place. And they’re nearly here, aren’t they?” Sorren saw what he needed in Erebus’s expression. He swallowed, biting back the bile rising sour and unwanted in the back of his throat. “Then it is time.”

Erebus searched the faces of his comrades, his friends, and he knew that he would not let them die for him.

Not like this.

Never like this.

Until the Weavers knew the truth, they would never allow Sorren and Ceveon to leave this place alive. So he cleaved his last shred of power from the depths of his soul, bidding it upwards and outwards. He commanded the shadows to form a wall of impenetrable dark, obscuring and sealing the outer tomb. Only those who knew the darkness—who felt the dark as it clung to them—would be able to enter this place.

Ceveon and Sorren stared in wonder as he worked, watching the shadows as they embedded themselves into every stone, every crevice.

“The tomb is now hidden,” Erebus said, motioning toward the barrier of undulating shadow. If one of them retreated—if Ceveon or Sorren left the

tomb—the barrier would shatter, leaving Erebus vulnerable. But they need not know this. They needed to escape when it was time. They needed to leave him and be free. "I've embedded my power into the stone. You will be safe to leave when you are ready."

Ceveon rested a hand on Erebus's shoulder. He wanted his lord to know that he was understood and that he would be protected. Moreover, that they, even if it were only they, would come back to him. Always, they would come back to him. Sorren joined him, laying a hand on Erebus's other shoulder.

Together, they made their oaths.

"We have followed you since Evernight," Ceveon said, fighting against the hopelessness that was beginning to taint his words. "And we will continue to follow you, forevermore."

Sorren nodded grimly. "The seal will keep you. The castle that you will guard—remember its purpose. Remember your mission, even when it seems darkest."

"And may we rid the world of its darkness, once and for all," Ceveon vowed. "We will return to you."

"Thank you, my friends," Erebus whispered, withdrawing into the tomb.

Ceveon and Sorren began the process of sealing him, but he could not watch. He could not watch as tears fell from Ceveon's battle-hardened face, leaving streaks in the dirt that marked his skin. He could not watch as Sorren made a quick, hasty cut over his own forearm, pressing his lifeblood into the last lines of the seal. And when they finally drew the door close, the last Erebus saw of the living world were his own shadows, staring back at him from the walls.

He sank to the floor, the darkness and the cold consuming him in full.

He knew he would not see the light again for some time.

And he was not ready.

WETNESS CLUNG to the Shadow Bringer's face, trickling from his eyes. He laid a hand there, in the place where his skin was wet, letting it seep into his fingertips.

Esmer was at the top of the stairs, uncertain and watching him. He had left her unaltered by his power; she was meant to find him, meant to wander here, linger here, follow him down—all so that she could be sealed as he had been for the past five-hundred years. If she could replace him in the

Realm, guarding the castle, then he could leave without guilt. It wouldn't be for long, he told himself. He'd come back for her—and she could handle her own. He had witnessed it himself. It had to be done.

It had to be done.

But his eyes wandered to the two lonely, desolate skeletons, two hollowed-out husks of two *people* who used to…who were…

"Ceveon," he mouthed, feeling out the name on his tongue. It had been so long, and his memories had withered. Still, he knew. "Sorren." He knelt beside them, laid a hand on their bones. How brittle they felt. How empty and wrong.

They had called him Erebus.

Not the Shadow Bringer.

Erebus .

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CHAPTER 20

MY DREAMS WERE PLAYING TRICKS ON ME.

The moon had shifted, revealing a hauntingly beautiful man with moon-white hair, bloodless skin, and eyes made alive by churning shadows. I couldn't move, couldn't so much as turn my head, but I could see him as clearly as I could see the embers of the legion's dying fire.

The Shadow Bringer.

His movements were stiff and strange, as though he was uncomfortable in his own skin. And maybe he was. Where his skin was porcelain-smooth in the Realm, it was now marred by bruises and hollowing dips under his cheekbones. He looked awful—and more human—than ever. He flexed his pale fingers; dried blood still clung to his skin, and his ripped clothing was markedly darker in several places, smeared with what looked to be dirt, dust, and even more blood.

His? Someone else's?

My eyes drifted shut. I was imagining him. He was not real.

He isn't real.

Slowly, I began to feel the ground beneath my back, the wind pressing against my face, the leather cloak I had been wrapped in, and the feel of my hands clutched over my dress—

My hands were *unbound* .

I took a furtive glance around the camp, expecting the legionnaires to be awake and aware, but they remained silent and still, sprawled out atop their various bedrolls.

Too still.

Silas reclined near the half-dead fire. His eyes were closed, face unlined and unconcerned. I touched his neck, feeling for a pulse, and nearly jumped when I felt the steady *thmp* of his heartbeat. Not dead, but nearly.

My blood chilled. Where was the Shadow Bringer? Had that figure truly been him?

The tomb, watching over the sleeping camp like a yawning beast, stood open, a wound of black marking its entrance. Someone had moved the stone slab, leaving the entrance unguarded and bare. Strangely, I knew the Shadow Bringer would be inside. I could feel him, a breath of power amidst dust and rot.

A weight washed over me as I entered the tomb, a silent scream begging me to leave. But I couldn't leave—not until I saw him.

When I found him, he was weeping.

The Shadow Bringer knelt at the bottom of a staircase by two skeletons, tears gleaming silver in the half-light of the tomb. Grief was familiar to me—it lived in the heart of Norhavellis. It lived in my Mother and Father after Eden's death. It lived in Elliot, who had watched as his goat, a soft, gentle creature that he bottle-fed from birth, was dragged into the Visstill by creatures with white fangs and hateful red eyes.

This felt like a different kind of grief.

I paused at the top of the staircase, not wanting to intrude, but needing answers all the same. He had put the Light Legion to sleep again—had put them to sleep and wandered off to the Tomb of the Devourer as if he wanted me to find him.

And maybe he did.

The Demon Lord.

The Devourer.

The Shadow Bringer.

Who *was* the Bringer, really? A lord of demons? An immortal devourer of dreams?

Eden's murderer?

In his current state, he looked no different than a weak, half-dead man who recently bathed in blood, sweat, and dirt. A man engulfed in sorrow and delusion. Moonlight filtered in from outside, casting the blackened walls in a strange, undulating light, and it made time feel strange. It felt as though I was walking in a dream—not stepping into a grave in the middle

of the Visstill—and I moved forward carefully, slowly descending each step as the Bringer knelt over the bones at his feet.

I was halfway down the stairs when footsteps sounded from behind me. They were meandering and slow. Heavy in weight, as if their owner wanted to be heard.

Mithras .

He strolled into the tomb, unmasked, half-armored, his golden hair dull and dark in the shadows of the tomb. Still, his honeyed eyes glowed as if lit by some internal flame. The Bringer stood slowly and laid a hand on the tomb's lower door. He took a deep breath, as if to prepare himself for something—as if to speak first. But his lips did not move.

"Esmer," Mithras announced in greeting, his voice low and sinister. It sent shivers down my back. "Taking an evening stroll?"

I shifted uneasily. What *was* I doing here? Everyone else had been put to sleep by the Bringer, and yet I had followed him blindly into his tomb. The tomb that housed the *creator of Corruption* . Mithras may have had doubts about my allegiances before, but he'd see no excuses now.

"I thought I saw a legionnaire enter the tomb," I explained lamely. "I wanted to assist, if help was needed. It seemed dangerous for them to go alone."

"Such bravery," Mithras drawled, looming over us at the top of the stairs. "And you would be capable of assisting my legionnaires? Destroying the dark should they need it?" He gestured toward my hands, which clearly held no weapons. "Quite impressive for a mere village girl. Your mother and father must have taught you well."

Father had trained me in some things—tending animals, fixing fences. Basic archery and swordplay. Mother had, too. The proper way to heal cuts and bruises. How to read and start a fire. What oils to use in the finest—or most putrid, depending on what was available to us—perfumes. Which plants to season the barest of dishes. How to care for another. How to find the good in people, even when there appeared to be none.

How to hope for a better future despite the darkness surrounding us.

But neither my father nor mother had taught me how to deal with a situation like this.

"Oh, and the Shadow Bringer. A pleasure to see you in the flesh after so long." Mithras directed his attention away from me, crossing his arms and

widening his stance. “Did your guilt lead you to wake? Or was it the screams of every poor soul you’ve ever killed?”

The Shadow Bringer turned. He faced Mithras fully, meeting his gaze with eyes of molten silver. “Perhaps it was my guilt,” he finally answered, his tone matching Mithras’s. “Or perhaps it was my will to finally be free.”

“Then you are delusional. Do your delusions speak to you, or do they take the shape of a ghost? Perhaps they take the form of those two at your feet.” Mithras descended the stairs quickly despite the dark. I backpedaled, twisting to avoid him, but he caught up easily, slamming me against the stairwell by my wrists. “Eager to meet your fate, are you?” he hissed. “Then *embrace* it.”

I thrashed against him—wherever his hands touched, it *burned* . His skin was fire made physical, a flame with a body and a voice. My bones were melting, heating to a warm, pulpy liquid under his touch.

“You will regret hurting her,” the Bringer warned, voice like ice.

“I am a reasonable man,” Mithras said to me, ignoring the Bringer and clenching my wrists tighter. Heat was spreading, spiraling into my forearms; for a moment, his eyes flashed a rich, bloody red. “I was considering giving you my mercy—a chance to redeem yourself after the wicked display of your mother and father. But I have again found you consorting with the devil himself. A devil who calls ghosts his friends.” He let go then, causing me to tumble the rest of the way down. The Shadow Bringer rushed to meet me, ready to tend to my wrists, but the fire was only temporary—my bones were pain-free and whole. “You are wicked, Demon Lord. Or should I call you the Devourer, perhaps? I never know which name is preferable.”

“I am none of those things,” the Bringer said, unperturbed. His voice was frighteningly calm as he pulled me behind him. “Perhaps I once was. But I am no longer.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Mithras said. He drew a sword from his side, its blade long and cruel. “Your fate, as it will be for all eternity, remains the same.” The edge of his mouth tugged upwards. “Truly, some would call it miraculous that our paths crossed. You came close, Demon Lord. But the light will always damn you back to the hell you tried crawling from.”

Darkness crackled at the edge of my periphery.

“Had you planned to lure her here to take your place? A clever plan, but useless—had you your *memory* , you would not—”

The Bringer moved then, springing on Mithras in a blur of metal and rolling, swirling shadow. His blade of obsidian—likely drawn from his palm as he had done in the Realm—behaved strangely, interacting with the shadows as it cut through the ancient, stone-damp air. The dark was drawn to it, sparking across its surface in wild, random arcs. Mithras did not flinch. Instead, he leaned forward into the Bringer as he charged.

Their blades met in a hard, violent *clang* as silver met obsidian.

"You're weak, Demon Lord," Mithras spat, shoving the Bringer sideways with a forceful thrust of his blade. "Your shadows are nothing. *You* are nothing."

"And you are no lord," the Bringer growled. He parried, sending Mithras reeling toward the staircase.

"Then I will remind you." Mithras drew his sword upward. Light spiraled down into the tomb, curling against its dark recesses and resting upon the skeletons, bathing their bones in a grey haze. "I am the Light Bringer. The chosen." It settled brightly against Mithras's blade, igniting it in a white glow. "As I will live in glory, you will rot in the shadows."

One sidestep, a duck, a counter. An arcing, violent sideswipe. A lightning-fast parry.

Mithras and the Shadow Bringer fought with maneuvers so automatic and instinctive that each movement seemed part of a larger dance. And despite the strangeness, the impossibility of it all, Mithras didn't cower from the Shadow Bringer's shadows, even as they shifted to consume the Bringer as a second skin. It felt like a familiar fight—one waged before, somehow.

It was mesmerizing. A battle belonging to warriors of power and practice.

There was the Shadow Bringer, with his tattered black clothing, grey eyes the shade of a churning sea, and a face set in sharp angles. White hair tumbled down his pale neck, resting in loose, mangled curls. Then there was Mithras, the Lord of Light, with his immaculate armor and golden eyes that could condemn with a violent fire. Honey-hued hair framed strong features and a tanned jaw. They were foils to one another, it seemed.

Foils that wanted to kill each other.

At its heat, just as it seemed Mithras and the Bringer would fight for hours, too evenly matched for there to be a clear victory, a shadow slipped

from the Bringer’s arm to my own. It sank into my skin, cool and soft, prodding away all memories of fire and hurt.

The Bringer glanced at me then, an eerie expression on his face.

He looked as though he were already dead. Hollow, gaping eyes. Ghostly skin marked with welts and gashes from Mithras’s blade. Cold, pale lips touched by blood leaking from his cheek. A walking corpse, a man half-alive.

I’m not sure how I knew, but I *knew* . He wanted me to help him.

He wants me to call on his power—like I did in the Realm.

And though we weren’t in the Realm, the Tomb of the Devourer bent the laws of reality itself. Here, shadow and light danced together, alive and singing. I could feel the shadows, the dark. They gathered around me, twining in a heavy cloak around my shoulders. They were there, roiling, powerful, and ready for my command. I didn’t know what I was doing—not even *close* —but I intuitively decided that I needed a weapon, a shield. Something to fend off Mithras. Something to allow the Bringer a chance to get the upper hand.

The Shadow Bringer.

Could I really side with the Bringer? Not the Light Bringer, but the *Shadow Bringer* ?

If I chose him, I wouldn’t be able to take it back.

And maybe it was the image of the Bringer, wretched and shaken as he knelt by the skeletons at his feet. The Bringer with his roaring shield of shadow as fire rained upon us. The Bringer, broken and alone, sleeping while demons gouged at his door. Or maybe it was that look he had given me. A look that was a simple, veiled plea for help.

I didn’t know for sure. I didn’t know anything. But a choice needed to be made.

The Bringer deflected another of Mithras’s wide, sweeping blows, ducking as he countered, and moved clockwise, forcing Mithras to stand with his back exposed to me.

I had to make a choice *now* .

Sinking into the power at my shoulders, I stepped back, balancing its weight as it grew in size. It flickered in and out of more physical forms, shifting back and forth between a thousand daggers, a kaleidoscope of broken glass, and billowing mist.

I grit my teeth against the pain. It was so *heavy.*

A sword. Change into a sword, a scythe.

The shadows twitched, flickering into a vague, sharp shape before fading back into mist. I groaned, shaking from the effort. The shadows weren't listening. Why weren't they listening?

Bind Mithras—rise and pin him against the wall.

Again the shadows twitched, gathering together as Mithras and the Bringer continued their battle. They pooled toward the floors, crept out toward the ceiling, but they disintegrated before it reached their target. I cursed quietly under my breath, attempting to summon them together once more. The Bringer looked at me again. Only this time, his eyes were not dead. They were not hollow or weak.

They rioted in the colors of a raging storm.

The Bringer ran my way, ducking as Mithras misjudged the weight and timing of his swing—his first mistake—and collapsed, taking my hand. His skin, typically covered in the Realm, felt cold and stiff, like it hadn't experienced human touch in many, many years.

"What are you—" He drew my hand into his chest, resting it against the shredded cloth of his tunic. I felt it, then, what he was doing; my shadows teetered over my shoulders, rising to merge with his own. Night, shadow, darkness—they became one above us, tousling our hair and clothing in their swirling, churning wind. It lifted the curls from my neck, grazing skin that was damp with sweat. It mingled my sleeve with the ragged edge of the Bringer's.

Mithras's eyes widened at what he saw. He remained near the staircase, unwavering in his stance, but he did not approach us, either. "Look at you!" he began, shouting over the darkness storming above. "A perfect match." He let loose a short, barking laugh. "And like the shadows you are, the *nothing* you are, you will both be burned away by the light. You think this gives you power, Lord of Demons?"

"He's stalling," I whispered, just loud enough for the Bringer to hear.

"You truly believe you'll leave this place again?" Mithras continued, beckoning around him. His blade glowed in the same ethereal light that shone from his eyes. "This place of rot and ruin was *made* for you!"

"He's—" I paused, looking, watching. Yes, I was certain of it. It was in the way Mithras edged closer to the stairs, keeping his shoulders open, ready, but not moving in for an attack. Mithras continued ranting, unaware. "He's waiting for his legionnaires."

The Bringer gave a growl of frustration and squeezed my hand tighter, drawing more shadows into the air. They loomed over us, both beautiful and terrifying.

As an answer, the Bringer roared, charging the mass of shadow into Mithras.

The shadows heaved against Mithras's limbs, flinging him to the ground with a sickening *crunch* as skull slammed into stone. Mithras struggled to stand—he struggled desperately, fighting against a sea of darkness that sought to consume him whole. It forced him down regardless. Mithras raised his sword, parting some of the shadows as it rose, but the dark won. It coiled around its length and snapped the metal in two, suffocating its light in a short burst of fire.

We needed to leave—we needed to escape. *Now* .

I pulled the Shadow Bringer's hand. "What are you waiting for?" I gasped out, failing to understand why he wasn't moving. "Come *on* ."

He blinked, as if waking from a dream. But just as quickly as his eyes appeared lucid, they glazed over, dulling down into a dark, depthless nothing. "No," he said, distantly, wretchedly, dropping my hand and moving to stand in front of the skeletons. "I shouldn't have forced your hand. I need to stay here."

"After all that—after *all that* —you're going to stay here? Why?"

"I have no other choice," he said simply, bowing over in pain. "This is my fate. Perhaps it has always been my fate." He slammed a fist into the stone and leaned his head back, closing his eyes. "But it doesn't have to be yours," he rasped. "Leave. *Go* ."

I made a sound of pure frustration. He was right, but where did that leave me? The truth of what we had done finally settled in. I had attacked *Mithras* . Mithras, the holy Light Bringer.

"Maybe you can still maintain the dream from outside the tomb," I suggested weakly.

"I can't," he said simply, gritting his teeth. "I want to, Esmer. But I can't. Not like this. Now *go.* Leave me and be free."

As if on cue, Mithras shouted for his legionnaires, for the Bringer to rot in Hell. He screamed that Elliot would die in the pits of Istralla. He screamed that he would burn us alive. His light had extinguished completely, shrouding the tomb in darkness once again.

I backed toward the stairs, still thinking—*hoping*— that the Bringer would follow.

He didn’t.

So I turned, cursing in frustration, and ran for my life.

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CHAPTER 21

I STUMBLED FREE FROM THE TOMB OF THE DEVOURER, PARTIALLY BLIND from the dark. Small, disjointed fires dotted the air in front of me, flames dancing in the cold night air.

Torches.

The Light Legion was fully awake, torches held aloft in armored hands.

"Esmer!" Silas shouted, running to me. His skin was flecked with dirt, leftover from lying on the ground during the Bringer's spell. "What were you doing in the tomb?"

"I need to leave," I gasped, moving to sidestep him. He grabbed my shoulders, quicker than I could dodge, stopping me. "Don't *touch* me!" I flinched at my own words—words that came out too fast, too harsh. I shook my head, still feeling the ghost of Mithras's fire in my bones. "I'm sorry. I __"

Silas removed his hands. "Lord Mithras called to us. Have you seen him?"

Alcott ran over, eyes hard and torch held high. "Likely in the Tomb of the Devourer, no doubt with—" He trailed off, searching my face. It was obvious he didn't like what he saw there. "You've done something, haven't you?"

I was the Shadow Bringer's accomplice, and we likely gave a fatal wound to the Light Bringer. I needed to run. I need to do *something* .

Anything.

A few legionnaires, led by Mila, assembled in front of the tomb. At one of Mithras's screams—which echoed well into the night—they rushed in. Silas and Alcott turned, momentarily distracted.

I bolted.

I grabbed my skirts by the fistful and *ran* , throwing myself at the deepest part of the forest. Branches tore across my face, lancing cheek, forehead, shin—but I didn't feel it. Adrenaline coursed through my limbs, simultaneously numbing and warming different parts of my body. If I could get to the horses—the *unguarded* horses—I would outrun them all. I could untie the horses, spook them into fleeing. They'd never be able to find them. Not in a forest so dark and so twisting as the Visstill. They would be stranded here, giving Elliot and I time to escape once I caught up with him. We could flee further into the countryside, sail across the sea to—somewhere. Anywhere.

A chance.

If I was being followed, I didn't notice. I didn't *hear* . Blood pounded in my ears.

What had I done?

Everything had happened so fast. Thomas's death. Packing and beginning the journey to Istralla. Hope. A village, betrayed, calling us their enemy. My parents, Corrupt. Elliot, afraid. Dream after dream—the Bringer and his castle of demons. A call to action, a village damning me as their villain. The Light Legion.

The Bringer, alive, *real* .

A Lord of Light who seemed no lord at all.

It was all too much—suddenly, agonizingly—it was all too much.

What had I done?

Something hit my back, heavy and hard, sending me sprawling into the dirt.

"Esmer—" Silas panted, looming over me. "What were you *thinking* ? Running into the Visstill like…" His face was barely readable, cast in darkness. "Why did you run? I called out to you. I asked you to stop."

I pressed my hands into my eyes, willing myself not to cry. Why had I ever thought the Bringer to be an *ally* ? Was siding with him worth losing my freedom? My family? My *life* ?

My life for *what* ?

Silas eased off me a bit, sitting up with a *whoosh* of pent-up air. He adjusted his gauntlets and wiped the dirt from his brow. "Talk to me."

"I've made a mistake."

He stilled. "What do you mean?"

“Mithras and the Shadow Bringer are in the tomb,” I began in a rush. “They started fighting—Mithras was hurt.” Silas shook his head, giving me a look like he thought I was delirious. I swallowed, feeling delirious. “To isolate Mithras, he forced you all into a sleep—a *stupor* that you couldn’t wake from.”

“That isn’t possible.” He paused carefully, deliberately, as though he were dancing around a half-hidden truth. “We’re safe from the work of darkness. Lord Mithras protects us.”

“You don’t understand.”

“Then *help me* understand.”

Alcott marched toward us through the brush, torch blazing in his hand. His freckled face was bloodied, and his green eyes had taken on a strange hue from the fire. “Bind her.” He pulled a thorn from his gloves, scowling. “Hurry. Our lord’s power is waning.”

Silas looked at me. “Will you return to camp with us?” A question that allowed me a choice: would I go back willingly, unbound, or would I be forced by their hands?

Alcott coughed. Cheekbones that were already high and neatly carved were made even hollower by the shadows. “Lord Mithras wouldn’t like seeing you hesitate like this, Silas.”

“We can’t drag her back to camp in chains,” Silas said, bristling. “Theorize what you want, but until the Light Bringer passes his final judgment, is she truly a criminal?”

“You’re right. She’s worse than a criminal,” Alcott hissed, pulling a strand of gleaming metal from a hidden compartment in his gauntlet. It shimmered, even in the dark, appearing both metallic and rope-like. I scrambled back in the underbrush, horrified. “Lord Mithras *knew* that you needed to be locked where you belong. I will not let you escape him again.”

“Alcott, *no* .” Silas threw out his hands, pushing Alcott back.

“Why are you—” He grunted, trying to maneuver around him. “—holding me back? It is our duty to the Legion to bring justice to those devoured by the dark. Those like my *mother* and *brother* !”

What could I say? My father had sunk arrows into Thomas’s back as he dragged his half-burned body through the grass, but I was the one who killed him. Not my Corrupted father, *me* . “I never wanted—”

“Never wanted Thomas to die?” Alcott seethed. “Maybe my brother wasn’t Corrupt at all. *Maybe* —” He thrashed against Silas again. “—*maybe*

he tried to kill you for a purpose. I bet he saw the darkness in you and tried to suffocate it before it broke free." Alcott's eyes suddenly went blank, drained of their fervor. It was as though something inside him had died. "We need to return to Lord Mithras."

"Yes, we do," Silas agreed, removing his hands from Alcott's shoulders. A slow, exasperated breath sank from his lungs as he looked at me. "Esmer. Are you coming with us?"

"If I go back, you'll condemn me with the Shadow Bringer."

Silas dragged a hand through his hair. "Our lord is honorable. He would not falsely persecute you. That is all I can promise."

Alcott nodded, if somewhat reluctant. "Indeed."

"And it's known that the Shadow Bringer uses deception and lies to suit his needs. If he forced you to ally with him, it wouldn't be your fault." Despite his attempt at reassurance, doubt lingered in his eyes, pooling in the depths. "There is no future for you in these woods. If you run now—if you make it back to Norhavellis or your brother somehow—it will be worse for you. For everyone. You have to understand how that would look."

And how does it look that I left the Lord of Light in a pool of his own blood? Blood caused by the Shadow Bringer—blood caused by me, too.

But Silas was right.

If I ran now, if I ran before defending my actions—I knew exactly how it would look.

I was damned no matter what.

The encampment, sparse without the Legion's horses or primary supplies, was silent when we returned. Ashes floated in the wind, leftover from both our hurried evening meal and torches left charred and half-burning on the ground. For a moment, Silas and Alcott did not speak. Breath heaved from their lungs as they assessed, calculated, and decided—all in silence.

I shivered, haunted by the wind, the silence, and what was about to happen. I'd soon face the wrath or grace of Mithras and the Legion. And whatever happened to me would happen to my family, too. If I fell, they'd fall with me.

What had I done?

Stories whirled through my mind, one after the other. Stories that would explain my innocence, tales that would prove the Bringer deceived me, used me. But as these stories eddied in my mind like the wind pulling at my

clothes, I couldn’t shake the feeling that I was lying to myself. The Bringer’s hollowed, marred face sprang into my mind, unbidden and unwelcome, reminding me of the strange, surprising connection we had and the brief feeling of *rightness* that came over me when I had possession of his power.

It was a power that made me feel as though I had, despite everything, a purpose.

From the tomb came a wild, unhinged laugh, snapping the silence and sending Silas and Alcott running. I followed after, stumbling through the ashes.

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CHAPTER 22

THE SHADOW BRINGER WOULD HAVE KILLED THEM IF HE COULD. WITH HIS power restored, he would have wrapped his shadows around their throats and watched as the light, dim and useless as it already was, was extinguished from their eyes. No longer would they have been puppets to their false lord.

Surely that would be preferable to whatever it was they were now.

But what would that make me, if I killed them all?

He cursed under his breath, grinding his nails into the palms of his hands. He was so weak—*so damnably weak* —and his thoughts were jumbled, lost, broken. He could not think clearly, could not make out the clarity of the shapes and colors around him. Things were fading, quickly. The shape of the tomb—his dwelling—was distorted, the shadows blending, swirling, rioting against the obscene brightness of the torches.

So many lights.

So many gazing, gaping, *empty* stares.

And what did they see? Did they see him as Mithras did? Did they see a monster, a demon, villain?

He focused on the tension in his palms and the dull bite of his teeth against the inner skin of his mouth. Vaguely, he remembered the pull that had awakened him—the crazed, half-formed feeling that Esmer was somehow tied to him. That she began to set him free when she opened his castle in the Realm.

Esmer.

He had wanted to take her here—lock her here in his place, rendering him free from his demons and his darkness. For a short while, he had

believed that to be the best path.

Now he needed to return to where he belonged.

Torchlight flickered, hesitating against the dark of the tomb. His lingering shadows gnawed at the flames, leaving them as useless as the puppet-like hands that held them.

Good.

It silenced the vile, raucous voices. Forced them into panicked whispers and trembling, half-formed sentences. The Bringer slipped backwards in the chaos, sinking into the shadows as the forms around him stumbled and fought to see.

He did not think about the bones at his feet as he descended into the dark, did not think about Esmer or the way her hand felt in his as the walls drew nearer around him. He did not feel the cold as it seeped into his bones, did not feel the hollows under his eyes growing tighter and deeper.

His anger, his purpose—they had dissolved, leaving behind nothing in their wake.

It was fitting.

The Bringer was nothing, and to nothing he would soon return.

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CHAPTER 23

ALCOTT'S ROPE, GLOWING LIKE IT HAD BEEN FORGED FROM THE SUN, BIT into my wrists, pinching the skin where each link was joined. Dirt and damp soaked through my dress as I kneeled, cooling my legs even as the rope burned my hands. I shifted, daring to lift my eyes to the dawn coloring the sky in violet and gold.

This was my trial.

I would be prodded, questioned, and examined until Mithras decided upon my guilt or innocence. The questions had been small, at first. Simple and direct. Questions about my life, my upbringing, my relationship with my mother, father, and Elliot. But then they turned darker—specific and vague all at once. I knew the answers to some; others I did not. They asked about the Bringer, the Weavers, and the Realm. They hypothesized about my powers or lack thereof. They tested my knowledge of Corruption, my potential involvement with demons, and the death of Thomas.

Now the questions were accusations.

Mithras dragged a hand across his swollen mouth, smearing the blood that occasionally pooled from it. His eyes were cold despite their golden color, dagger-like and violent, and his skin had sunken around his jaw and nose, much like the Bringer's had. It accentuated the scar that split his brow.

Alcott was seething, teeth nearly bared. "You freed our kingdom's mortal enemy. It began in a dream, and then turned physical—"

"But is the Shadow Bringer capable of such a feat? Escaping his castle through the dreams of another?" Mila interrupted, balancing on the edge of her heel. Like the other legionnaires, she looked exhausted.

“The Shadow Bringer’s diseased power, combined with an equally diseased mind, could produce such a result,” Mithras said, thumbing a fleck of blood from his mouth. A legionnaire offered him a bit of cloth, but he pushed it away. “As we are aware, like calls to like,” he added, growling the words out.

Like calls to like.

A lord of demons, connected to *me.*

Why?

Mila glanced at me, but quickly looked away. “Then if she’s telling the truth, such a vision would seem possible. Likely, even, as he is known for his deception.”

“I am telling the truth,” I insisted, trying to look each legionnaire in the eye. “Why would I lie about this? What would I have to gain from *lying* right now?”

“What *don’t* you have to gain?” Alcott was red-faced, barely restraining himself from throwing himself at me. The rope that bound me, spinning out from his gauntlet, shook where he held it. “You made some unholy deal with the Shadow Bringer, and now that you’re caught, you want out. Isn’t that right?”

“No—*no* . I made no deal with him. He tricked me. The Shadow Bringer tricked me.”

But he didn’t trick me. I joined him, willingly.

“You befriended the devil himself! Did your parents think to teach you that—” Alcott laughed, interrupting himself. “Ah, but it was your parents that likely *led* you toward your evil choice.”

“Alcott,” Mithras warned. Alcott retreated, bowing his head. His skin still burned with red, angry splotches. “Go on, Esmer.”

“After I saw the legionnaires, the Shadow Bringer appeared. He summoned some kind of cloud. It was dark and churning, and it swallowed the flames.” A few strands of hair, wet with blood and dirt, stuck to Mithras’s jaw. I swallowed, momentarily distracted. “But before, when—”

I stopped, hesitating. I hadn’t told the Light Legion about my other dreams. They didn’t know about the Bringer’s castle, didn’t know that I had willingly walked inside and spoke with him. My thoughts drifted to the Shadow Bringer, wondering why he wasn’t facing a trial like I was. His tomb was open but silent, devoid of any life. Had they bound him there again? Had they killed him?

Like calls to like.

“Go on. Continue. Indulge us in your tale.”

“I—”

“Explain to us how you deceived Norhavellis into harboring the Shadow Bringer’s only living follower.” Mithras stalked to where I knelt, forcing my chin up so I would look at him. “I had thought of you as a poor, suffering wretch, hurt by your family’s dark choices. But you are anything but.”

“You’re wrong,” I whispered. Tears sprang to my eyes, unbidden.

Mithras’s golden eyes brightened, even in the dimness of the rising dawn. “Fortunately, the Maker has graced us with a miracle. He allowed us to entomb the Shadow Bringer again, even after we fell under his lies. Our Maker is with us, even in the dark. We must walk in the shadows.”

“To walk in the light,” the Light Legion answered, voices wavering.

When Mithras spoke again, it was to the Light Legion.

“Your voices *waver* .” His voice was soft, deadly in its false civility. “I have fought for years to discover a cure for Corruption. You all know this—*very clearly* you know this. Your comrades—what would they speak of, if they heard your doubt? Your friends, your family, your beloved companions—as they watch us from above, as they watch me fight and *bleed* for a cure so that *no one else* would fall, what would they speak of?”

Blood trickled from Mithras’s lips. He wiped at it, dragging it back into his mouth. Several legionnaires looked down, away—averting their eyes from their lord’s sunken eyes, bruised body, and bloodied mouth.

“Look at me,” Mithras snapped. “The Light Bringer, bleeding like a cut swine.” He spun slowly, methodically, making a point to look each legionnaire in the eye. “*Look at me!* Where are your doubts now?”

He turned to me. The edges of his lips, full and bruised, curled up.

“You may stand,” he said suddenly, extending a hand, smeared with his blood, toward me. “Rise and become one of us, as you have declared.”

What?

The legionnaires glanced at one another, failing to understand their leader’s newest declaration. The Visstill rustled with their agitated movements. When I didn’t accept Mithras’s hand, he frowned, golden eyes flashing.

“You act as though your hands are bound.”

I flexed my hands to make my point, flinching when they moved without resistance. At some point, they had become unbound.

When? And why?

I looked up at Mithras, who was still offering me his bloodied hand.

“What is this?” I asked, taking advantage of the Light Legion’s distracted murmurs. “What are you doing?”

“Listen carefully,” Mithras hissed, eyes wild as he grabbed me by the hand and yanked me up. “I will treat your Corrupted parents with respect until their purification and offer Elliot a privileged life in Istralla.” His mouth ticked up again. “In return, you must serve our purposes in the Tomb of the Devourer. But if you deny me, I will personally see to it that your mother and father aren’t purified and Elliot is disposed of like the worthless child he already is.”

Bile rose sick and violent in the back of my throat.

“I will do all that you ask,” I choked out, skin clammy and cold. The tomb would kill me. There existed no food, water, or light. There existed no way out, save for the colossal door of iron and stone at its front. But if it meant my parents would be purified and Elliot would live, I would do anything. “Even if you’re sentencing me to die, I will obey.”

“Oh, but this isn’t a death sentence. Asleep under the Shadow Bringer’s spell, you will need no sustenance.” He squeezed my hand for emphasis, holding it as though we were sharing a deep, heartfelt conversation. “Let us walk,” he said suddenly, then turned to face the Legion. Some color had returned to his skin, masking its hollowness. “Legion! Make preparations for our departure. Esmer’s fate will soon be made clear.”

Their voices grew indistinguishable as Mithras and I walked to the tomb, strolling together like friends—or lovers, even. Once we were far enough away, however, he dropped my hand, stepping a step back as though I carried a disease.

“Earlier in the tomb I allowed my anger get the best of me.” For a moment, he made a strange expression, grief dusting his features and loosening his shoulders. “The Shadow Bringer is more than an enemy of the kingdom. In many ways, he’s an asset. He must be protected at all costs, for if he dies, the army of demons he harbors would overwhelm us. And that’s what this tomb is. A safeguard for his mortal body so that his soul may be sustained.”

I bit the inside of my cheek, watching as Mithras examined the tomb's outer wall. The dark, curling trees of the Visstill wound overhead, threading through the light of the rising dawn.

"I will vow for the purification of your parents and the safety of Elliot. In return, you will guard Noctis from the monsters the Shadow Bringer harbors. With him you will buffer our world from the darkest shadows of the Realm."

My skin prickled at the absurdity of my fate, the chill in the air, and Mithras's fiery stare.

"This tomb is a font of darkness. You will inhabit it physically and tether yourself spiritually. Asleep, you will draw the Realm's demons to you, binding them to the Shadow Bringer's domain. In theory, your combined power should bind more demons, saving more lives."

"But I don't have this 'power' that you're speaking of. His shadows merely listen to me. They aren't mine."

"But you do. I sensed it when I first met you," Mithras insisted, turning to face me. "Power in the Realm is shared with dreamers of similar capabilities. You are every bit as capable as he is—you just need time to practice, is all." He added, voice lowering, "And besides, even if you *didn't* have power of your own, you're still able to bolster his. You give him a strength I haven't imagined possible. He needs you."

What did *that* mean?

The shift in his personality unnerved me. He seemed incredibly earnest—genuine, even—and there was not a hint of malice in his tone. Not to mention that he was referring to the Shadow Bringer as if he were an old friend and not his kingdom's greatest enemy. I crossed my arms, confused by this newest development. This wasn't really a punishment. He truly intended for me to serve a purpose in the Realm. But how long would I be stuck there?

The Shadow Bringer's velvet-deep voice came to mind. He had already warned me of this.

If they seal you there with me, you'll never leave. You'll share my fate, bound to this castle and unable to watch your loved ones grow up. You'll live here as Noctis sinks further into ruin, blind to the waking world and numb to the passage of time. Don't let them take you.

Frustrated tears sprang to my eyes, but I held them back. I would not cry now. If I did, I'd shatter. "You say you'll purify my parents and give

Elliot a life of privilege, but I won't be able to see them again, will I? The Shadow Bringer was locked away for centuries. Is that to be my fate, too?"

"It doesn't have to be. But what other fate would you prefer?" Mithras drew close, eyes wild and desperate. I took an uneasy step back, heart thundering. "A fate where you rot into the earth, leaving behind no legacy, no meaning, no *purpose* ? The tomb will be the safest place for you. The safest and the most necessary." Trailing off, Mithras faced the tomb again. "Corruption is overrunning Noctis. Too many are dying before they even make it to Istralla. If there is a chance this helps us bind more demons, then that hope will spread, illuminating our kingdom in the light of the Maker."

I sensed that this statement was sincere. It unnerved me deeply.

Mithras watched me. "You needn't be so frightened." He added, more gently, "If you prove your worth, you will be unearthed. I swear we will return for you."

I felt around for words, unsure of what I wanted to say. What I *could* say without damning myself further. Surprisingly, Mithras didn't prod; we stood in silence as dawn's full color crested over the Visstill hillside. As much as I hated to admit it, hope—even if that hope was miserably small—rested in the tomb.

The Shadow Bringer was there, and he was all I had left.

"Remember, the Shadow Bringer is a necessary darkness, even though you've been taught otherwise. I do *not* desire his death or his release." Mithras considered me fiercely, as if he wanted me to understand something that I was not fully comprehending. "So above all else, do not harm the Shadow Bringer, and do not release him from his tomb or his castle. We need him there. *I* need him there. Swear to me, Esmer. Do *not* release him."

I nodded, trying to hide the quiver in my lip. "Of course. I swear it."

"You won't be in the Realm forever. If all goes to plan, then—"

"Lord Mithras, we await your command."

Mithras and I turned as one, facing the rest of the traveling party. They had approached us quietly, forming a careful, distant ring around the tomb's entrance.

Mithras titled his chin high, offering a triumphant smile. "Esmer has declared her loyalties to me. She will guard the Tomb of the Devourer and its demons until we return."

Eyes widened, shoulders shifted, mouths tightened.

Wind groaned softly through the trees, rustling leaves and speckling dawn’s early sunlight across the expanse of the clearing. Beyond, the tomb was dark and silent, its overgrown entrance a smear against the hillside. If the Shadow Bringer was still within, he had clearly resigned himself to his fate.

I stretched myself upright, standing as tall and as straight-backed as I could. I needed to find strength somewhere, so I drew it from my father, remembering his stiff spine and taut muscles as he patrolled our home. Every night he battled demons. They were demons of the unknown, demons of the twilight and murk. Demons of dread, demons that made sounds as they shifted in the woods, snapping twigs and howling at the stars. Demons created out of fear.

Demons built out of Corruption.

Taking a deep breath, I steeled myself for what was about to come—what my fate had conspired to be. Visions of a different future seemed bizarre and meaningless. Istralla, once a glittering beacon, seemed dull, colorless. A cured world without Corruption seemed impossible. Restored dreams seemed illogical.

In this world of darkness and chaos, Corruption and broken dreams, my fate was fitting.

I met Mithras’s eyes as I walked toward the tomb, surprised at what I found there.

They reflected only dread.

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CHAPTER 24

THE TOMB OF THE DEVOURER WAS SILENT, HEAVY, AND ENDLESS.

Half-mad with exhaustion and fear, I stumbled forward, feeling my way through damp tunnels and crumbling stairs. Without torchlight or a moonlit sky, the tomb gnawed at me, flooding me with its ancient scent and eternal dark. The walls were strange, thrumming with a soft vibration that made the space feel alive, somehow. As though it had been waiting for me all along.

As though it wasn't just the Tomb of the Devourer but *my* tomb, *my* grave.

This is what it must feel like to be buried alive.

I swallowed back tears, coughing as I breathed the dusty air. Where was the Shadow Bringer? He was nowhere in the silence, the dust, the rotting stone. My hand searched the walls for a clue, a sign, *something* —when I tripped into something dry and rattling.

Bones.

As the sound echoed off the walls, I waited, silent, fully expecting that the Shadow Bringer would reveal himself. When he didn't, when minutes—perhaps hours—passed, my only companions, darkness and two skeletons, mocked me.

Maker, help me.

I paced around the chamber, dragging my hand along the walls for support as I went. The movement reminded me of when I first entered the Bringer's castle; encased in darkness, it wasn't until my eyes adjusted that the space had revealed itself. But there were no lights here. No gilded chandeliers or candelabras, no mirrors by which candlelight could reflect. Still, there had to be a door or a passageway somewhere.

“You can appear any time now, Shadow Bringer,” I said, my voice higher in pitch than I had intended it to be. I tried to ignore the rising fear that Mithras had lied—that the Bringer wasn’t here at all and I was alone, doomed to rot by myself in this pit of darkness.

I clung to the stone, slowing my breathing and counting to ten.

No.

The Bringer was here, somewhere. In the dark, in the cold, in the shadows—this prison was his, and he was within. I pulled my arms in tight, fighting the cold seeping into my dress. The vibration, the steady *thrum* of power, was back, this time closer and warmer than before. It hummed steadily under my fingertips, calling me to the center of the tomb’s innermost wall. Here the stone felt different—as though it were made from a different material altogether. Curious, I traced a finger over the stone, flinching as my hand passed through. The stone parted like dust or smoke, swirling apart in a curtain of long, sweeping tendrils. I inched my hand forward, shivering as the substance lapped against my wrist, forearm, elbow.

Then, as though the substance was alive, it grabbed my arm and *pulled*.

I shrieked, mortified as the tendrils passed over me in a quick, freezing blast. It was like jumping into a pond on a summer night—slipping under a crust of warmth, leftover from the sun’s scorching heat, to reach the darker, colder depths below.

I pushed up against the hidden chamber’s floor, scrambling to get my bearings. The space was surprisingly vast; my own home could fit within it five times over, and I still couldn’t see past the shadows that obscured its edges. Stonework arched overhead, curling into a central orb that glowed silver and steady. A slab of obsidian sat underneath the orb, as if patiently awaiting a sacrifice, and thousands of small, quivering flecks illuminated the cavernous ceiling beyond, mimicking stars.

It didn’t take me long to find the Shadow Bringer.

He sat against one of the twisting, arching stones, leaning back with his neck exposed. From his wounds spun a thick, meandering smoke, crystallizing as it drifted up toward the orb. One of the deepest cuts—an ugly, unforgiving gash across his shoulder—gave off the blackest substance, trailing over his skin and tangling in his pale hair.

A beautiful and haunted man indeed.

“End it,” he said to me, his voice echoing strangely in the cavernous space. His eyes were less hollow, cheeks less sunken—but his spirit seemed emptier. “That’s why they brought you to me, isn’t it? End it. I will let you.”

A sound of disbelief escaped my lips. “I’m not here to kill you. I would have, once. But not now. Not like this.”

“Why not? Do you no longer see me as the monster you’ve been taught to fear?”

Not like I once did, no.

“I see you as a necessary evil,” I said simply. It was a cold truth and perhaps not the entire truth, but the Bringer did not so much as flinch. “You harbor demons that would overrun Noctis otherwise. So no, I can’t kill you. But I still don’t know the full truth behind Corruption and how to stop it. Until that becomes clear, I can’t trust you.”

“So, not a monster but a tool.” He let loose a sigh. It was the only sign he was even breathing. “Leave, Esmer. You don’t belong here.”

“I can’t. They sealed the entrance.”

His mouth tightened. “You should have escaped while you could.”

“We almost killed the *Light Bringer* . Mithras threatened to—” I bit my cheek, changing my mind. He didn’t need to know about my family or my weaknesses. “You can try to drag me out of this tomb yourself if you don’t believe me, but it would be pointless. We’re sealed here together now. This is my punishment.”

“Punishment,” the Bringer echoed, as if it were a question.

“Being here.” I motioned wildly at the strange, starlit cavern. “With you.” I pointed at the Bringer, at his swirling, equally strange eyes. “That’s my sentence. My punishment from the Light Legion is to be caged indefinitely in the Realm.”

The Bringer stood to his full height, and that strange, dark smoke rippled around the lines of his body. Within a blink he was looming over me. “And what do you know about life spent in a cage?”

“I know enough,” I said, meeting his eyes as evenly as I could. Maybe it was exhaustion, but I did not feel fear when I looked upon him. “A lifelong sentence of Absolver duty to Norhavellis and never being able to leave the village. Corruption destroying families and rotting out the eyes of those too young to even know why. Not having a choice—or the power—to say no to those with—” I stopped, frustrated at the emotion rising up my throat.

“My mother once told me that a caged life is like being a wolf confined to some desolate, enclosed space,” he began, threading his fingers through some of the shadows that rose from his injuries. “You snarl and howl, desperate to sink your teeth into something tangible, but you have no way to explore the vast wilderness just outside your reach.” He made a fist, squeezing a thread of shadow until it broke apart. “You can almost feel the earth beneath your feet or the wind on your skin, but you’re trapped. You ache for the wild unknown, where the rest of your life—every possibility, every hope for the future—waits, but you can’t move.”

So, he had a mother. The tales never told of such a possibility—never humanized him at all.

“I’ve felt that way before,” I admitted. “I desperately wanted to escape my life for something better, but I never could. And now I have nothing.” I brushed my hand across a shadow as it moved to touch my shoulder. “It’s a horribly accurate comparison.”

“It is, isn’t it? Ironically, my mother used to make that comparison to encourage me to dream. Whenever I was facing something challenging in reality, she’d tell me to escape to the Realm and let the Weavers guide me.” He looked away, swallowing hard. “If only she knew I’d spend most of my life not even having the choice.”

“Did your mother pass before you were locked away, then?”

He nodded. “My mother and father both died when I was a child. They never knew what I would become. And now you’re here facing the same fate.” His eyes snapped to mine. “I told you to run.”

“Even if I managed to outrun the Light Legion, I wouldn’t be free. They would have hunted me down and made my family suffer all the more because of it.”

He clenched his fists. “Then I should do more to ensure they don't.”

I raised an eyebrow. “And what, exactly, does *more* mean?”

“It means exactly what you’re thinking.”

“Kept them sleeping, then?”

A smile tugged at his lips. “If that’s the only trick you think I'm capable of, then I clearly need to do more demonstrations.”

He was suddenly too close, too overwhelming. Had the Shadow Bringer been a normal man, I would have felt the heat diffusing from his skin. He searched my eyes, breath hitching at whatever he found in them, then spun

on his heel to walk to the obsidian slab, pieces of his ragged clothing sliding across the floor.

“What is that?” I asked, following.

“A means to an eternal slumber,” he answered. The slab, its edges curling upwards, was surprisingly pliant to the touch, its surface reflecting the light from above. “It anchors you to the Realm, but being physically tethered alters you. It distorts the mind over time and shatters memories—all while its bearer lies comatose.”

I nodded. “I was taught that the Weavers took precautions against such a fate. They’d periodically wake so they wouldn’t lose themselves to the Realm.”

In the tales, the Weavers rose from their sleep to attend the most extravagant and pivotal moments in Noctis’s history. They were there for the crowning of kings and victories in war. They were honored guests at city-wide celebrations, deity-like in the fanfare they caused. Though waking from the Realm was a risk—it made them mortal and perceptible to death and aging—they were protected and beloved by the people.

Until Corruption.

“Weavers be damned,” the Bringer growled. “For centuries I lied upon this stone, waiting for a release that never came. Death would have been preferable.”

A shiver coursed unbidden through my skin. He was locked within his castle in an eternal sleep for *centuries* . I couldn’t imagine what he had lost during those years—what he had forgotten. I shuddered to think what I, too, would lose or forget if Mithras chose not to release me.

“Do you honestly believe you were wrongly imprisoned?” I asked, lowering my voice. It felt like I was asking something forbidden. “Only your wickedness is recorded in the tales. There’s no trace of goodness there.”

The Bringer placed his forehead into the palm of his hand, clenching his jaw as though he were in physical pain. “Threads of memory, broken moments in time—that’s all I have. And they don’t always tell me what I’ve lost or what life was like before. But I feel a deep hatred toward the Weavers and Mithras. That I do know.” He looked at me again, long and hard, as though he were considering an unspoken decision. “I slept here for centuries as my soul withered. Perhaps I was good once, and perhaps I can

change Noctis's fate, but there's nothing good or worthy in me left. You need to understand that."

Something didn't feel right. It was in his eyes; in the way they shifted, lowering.

"You look as if you could use some rest," he murmured, his voice a soft caress. His words felt like silk or velvet—a deep, rumbling purr. "Come, lie on this stone and let me ease your burdens." His words had an irresistible pull, and I found myself surrendering to the exhaustion that was weighing me down. As I lay on the slab, the stone seemed to soften and embrace me, easing away my weariness.

I nodded in agreement, thanking him.

Didn't I?

I sighed, my eyes heavy and warm. I couldn't remember.

"You're all that I have left," I whispered. "Do you know that?"

The Bringer leaned over me, lips a breath from my own. "That isn't true."

"But it is," I breathed. Tears ran down my face, bubbling up from where I had suppressed them earlier. "And it is heartbreaking."

I felt a hand—*is it a hand or his shadows?* —slide around the nape of my neck, threading my hair with long, cool fingers. I shivered, leaning into him as he held me, and marveled at the new shade of darkness spinning around us. I reached out to touch it, to see what it felt like—and realized it was rippling from my own skin.

What is this? I thought I asked. *What is this coming from my body?*

But my eyes were heavy again—the stone so soft and welcoming.

Something brushed my temple, my wrist.

And then I felt no more.

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PART TWO
THE FORGOTTEN DAWN

Forests were set on fire—but hour by hour
They fell and faded—and the crackling trunks
Extinguish'd with a crash—and all was black.
The brows of men by the despairing light
Wore an unearthly aspect, as by fits
The flashes fell upon them; some lay down
And hid their eyes and wept; and some did rest
Their chins upon their clenched hands, and smil'd;
And others hurried to and fro, and fed
Their funeral piles with fuel, and look'd up
With mad disquietude on the dull sky,
The pall of a past world; and then again
With curses cast them down upon the dust,
And gnash'd their teeth and howl’d.
- *Darkness* , Lord Byron

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CHAPTER 25

FIVE CENTURIES BEFORE

THE CASTLE HAD BEEN BUILT FROM SHADOWS AND STARLIGHT.

It towered over the hillside like a dark jewel, embraced by iridescent trees and an eternal sky rotating between twilight, dusk, and deep, relentless night. Its stone was the outer threads of dreams, its mortar the underbelly of fire, water, air, and time.

Erebus hadn't intended for it to be beautiful; no, the intent for the castle was for it to be his haven. A place to freely practice his Maker-given talents. A place to create and dream and be. But the longer he worked, the more glorious it had become.

And work he had.

Its spires touched the heavens, its rooms overflowed with eldritch paintings and sumptuous furniture only his imagination could produce. A light in the bitter dark.

Now, it was none of those things.

He shuddered awake in his bed, chest tight with an emotion he hadn't felt in some time. It overcame him, flooded him, twisted his throat into a knot and his hands into loose, shaking things.

Fear.

The castle was a blur as Erebus raced through it, his limbs disappearing and reappearing as his shadows pushed him forward. They carried him past standing sculptures and reliefs, libraries filled with literature both historic and imagined, a cavern pooling with liquid stardust, winding staircases and strange passageways—past the living shadows,

those who had breathed deep the dark and became it themselves. They could not heed him, nor could they communicate; they felt like ghosts, despite the darkness and humanity that mingled within them. Ghosts that he could—would—protect. Ghosts that he would free.

If he could make it.

If the Weavers would listen.

The castle's entryway loomed in front of him, carved with smaller living shadows that danced to their own stories. Tonight, they were spinning around in wide, looping circles, teeth mawing open and close in silent screams. He placed a hand upon the undulating stone and the mouths paused, quivered, then continued with their endless, tortured, open-mouthed howls.

Clenching his teeth and ignoring the shivering of his hands, Erebus threw the door wide.

Outside, the sky was churning in a riot of midnight colors. It ravaged the horizon as it moved, screaming a deadly warning. Erebus growled at the sight, throwing up his hands in a final, desperate plea for protection.

There—he could do it. There was still time.

Lelantos descended in a spiral of lightning and wind. Cloaked in feathers that floated over his tawny body, he hovered over the forest that surrounded the castle. Watching, waiting. His half-mask of bone was imposing—sinister, even—hiding the friendliness that usually emanated from his pale eyes.

There was still time.

Calling forth the fullest weight of his power, Erebus's shadows curled up from the earth and down from the sky. They poured from the castle's open doors and surrounded him, thrumming around his body in time with his every heartbeat, his every breath.

Fenrir and Nephthys announced themselves in a flurry of fire and water, mingling their powers in a dance of power and grace. Nephthys's clothing, a maze of jewels, brooches, and pearls, coiled up to her headpiece, a mass of curved spires and dried, oceanic skeletons. It glistened wildly, even in the eternal night, contrasting with Fenrir's coal-black tattoos and blood-red robes. Flames burned in Fenrir's eyes, reflecting into Nephthys's.

No—no—no.

Erebus spread his hands wider, leaning forward to brace himself against the immense power rolling from and around him. At his call, the dark

surged forward as one.

Ceres came separately from her elemental brothers and sister, exploding from the ground in a cocoon of tree roots. She unfurled from it like a beast born anew, stepping barefoot upon the ground. Her horned headpiece, curled tightly around her scalp, was tangled with spiderwebs, roses, and decay.

He was running out of time.

Erebus growled, grinding his teeth together as he struggled to maintain the wall of shadow. He had never before witnessed a domain being set, but he felt, somehow, that he could. The knowledge was there, somehow, deep within his core. For his castle—and the wild land that surrounded it—to be contained as his, he would have to embed his power into the very fabric of the space.

Everywhere must be him, and he must be everywhere.

And with a domain set, he could negotiate with the Weavers in peace.

The final three Weavers manifested. Past, present, and future—Somnus, Xander, and Theia. Somnus, with his serpentine face glowing from under a curtain of black hair. Xander, armored in iron and shielded by six floating swords. Theia, ever more a spirit than a physical, living being, draped in translucent fabric that mirrored her silver hair, skin, and eyes. Crowns adorned each of their brows, forever embedded into their skin: Somnus, a crown of bone; Xander, a crown of iron; Theia, a crown of diamond.

There was no time.

The Weavers moved to surround him, rush him, destroy him—but his wall of shadow, his last hope, his last thread of power, stopped them from advancing. They eddied around it, thrashing with bursts of their own gifts—the sky was a maelstrom, a firestorm, a tornado, a masterful display of the Weavers' indomitable might. Never before had he seen their abilities used in such a reckless, wild manner. They lacked pattern or precision, surging instead with hatred and rage. He could feel their emotions embedded deep within every blow, every spiral of elemental prowess. It thrummed through the air, singing through his bones.

Erebus dropped to a knee, sweat beading his brow as he fought their almighty fury, struggling to close the domain's perimeter.

"Erebus! You have forsaken us—forsaken the Weavers and our Maker," Xander cried, swinging each of his six blades against the barrier. Every

blow was impossibly powerful, bending his wall and shaking the ground. "Your betrayal cannot be forgiven."

"No, it cannot," Nephthys chimed, her violet eyes flashing in their fury. Raging tides swirled against the barrier; they were a vortex of water darker than blood. "Do you know what it is you have done?" She was screaming now, her teeth sharpening into feral points. "Do you feel the blood of the innocents? Do you feel it staining your skin, pooling in the depths of your soul?"

Erebus's throat closed. His limbs deadened, numb.

Still, he fought.

"Traitor!" Fenrir howled, his flames exploding across the forest. They razed every meadow and twisted trees into corpses. "I will burn you and your cursed brethren. By the Maker, I swear it—you all will burn!"

A stray drag of wind, threaded with feathers and ice razor-sharp, broke through a crack in his barrier and lanced open his cheek. Fire fought through the crack, following the wind, and grabbed his neck, burning him. Erebus cursed, low and dark. Blood dripped from his skin, staining the stone below.

Still, he did not fall.

Theia rose above the Weavers, white skirts trailing behind her in a cloud. She clasped her hands together and the earth shook, rumbling with an unseen power from far below.

"Weavers, summon forth your strength," Theia called, her words echoing over the landscape. Her voice was a choir of maidens, bells full of light and promise. It was hope and mystery, threaded together in a symphony.

The Weavers moved to surround her, sacrificing their full strength into her growing light. Together, their united power was beyond words—it was glorious, reverent, indescribable. A testament to the Maker and the responsibility He had bestowed upon each.

Before them all stood Mithras, golden eyes grim with fear.

And regret.

Had the circumstances been different, Erebus could have wept.

"Together," Theia said, "we will banish this wicked place into the Beyond."

The Beyond—or Hell, as mortals knew it to be. The indomitable space that clung to the underbelly of the Realm, bleeding into nightmares and

harboring demons with their false gods. The Beyond was where wicked souls—the souls who betrayed the Maker—were sent to rot, putrefying in an eternity of fire and madness.

"You will not," Erebus whispered, raising his hands higher. A bolt of Ceres' rock broke through, deadly in its swiftness, raining down on his defenseless body as his barrier stretched, agonizing under the assault. "You will not take my soul." Rock crushed his outstretched arms; his left dropped, useless. But even mangled and broken, trembling and bloody, his right hand held, commanding the dark as it threaded together the final stitches of his domain.

"You will not take my soul!" Erebus roared again.

And the Realm roared back.

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CHAPTER 26

"*Dreamer, dreamer—wake up .*"

I sighed, burrowing into the silky depths of my bed. "Go away."

"*How long do you intend to keep us waiting? "*

"Us? Is Mother there, too?" I nestled deeper into the bedding, tugging a particularly fine blanket up to my nose. It smelled of juniper, night, and the brush of rain on fallen leaves. "I'm not ready yet."

"*We have not the time as you do. "*

"*We wait. He waits."*

"But I've waited more. "

A groan crept out before I could stop it. Why were Elliot and Mother so *insistent* ? Didn't they know how exhausted I was? My bones were stone, my skin a sheath of molasses. I couldn't possibly do what they asked.

"*Wake up. "*

"*Wake up. "*

"*Wake up. "*

"Fine—I will," I mumbled, rubbing my eyes and giving the room a bleary once-over. Everything was so dark, so formless—had they not thought to light a lamp? "Where are you?"

"*We're here. "*

Ice gripped my spine, spiraling up toward my neck. The Shadow Bringer's room hit me with all its force—its every shadow, its colors and smell. I had been here before, but that memory paled in comparison to what I felt now. Now I was *here* —truly, physically *here* .

And I was most *definitely* not in my bed.

I threw back the covers, mortified that part of me still wanted to curl up in his blankets, breathe deep the scent of night and rain on his pillows, and sleep.

Where did those voices come from?

A quick once-over of the Bringer's chamber told me I was alone, but the sky beyond the full-walled curtain told me night had just begun. There were too many places to hide, too many corners that could cloak or conceal.

And what was that dragging noise coming from the hall?

Oh, Maker. I'm not made for this.

I squeezed my elbows, wishing that I was wearing the Bringer's dark, menacing armor. Surely that would be more useful than a flimsy dress worn from travel and time. I needed a weapon of some sort—something besides my bare and useless hands.

"Come to me, shadows," I said, attempting to sound strong and confident. I wasn't sure that I succeeded. I waited, expectant, trying to quiet my breathing. My heart was panicking, clawing itself to my throat, which made it difficult to hear the demons in the hall. Were they watching, waiting? Did they know I was here, alone? "Shadows, come forward," I hissed again, feeling absolutely ridiculous. Why weren't they listening?

"*Let us outtttt!* " A demon suddenly shrieked, slamming its weight into the door. The walls trembled at the force of it, letting loose dust and a few books.

All right, strength and confidence be damned.

"*Please* ," I begged, glancing around wildly. Where were the shadows? It felt easier to summon them before; what was I doing wrong? I focused on my hands, acutely aware of the emptiness there. Nothing prickled at my palms or flooded my chest. There was no rush of energy, no thrum of the Bringer's lingering power.

I was truly alone—without anything or anyone keeping me from the demons.

"The old-fashioned way, then," I said through gritted teeth.

And I went to work.

By the time I was finished, the back of my dress was damp with sweat, clinging to my skin as I knelt to inspect my work. A tower of interlocked furniture, the Bringer's sumptuous chairs, bookshelves, and bed, were now shoved haphazardly against the door. It was fine enough, I supposed. At

least a demon would be met with some resistance before getting the chance to eat me.

For good measure, I climbed through the maze of furniture and shoved a piece of iron—the scepter of some sculpture—through the door handle.

Better.

I sank into an armchair I left behind. As with my other Realm adventures, I felt no hunger, no thirst, no urge for bodily functions—but cold, heat, and the dusting of pain could easily seep in.

And seep it did.

Night air swept in from the balcony, chilling my sweat-sheened skin and rustling the curtain it passed through. It mingled with the many candelabras, tossing their flames close to death, and roved back to me, forcing shivers down my arms.

It nearly made me forget why I was there in the first place.

Somehow the Shadow Bringer had locked me here, trading places so that he could be free. Escaping his tomb the first time hadn't *truly* freed him—he had still been tethered to the Realm, locked within a cage of demons and darkness.

His own cage of demons and darkness , I reminded myself. It wasn't as though he was locked in his castle without reason. According to the tales, the Shadow Bringer betrayed the Weavers, formed Corruption, and threw the Realm into chaos. Because of the Bringer—and those wicked enough to follow him—there were no dreams without demons, death, and Corruption. Because of him, the Weavers sank into silence, leaving humanity to its fate.

I muffled a scream into my hands.

The Bringer must have known that he could bind me. That's why he led me to his tomb. He intended to lead me there, bind me, and…then what? Kill the legionnaires as he left? Take over Istralla and unleash his demons on mankind? Spread Corruption further and more pervasively? Destroy all the elixir stores?

Why did I trust him? And why didn't I stop him when I had the chance?

Mithras had nearly defeated the Shadow Bringer. If I had taken his side instead of the Bringer's, would my fate be any different? Perhaps I'd be in Istralla, safe and drinking proper, capital-brewed elixir to banish visions of the Bringer and his nightmarish castle. And the Bringer would be locked within his tomb, buffering the world from his demons and darkness.

I walked to the curtain of billowing fabric, determined to figure out a way to stop the wind, when a strange noise whistled in the distance.

"*Dreamer* ," it keened, and I recognized it as the voice from earlier.

The voice I had thought to be Elliot's.

Under the unusually bright and silver-tinged moonlight, the Bringer's balcony was a sight to behold. Dark roots entwined with ironwork, forming sculptural motifs across the castle walls, and the floor, a glistening, star-flecked obsidian, felt like silk underfoot.

"*Have you finally the wits to see us? Here, here,* " the voice whistled again, echoing out from somewhere below the balustrade.

I peeked an eye at the forest below, uncertain as to what I'd find.

"*Ah, dreamer* ," the familiar grey-faced demon rasped. "*Quite some time it has been* ."

The demon seemed more human than before, its eyes no longer seeping and its cheeks less like the curves of a skull. Even its posture seemed more composed—tall and graceful, not hunched and dragging as though the weight of Hell was upon its shoulders.

Or maybe it was just the moonlight playing tricks on me.

Moonlight and the orbs that floated like stars through the forest's many trees.

"*Where is he, dreamer?* " A second demon asked, slinking from the forest. This one wore a short cape—unlike the long, meandering cloth of the first—and glared up at me with eyes of coal. "*What have you done? Where is Erebus?* "

Erebus ?

Did they mean the Shadow Bringer?

I bit the inside of my cheek. If they knew he was gone, what would they do? Would they try to take advantage of the situation and overrun me? "He's inside," I answered, turning my shoulders as if to leave. "In fact, he's calling for me. I had better return before he notices I'm speaking to monsters in the woods."

The first demon grinned and tilted its head. "*You're cold. Has he not attired you with one of his cloaks? They are rather dramatic, but practical enough. Quite suitable for times such as these.* "

"He already asked. I declined."

The second demon scoffed. "*You would spite him in such a manner? How loathsome.* "

The grin of the first demon widened. “*Quite loathsome indeed. But I do forget—our poor demon-riddled minds are so fragile, you know—our lord has only a single cloak, typically affixed to his shoulders . He does not lend it willingly.”*

“I spoke too quickly. I only meant that he offered me a *blanket* .”

“*Hmm. A blanket, you say? Strange—my memory has returned. Our lord always adorns his personal guests in his cloaks. Yes, most definitely cloaks. A welcome gift, if you will. ”*

Color rose to my cheeks, clearly marking my frustration, so I stepped back into the shadows. I wasn’t sure how well the demons could see—or how powerful they were—but I didn’t feel like finding out.

“*Retreating so soon? Are you certain you wish to do that? ”*

“I won’t tolerate your tricks, demon. Leave me be and go back to where you belong.”

“*And where is that, dear mortal? Where is it that we should go? ”*

I didn’t answer. Instead, I turned on my heel and marched back inside, clenching my jaw against their varied and clever taunts. The conversation had almost felt preferable to the uncertainty and loneliness that dwelt within the Bringer’s chamber.

Almost.

I spent the next few hours searching through the Bringer’s things, hoping that his real or imagined cloaks would rise into existence. His room was cavernous, stretched tall by ribs of obsidian and adorned with unimagined opulence, so it took some time to look through it all—even with half its furniture piled against the door. I found books both strange and familiar; some pages were empty, some burst with poetry, art, and music. Then there were some Weaver tales, though they didn’t feel like tales at all. They seemed living and true, depicting the Weavers in ordinary settings and conversations.

According to these new tales, Fenrir and Nephthys were lovers, Lelantos wore a half-mask of bone to look more imposing, and Ceres was a habitual hoarder. Though Xander was technically the youngest, he enjoyed acting as the Weavers’ responsible older brother, and Theia occasionally tricked them by materializing as a spirit. Somnus preferred to keep to himself, sometimes disappearing into his domain for years, but he brought back life and mischief to any gathering when he chose to return.

And then there was Citadel Firstlight and Evernight. In these books, Citadel Firstlight was a haven to the Weavers and their acolytes; it provided resources, training grounds, and a means for the Weavers to delegate with earthly rulers. On the other hand, Citadel Evernight was a place where nobles and their families could dream in profound ways; it was here that collective Realm feasts and balls, lavish affairs beyond the imagination, could occur without restriction.

There was also a Realm warrior named Erebus.

He was an anomaly, failing to possess a specific affinity to any Weaver, but his acclimation to the Realm allowed him to join their ranks regardless. The pages spoke of his raw, unprecedented ability, describing the ferocious battles he led against demons and their false gods.

I read until my eyes hurt—until the pages blurred and the words swam.

Moving to the floor, I cradled my head in the crook of my arms. Above me, dramatic seascape and mountain paintings, easily the height of three or four men, crawled up the walls to coil around a black chandelier. The paint broke apart in some places, slipping out of the canvas to float by the shadows.

It was a beauty both strange and breathtaking.

The floor held me for some time, writhing its phantom smoke over my skin to the balcony where it disappeared. Despite its opulence, the Bringer’s room felt empty. Cold and void of warmth, hope, and joy.

It ached for something, but I wasn’t sure what.

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CHAPTER 27

I WOKE IN A PILE OF SILKEN PILLOWS AND FEATHER-SOFT BLANKETS, BATHED in the strange scent of a thunderstorm mixed with dusty furniture. I pressed my face to the nearest pillow and breathed in, relishing it. It reminded me of a fog-covered field, but with a subtle undertone of smoke and old books.

"*Letussouttletussouttletussoutt!* "

I sprang to my feet, disoriented from the low candlelight. My barricade needed to be reinforced—*immediately* .

"Oh, Maker. *No* ."

My heart plummeted as the chamber sharpened into focus. Gone was my shield, the barricade of furniture piled high against the door. Every item, every glass, every book, was precisely placed, resting exactly where it had originally been.

"*Let us outttttttt!* "

I made to slam a chair against the bowing door but quickly changed my mind. A chair would be nothing against the might of a demon; I might as well have been using a scrap of lace to stop the force of a river.

Maybe there's a way out through the balcony, a hidden ladder of some sort.

The two demons rested against a pair of trees, their distorted faces mocking and cruel. One was sharpening a piece of metal, carving its edge into something gleaming and sharp. The other simply looked bored.

"*Dreamer. Still without that cloak, I see. Here to delight in this good morning?* "

"This is no morning." The sky was the color of sapphires and turbid, ancient wine; without the balcony's candlelight and the forest's silvery orbs,

the demons would be altogether obscured. “How is this morning”—I motioned wildly at the sky—“and what about any of this is *good* ?”

“*Ah, that. Should we tell her?* ” The first demon glanced at the second, its expression thoughtful, but the attempt was ignored. The second demon merely continued sharpening its makeshift blade. “*Excellent, I will tell her.* ” It looked back at me and grinned. “*We aren’t in the mortal world, darling. Our eternal night is, well, eternal.* ”

“But we’re dreaming. Can’t its structure be altered?”

I thought back to when the Bringer’s dungeon shifted, transporting me back to my home in Norhavellis. Or when wings burst from the Bringer’s back, carrying him high over the Visstill.

“*No. This domain was permanently set to protect Erebus. Or to curse him—we aren’t certain. Have we decided our opinion on that?* ” The demon glanced at its companion again, and again he was ignored. “*It’s as I thought. We aren’t certain. So eternal night it is.* ”

I cursed under my breath. The forest below was a long way down, dropping further and further away the more I looked. Without wings or the Shadow Bringer’s shadows, I’d have to physically descend the wall. Or jump. And neither of those options seemed very realistic.

“*Are you in distress? You seem a bit distressed.* ”

“No.”

“*If you ask our lord nicely, I’m sure he would quell your troubles.* ”

“I’m sure he would.”

The demon—still clawing at the Shadow Bringer’s door—roared, its howl rattling the chamber and echoing out into the night.

“*He’s in a mood today, hmm? Trouble sleeping?* ”

“Enough with your games,” I seethed. The demons clearly knew more than they were choosing to say—likely withholding information that would prevent my escape. “You know that isn’t him.”

“*Could have fooled me.* ”

“I need to wake up from this dream. Tell me how I can.”

The first demon thumbed its chin, considering. “*Quite a dangerous truth, that.* ”

“I don’t care what I have to do. I don’t belong here, and I need to go home.”

“*You truly wish to wake?* ” Its grin widened. “*Then you must first go to sleep.*”

The other demon slammed its blade into the grass. “*Your attempt at wit is making me lose my own. If the girl cannot— ”*

A second roar erupted, along with the shuddering *crack* of a door splitting open.

The demon lurched out into the balcony, spindly arms trailing like liquid across the stone. Its spine was long and crooked, needled with twigs and fur, and its face—if it could be called a face—was the skull of an elk. I reeled backwards, frozen with terror. My hands were empty, bereft of either steel or shadow, and I could do nothing but watch, horrified, as the demon slunk forward. If I jumped from the edge, would I wake in the Tomb of the Devourer? I shook my head. No—my body was physically tied to the Realm. If I died here, I might not come back on the other side.

I might not come back at all.

“*Outttttt, ”* the elk demon rasped, as three others joined it. The balcony trembled from the weight of their collective steps, shivering as I did when I looked upon their bodies. Atop each neck sat a skull; there was the elk of the first, the horse of the second, and something fanged and serrated atop the third.

They looked up at the midnight sky, raising their faces to meet the wind.

“*Ceveon* ,” the elk demon growled, towering over the balustrade. “*Where is he? ”* Its voice rumbled and cracked around each syllable—as if it hadn’t spoken a coherent sentence in centuries.

The long-caped demon beamed, strangely triumphant. “*Whatever do you mean? You should have passed our unruly lord on your way out. ”*

As an answer, the demons on the balcony made a furious, animalistic noise.

The demon coiled its cape around its shoulders, hefting a staff from somewhere beneath the cloth. He pointed one of its jewel-tipped ends at me. “*No? Then ask that one. ”*

The elk demon turned to face me, halting its jagged movements. For a moment it simply stared, its empty sockets suggesting eyes that saw everything—saw movement and shape beyond the physical. Things deep within the soul. Then it stepped forward, and again, slowly dragging itself to me. I pressed myself flat against the balustrade, attempting to still my shuddering limbs.

I had almost succeeded—until it bowed low enough to scent the air by my neck.

“*Something of his resides within her.*”

The fanged demon circled close, followed by the other. It looked ready to jump, its clawed hands gripping at the stone. “*She was here before. Perhaps she is his replacement—or perhaps he has abandoned us.*”

The elk demon joined in, circling me. “*Where is he? Where is the lord who would not release us?*”

I held my chin high against the demons’ menacing faces. I had neither steel nor shadow to fight with—only words. “If you so much as touch me, the Shadow Bringer will have his revenge upon you all.”

“*Do not trick us. He cares not for you nor anyone.*”

The fanged demon hissed. “*Your death would be of little consequence, dreamer.*”

Beneath me, the stone of the balustrade cracked.

No, no, no.

I staggered against the crumbling stone, swaying, reaching, grasping for *anything* —but the demons, in the chaos, thrashed their limbs into the bannister. They shattered the stone, flinging it wide and far over the forest.

As I fell, I didn’t know where the screams were coming from—if it was from my lungs, my mind, or some nauseating union of both. All I could see were the demons. A horde of skulled, broken beasts crawling, climbing, and lurching their bodies over the edge behind me.

Hundreds of demons, pouring into the night.

I WOKE in darkness upon the Shadow Bringer’s floor.

The fall did not kill me—nor did it force me to wake in the tomb.

The dark had become a living, breathing thing, cloying its way into my eyes and nose. It hurt to breathe. Cold air swept over the blankets still strewn about the floor, flipped the pages of books left unread, and whistled through unlit chandeliers and candelabras.

For the first time, the castle had not restored itself.

Drawing a velvet blanket around my shoulders, I stumbled to the balcony, cursing my fate and contemplating whether or not it would be worth it to yell into the night. If this were to be my reality for the next month—or year, even—my mind would surely disintegrate before I saw the light of day again.

I shivered from a new kind of fear.

Just how long would it take for me to wake up from this?

When I was little, the idea of dreaming felt precious and wondrous. Sacred, even. To dream before the Shadow Bringer's existence was to be given a gift from the Maker; in a dream, one could relish in hope and wander in possibility. Eden and I used to whisper about dreams, worried that Mother or Father would hear and think we were being disrespectful. But we enjoyed imagining what the Realm might look like. How the Weavers dressed, talked, moved. We would curl under a tent of blankets with our Weaver tales, spinning tales of adventure. We discussed how a dream might feel—conjecture the sights and sounds that we might experience. We wondered what it would take to become a dream warrior of legend or to have a Weaver choose us as a follower. But most of all, we wondered what we might have to do to leave behind our twisted life in Norhavellis.

I laughed, the sound of it weak and small against the void around me.

What I wouldn't give to have that life back.

A knock sounded from somewhere within the castle, rumbling low and powerful. One knock melted into three, three into five. It felt like a beating heart, a thrumming, full-bodied *thmp* against the stone.

Days before, when flames still burned within their receptacles, I ventured outside of the Bringer's chamber. I had crept through winding halls and strange, unearthly rooms, battling the fear that someone—or something—was watching. Fear was a battle I couldn't win here. It suffocated me—crawled over my skin, squeezed my heart, chilled my bones. Because of this fear, I had retreated before reaching anything of importance. There was always the crumbling *crack* of a stone that sounded like footsteps, a whisper of wind that sounded too near to a breath.

Still, even with my fears, there had been no sign of life.

The demons were gone.

So who was knocking?

Thmp. Thmp. Thmp.

I knelt behind a statue, drawing the blanket close. If I concentrated, I could pretend I was a child in Norhavellis, spinning tales of wonder with Eden.

Dreams weren't meant for this.

Fear, sorrow, hatred—dreams were meant to quell these things. Not ignite or reaffirm.

From my burrow of velvet and stone, I watched in horror as a figure leapt to the castle's highest spire. It was tall and spindly, bone-white skin glowing as though it were the moon and stars. Sweeping tendrils of hair flowed out from its skull, webbing the castle in black.

A demon?

For a moment it stood, motionless, its face tilted downwards.

I couldn't tell where it was looking; its face was shrouded in shadow, its limbs half-cloaked by its hair. I sucked in a slow, steady breath and held it, flattening myself against the statue.

Don't see me. Don't see me. Don't see me.

As though it could hear my thoughts, the creature cocked its head.

Then it descended.

It floated through the air, landing elegantly in a pile of robes and hair. The creature—the man—looked my way, his face a serpentine array of angles. His mouth was a thin, cunning frown, his nose a sweeping line between listless eyes of coal.

And atop his brow sat an ivory crown.

"You needn't cower so," the serpentine man said, acknowledging me but maintaining his distance. His voice was slow and melodic, a dusting of silk upon stone. "Had you answered the door, I would have entered properly."

I lifted myself from my burrow. "It isn't my door to open."

"Darkness beckons to the isolated. If you do not open the door, you will still be found," he murmured, his eyes clouded in thought. Then, as if a weight was lifted from his skeletal shoulders, he sighed. "But I digress. Will I be invited indoors, or will we continue this charade on the balcony?"

"Who are you? Are you of the demons?"

"At one time or another, we all are nearly demons."

I clenched my jaw. "That isn't an answer. I asked who you were."

"And I owe you nothing, dreamer." He fixed me with his eyes of coal. "But I will give you my name, because you already know it."

For a moment I studied him, the angle of his dark, intelligent eyes, the ghostly undertones of his voice. He spoke as though he knew sorrow, despair, and death—knew them so intimately that he no longer feared them.

He looked nearly the same as his image in the book of Weaver tales.

Somnus, Weaver of the Past, bowed.

"A pleasure."

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CHAPTER 28

"WHAT A WRETCHED CONDITION THIS CASTLE IS IN," SOMNUS OBSERVED, inspecting the Bringer's chamber with a scornful eye. He lifted the edge of a ruined painting, its canvas ripped into long, oily shreds. Silver light ebbed from his fingertips and illuminated the paint. "A shame, considering the hope and wonder that were imbued in its mortar."

He trailed around the broken pieces of the room, pausing every few steps to examine a shredded book or gouges clawed deep into the walls. Every movement was smooth, careful, effortless; refined over the course of centuries, his body carried itself with perfect precision.

Somnus was a ghost formed into life, a living specter of a man.

"You talk as though you built this place." At Somnus's inquisitive expression, I worked to retrace my statement. It was said Weavers created everything in the Realm, blending landscapes and simulated realities like they, too, were the Maker of their worlds. Some dreamers could alter pieces of their dreams, adding context or adjustments as their minds saw fit, but most dreams were the direct creation of the Weaver behind it. "I mean—"

"No. It is not of my creation; my domain rests elsewhere." Somnus dropped the jeweled tapestry he was examining. It gleamed as it fell, curling over his pointed boot. "But you think it is beautiful, do you not? Even in its ruin, I forget how grandiose the Realm appears to a dreamer. And this castle is merely one thread within the Realm entirety."

I didn't respond, holding my arms close.

"Dreams have become fickle, shadowed things. To truly dream—" he paused, his depthless gaze narrowing. It was clear he wasn't satisfied with my silence. "Surely it is exquisite in your eyes."

“It is beautiful,” I admitted, reluctant to specifically acknowledge the beauty of the Bringer’s castle. The Shadow Bringer was a mortal enemy of the Weavers; any affiliation with him here—beyond my chance appearance in it—was an enormous risk. I pretended to examine a flameless candelabra. “Though I’d prefer a bit of light.”

“Beauty can be found in darkness, dreamer. You needn’t be afraid of acknowledging your affiliation with the Shadow Bringer, even though he did cause quite the turmoil some five-hundred years ago.”

Oh, hell.

I whirled on Somnus. “You know what I’m thinking.”

He shrugged. “I merely witness impressions. Small shivers of emotion and belief.” He stared at me, all-knowing. Deadly. “But I am experienced enough to know what they mean.”

Realization crashed against me, heavy as the sea; Somnus wasn’t here to make small talk. to comment on the beauty of the Realm or the state of the Bringer’s castle. No—his eyes spoke of something deeper, deadlier. His posture reeked of bloodlust even amidst its grace.

“You’re here to kill him, aren’t you?”

Somnus considered me for a moment, assessing the way I stood, the clench of my jaw, the shaking in my hands. “No, dreamer. I merely bore witness to the darkness escaping his castle, shattering what was left of his domain’s boundary. I thought I’d find him here, but all I see is you.”

“That’s because he isn't here. I was tricked into taking his place.”

“That is the sole purpose for your presence here, then?” Somnus motioned around us—at the Bringer’s crumbling chamber, at the night leaking in through the uncurtained wall. “Because you took his place in the mortal world?”

“What else would I—”

“That is not the only reason you are here, dreamer.” Somnus pulled a weapon of his own from the fold of his robes. It was a blade forged from the night sky, its handle carved in onyx and ivory. Tiny stars danced along its edge. “Your purpose is beyond that. *His* purpose is beyond that. But a thousand darkened souls, freed? It is of incredible concern, considering they were contained here for nearly five-hundred years prior.”

I swallowed back the fear rising in my throat.

Where had they gone? What had I *done* ?

“I couldn’t stop them,” I whispered miserably.

Somnus approached, gliding silently across the stone. I thought he was positioning his body to attack, but he instead offered me his sword.

“A token from the Maker Himself.” I tensed, watching as the weapon rippled with power. Weaver or not, I had no idea what his intentions were. “Use it to channel the gifts you were given.”

When I made no move to take it, Somnus gently placed his hand over my own.

“Why do you hesitate?”

“Because I don’t understand why you’re offering it to me.”

“And I don’t discern why the Maker does what He does. I only act upon His command, trusting that He sees further than I.” A corner of his mouth lifted. “Also, you are weak and fearful. You need a weapon if you wish to be of any consequence here.”

Well, then.

Color rose to my face as I accepted the blade, lifting it gingerly. Cool to the touch and thrumming with power, it felt no heavier than a small broomstick.

Somnus dipped his head in a small bow. “May it protect and guide you.”

“How is it meant to be used?” I asked, remembering the Bringer’s blade, a lethal thing of utter darkness, and Mithras’s, silver and burning with light. This sword felt different, somehow, and yet familiar in ways I couldn’t name.

“As any weapon is used. Be its bearer, and it will destroy you. Meld with it, and you will conquer.” He parted his hair and a curved sword emerged, its blade much like the fang of some enormous beast. “It can also be hidden on your person when not in use. Do you have a preference as to where?”

I thought for a moment, remembering how the Bringer had pulled his blade from his palm. An easy spot to access; it seemed as useful a spot as any.

“The palm of my hand.”

Somnus nodded, approval in his serpentine eyes. “Place the blade here —” He positioned the sword above the center of my palm, its point nearly piercing the flesh. “And use your will to command it under your skin.”

I did as he commanded, taking hold of the hilt and balancing it above my palm. I lowered the sword, slowly, carefully, imagining that it wasn’t a sword at all but a delicate breeze or a wisp of smoke. But I hesitated. So

instead of passing through like smoke, it passed through very much like a regular sword would.

Definitely not like a delicate breeze.

"*Maker's light* ," I hissed, staunching the blood with my sleeve. "How is it even possible to bleed here? None of this is—"

"Real?" Somnus asked, sheathing his blade back into his hair. "There are different parts of the Realm. Some are more physical in nature than others. Try again."

"I—" *I don't know if I want to try again* , I almost said. But Somnus withered me with a look so filled with expectation and mild disappointment that I changed my mind. "Fine. Okay."

I took a full breath, centering my focus back on the sword. It seemed to mock me, gleaming as it was, wondering why *I* of all people was to be its master.

Closing my eyes, I again imagined that the blade was nothing but a shadow. I envisioned a creeping, sword-eating darkness coiling up its length, rendering it entirely into mist. Slowly, I let the weight of the mist pull itself down, focusing on what it felt like to have the substance pool in my hands. Then, my right fist fell empty against the palm of my left, and I opened my eyes.

The sword was gone.

I flexed my hand open and shut, marveling at the sensation of the sword within. My palm ached, thrumming with cold and heat and the sensation that something was within it that wanted *out* .

"You need to test it."

"Yes," I agreed, surprised at the new sense of purpose that pooled within me. The sword was a vein of power, a weapon both familiar and new. "But against what?"

Somnus beckoned me to follow him. "Something that will prepare you to face all the darkened souls that fled from here."

We walked through the castle, silent save for the sweeping of Somnus's hair upon the stone. He moved as if he knew the castle intimately, never hesitating in which staircase to descend or hallway to follow. Candelabras ignited beside him, glowing from orbs that spun out from under his hands, and the castle slowly melted into life as we ventured through. The light slid over paintings taller than trees in the Visstill, over waterfalls crawling like honey from statues of lions and serpents.

But the further we walked, the more we saw decay, rot, and ruin.

Dry, snake-like branches, rattling as they burst from the ground, clawed against paintings, ripping them. Arched ceilings adorned with whorls of silver and draped in star-specked gossamer crumbled as we passed underneath, showering the air with dust and revealing the sky above. Then there was what the demons left behind. Each room held impossibly high claw marks and teeth left scattered in piles of rubble and cloth.

The main vestibule, the lavish entryway where I first met the Bringer, was a mess of broken furniture and dust; it looked—and smelled—as though it hadn't seen light, fresh air, or humanity in years. What I remembered as vibrant shades of emerald, plum, and wine were now pale and lifeless, and the array of golden mirrors and candelabras were broken to shards upon the floor.

"Decay can settle so quickly," Somnus remarked. "This castle is merely a husk without its ruler. It is quite simply mesmerizing."

Mesmerizing?

With all the rubble and lingering shadows, it felt as though a demon would appear at any moment. There wasn't anything mesmerizing about that. Somnus beckoned to a passageway below the vestibule; it coiled down in a steep descent, veiled in a haze of shadow. From it, a familiar smell emanated. Something damp and cave-like.

"Come, dreamer. We are nearly there."

I struggled to keep up as we descended, worrying that my feet would tangle in Somnus's hair. It was a sleek, beautiful curtain, trailing behind him like a cape, but it was far too long for someone to safely follow. The more I studied it, the more I wondered if it possessed a mind of its own. And maybe it did. Whenever my footsteps trailed too close, it would shift away just in time.

I thought I heard Somnus chuckle, once. Likely mocking my senseless concern.

We ended up in the Bringer's water cavern, its wet stone and twilight greenery a mangled smear of what it used to be. The hole cut into its ceiling was no longer visible, tangled over by vines as it was, causing the space to be cast over by a strange, pervasive darkness. Even the central pool, its waters previously lit by starlight, seemed empty and dead.

"And we are here," Somnus said, his voice echoing. "Another place lost to time."

He spread his hands wide, orbs springing from his fingertips and diving deep into the pool. As his hands followed, the water erupted into a burst of starlight, mingling with orbs that danced slow, meandering arcs beneath its surface. Depthless as the pool was, there were no signs of monsters lurking in the deep. It felt clean—inviting, even. I found myself standing over its waters, watching as Somnus traced symbols and figures over the silver light.

"You are ready, I assume," Somnus murmured, continuing to thread shapes into the surface. "Use what you were given and conquer all that you face."

I stared at the surface, expecting something to jump out at us. The water rippled, steady and bright, iridescent with stars. Clear and demonless, it held no clues about what he wanted me to face. I turned to face Somnus, several questions upon my lips.

But he was gone.

Before I could react, a force cracked against my shoulder. My balance was already unsteady from the half-light of the cavern and the power vibrating under my skin; I tripped, flailing.

The water caught me quickly—but it was no longer water at all.

I was in a pit, a forest of snow-covered bone and rot spanning beyond it. And in the center was Elliot, his eyes bruised and hollow.

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CHAPTER 29

"ELLIOT!" I SCREAMED, LUNGING TOWARD HIM. BUT MY LEGS WOULDN'T move—they were stuck underneath me, caught by something dark like mud but thick with bone, rot, and other foul, disgusting things. It clung to my feet and forced me into stillness.

Elliot hunched over his knees, bony arms gripping his sides. His hair was dirty and matted, his clothes nothing but long, dwindling rags. They reminded me of the grey demon's clothing—nothing suitable for a human boy.

"Sawhee," he moaned, sobs wracking deep and heavy from his chest. "I-I'm sawhee Mothah. I'm sawhee Fathah. I'm sawhee 'smeh."

My skin prickled at that word: *sawhee* .

Growing up, Elliot struggled to say certain sounds. Other words of his were jumbled or altogether strange; he enjoyed creating new phrases and sounds, stringing them together in a language all his own. And his language had been mine, too. I could understand him when no one else could. Or when no one else cared to try.

But he had grown out of it. Years ago.

I took another look at my brother. He was thinner, smaller—his voice wavering and more childish than I had heard in some time. This Elliot wasn't the same boy I left behind in Norhavellis; this Elliot was a young child ravished by sickness and hunger.

"Sawhee!" he howled again, raising his face toward the endless pit of bone, snow, and filth. The pit changed as he howled, slowly unfurling one of its edges. A winged demon peeked over this unfurling edge, its skull ringed in horns that crowned red, smoking eyes. Where its face should be

was a mask of swirling darkness, empty of everything save for those eyes, and its body was colossal, clothed in armor that formed to every part of its unnatural shape. Elliot saw the demon and howled louder, crying to a snowing, horrible sky.

“Elliot, look at me!” I fought against the ice-slicked wind that was now whirling around the pit. It stuck to his back, froze against the strips of his rags. “You need to wake up right now! Fight it—fight this! You can’t let it get you—*please!* ”

Somnus had thrown me into one of Elliot’s nightmares when he was dying of fever. I had been thirteen at the time; it was a year that had no end or beginning. There was only hunger, darkness, and the lingering stench of death. Mother and Father had managed to provide us with elixir—the Norhavellian supply, I knew now—but only after Elliot had told us of his dreams.

They had been horrific, those dreams. Filled with things most vile and terrifying, they were far worse than any of the stories we had known. But for a time he had kept them from us, determined that his silence would mean our safety. He thought his dreams were his fault. That he had done something to deserve them.

But he had never mentioned a demon.

The demon descended slowly, crawling over the lip of the pit and staring hungrily at my brother. Elliot sniffed, his slight shoulders trembling, tilting his face toward the sound of my voice.

“Are yoweh a d-demon, too?”

“No, I’m your sister—it’s *me* . It’s Esmer.”

Recognition dawned in his dull eyes. “‘smeh? You whook diff’rent…”

Boom.

Continuing to descend, the demon grew closer and closer, its eyes glinting with hellfire. Its armor shifted with each step, the sound of it echoing, booming—a deep, rumbling that shook the core of the earth.

Boom.

And as it walked, my body sunk deeper into the mire. First my ankles. Then my shins. It sank into my thighs, bit deep into my hips. A breath later, and it was seeping up over my stomach, cold and foul.

Boom.

I was helpless to this—*helpless* .

“Hewhp m-me,” Elliot begged, reaching for me. “Pwhease don’t go. I-I’m scahw’d.”

The muck was heavy now, squeezing my ribs like a vice.

From within my arm, the sword began to thrum, reminding me of something.

Use what you’ve been given and conquer all that you face.

I looked in newfound horror upon the demon. I sincerely doubted Somnus meant conquering *that* . It didn’t seem conquerable in the slightest, but it was the only danger here—and I was the only one with any power to stop it.

“Maker help us,” I muttered, pulling the blade from my palm.

I wasn’t born a fighter. I had no formal training, no lessons in self-defense or swordplay; a true sword—one with actual weight and a history of battle—had never found its way into my hands. But my muscles were somewhat strong, honed from chores and carrying boxes of elixir to and from the village.

That, and I was in a dream. Surely I could be more than who I was in reality.

Right?

As soon as the blade met the air, three things happened: the demon positioned itself to jump, its cloud-like maw parting to reveal black teeth, Elliot started running, and the ground below me solidified, spitting me out. Instinct told me to raise the weapon high, focusing every ounce of my willpower into making it do whatever it was supposed to do. The metal, reflecting a glorious night sky within its body, began to glow, and snow circled in a pattern around it, swirling rapidly like a blizzard might.

“Hewhp!” Elliot cried, stumbling to kneel behind me. I spared a hand to hold him to my side. “I-it’s *cold* , ‘smeh. I wanna go h-home.”

“I do too, Ell. But I need to defeat this thing first.”

Ice coated Elliot’s eyelashes and clung to my hair in clumps. I blinked back tears, focusing, trying my hardest to see beyond the swirling wall of snow. The demon was out there somewhere, lumbering its way toward us, but the snow obscured it.

Boom.

“I-it ‘ates the wight.” Elliot warbled.

It hates the light.

My breath hitched. “How do you know that? You’ve seen this demon before?”

Elliot nodded, hiccupping. “But nevah this close.”

The demon attacked.

It barreled at us from the vortex of wind and snow, its body so massive that parts were still obscured in grey, milky mist. I swung the sword up, willing it to make contact, begging it to burst with a light so bright it would force the creature back—and it began to glow, gleaming with the force of a million stars. It parted the snow and ice, lifted parts of the fog.

Don’t fail me now, sword. Please don’t fail me now.

The demon hesitated, leaning back into the mist. It was working—the light truly was giving it pause. I grinned in utter disbelief.

It’s working .

But suddenly, just as it ignited, the sword went dark. It faded into a regular blade, something that one might find forged at a village blacksmith’s. Elliot and I looked at each other, horrified. The demon lurched forward, lowering its depthless face to meet my own. It didn’t speak, exactly, but I could feel its raw hunger, its boiling rage. A raw, all-consuming *want* to devour me whole. This creature was unlike anything I had encountered before; it dwarfed every demon in the Bringer’s castle. It made them seem insignificant and small.

And it was about to consume Elliot and I alive.

I screamed as it reached for us, unable to keep a sound of primal horror from escaping my lips. It pinned us to the ground with a press of its claw, nearly forcing the sword from my hands. Elliot howled miserably, squirming against the thing’s charred flesh, but the effort was useless; its claw was the size of a carriage, crushing our bodies.

“I can’t wake up, ‘smer! I *can’t* . I’m sawhee!”

I groaned, unable to take a full breath. “*Hang on!* ”

Waking up wouldn’t save us. Not like this. Not when the demon had already claimed us. Tears leaked from my eyes, stinging my frozen cheeks with their warmth. Somnus sent me to this dream for a purpose, but I had failed him—failed my brother, too.

Because if this demon wasn’t destroyed, there was a chance it could alter Elliot’s past.

I ground my teeth in frustration, throwing my weight up into the demon’s fingers. If Elliot battled Corruption when he was at his sickest, he

would die. Quickly. Fever had already wasted away his body for months; physical deterioration, in deadly combination with the deterioration that came from Corruption, would have been unthinkable.

An unwanted image of the Shadow Bringer danced in my peripheral, taunting me. He was strong where I wasn't—had power and command over his surroundings in ways I only borrowed. Enemy or otherwise, had he been here, he would have been able to do something.

This is his fault. All of it—

"You claim to know a man's guilt without first knowing his soul? " Somnus's voice rang, piercing sharp and clear through my mind. *"This reality is beyond that of your Shadow Bringer's. Use what you've been given; see the light within the darkness and let it sing. "*

See the light within.

See the light within.

See the light within.

At Somnus's direction, I began to see something within the demon: a small vein of light, trickling out from a crack in its armor. The light was no larger than a wisp of hair or the stem of a flower; still, it was there. Waiting. Watching. Yearning to escape the confines of the demon's armor and rotting heart. It reacted to the sword immediately, glowing brighter and brighter as the blade absorbed it.

The demon made a miserable sound, its teeth flashing once before disappearing into its clouded face. It drew its claws up as it roared, shaking its crown of horns. Elliot and I scrambled away, stumbling backwards and tripping over ourselves as I fought to hold the sword upright. Light was pouring into it now, gushing from the demon in a river of white, sun-drenched blood.

"It's shwinkin'!" Elliot exclaimed, looking on in wonder as the demon folded into itself. And as the demon shrank, Elliot's skin cleared; his eyes became bright and luminous, his hair gleaming with shiny curls. No longer was he clothed in rags, either; he wore garb suitable for a prince. Even the snow had stopped, replaced by a shower of light. "You did it, 'smeh!"

Within seconds, the demon was reduced to the height and stature of a goat.

Its horns were brambles, its stormcloud face a puff of smoke. I stood over it, furious at this demon who terrorized my brother, pressing the sword to the exposed flesh of its stomach. It made a squealing, whistling sound,

falling to the ground in a fit as it tried to back away, but I held on, cutting straight through flesh and bone and blood. My vision burned red, my hands felt both foreign and alive all at once. Only the back of the demon's chest plate, still cupping its skin despite its reduced size, stopped me.

A rhythmic sound echoed over the pit.

The edges of the pit began to flatten, shivering down until the landscape was smooth and uniform. The mist cleared, too, as did the light that had flowed from the demon's body. An army was revealed, led by a man ringed by floating swords, a ghostly woman draped in white, and a man armored in crimson and gold.

Xander, Weaver of the Present, Theia, Weaver of the Future, and *Mithras.*

Elliot's mouth gaped open. "Weavahs—!"

"Stay close," I said, motioning for Elliot to step away from the demon. It gasped out irregular, shallow breaths, letting out a final *wheeze* of air as the sword slid from its stomach and back into my palm.

"Your report was lacking," Xander, Weaver of the Present, intoned to a soldier at his left. Hundreds of soldiers, faces obscured by masks, stood behind their leaders, marked by the color of their leader. Xander's were in iron, Theia's in diamond, and Mithras's in gold. "It is merely a pup."

The ironclad soldier bowed his head. "I'm sorry, my lord. Perhaps the demon moved dreams—"

"Enough. It is done," Xander responded, commanding and clear. He appeared as he did in the tales, a legendary king made immortal. Chestnut hair swept back from his temples to rest under a crown, framing a strong, shrewd face and bright eyes.

Mithras kicked the demon's lifeless body, knocking loose one of its twig-like horns. "*A face wild as a storm, body protected by the Maker's stolen armor.* A lacking report indeed. Pathetic creature."

"I wouldn't let it sully my boot," Xander said, mouth twisting in displeasure. The ground was stained heavily by the demon's blood, and he stepped to avoid it. "Come, let us return to the Citadel."

"*Ahem* ," Theia said, gesturing delicately at Elliot and I. Her eyes were wide and silver, her hair glossy and full of light, but her form felt false in its perfection; she seemed a sculpture, a living painting—not living, not breathing. "The dreamers are here; they appear to be lucid."

The Weavers' attention snapped to Elliot and I, instantly wary. But the more they examined us, the more they grew disinterested. It was clear we were of no importance; therefore, we weren't worth their time or attention. Still, Mithras strode over to us, boredom and vague curiosity—but not recognition—set deep into his golden eyes.

"Is it true? Are you aware, dreamers?" Mithras asked, looming over us. "How rare."

"I can't be'weive it's weally you guys!" Elliot exclaimed, completely ignoring his question. "Fightin' them an' stuff—*wow* !"

I gripped Elliot's shoulder, pulling him back a step.

Theia's pale lips drew back in a smile. "It is as I said. Lucid."

"But who awh you?"

"Hmm?" Mithras responded, frowning.

"Elliot, stop—"

"Who awh you? I don' know if yoweh maybe…Fenwee'eh?"

Mithras's gaze grew distant. Then he placed a single gloved finger against Elliot's brow.

"What awh you doin'?" Elliot asked innocently, looking from Mithras, to the other Weavers, and to me. "Yoweh fingeh's cold."

And just like that, Elliot disappeared.

"*No!* " I lunged forward, unthinking, and swung my fist straight into Mithras's golden jaw.

Stunned, he fell backwards, slamming into the bloody ground. For a second he was silent, disbelief and rage boiling in his eyes. Then he roared, scrambling upright.

"I merely *woke* him. I should take your—" He reached for me, but his hand froze mid-movement.

"Have grace," said Xander. He held his hand up, mirroring Mithras's. When he drew it to his side, Mithras's dropped, too. "A hunt, no matter its length or success, does not warrant such base behavior."

Theia nodded, crossing her arms. A row of bracelets, delicate and clear, chimed on her wrist. They trailed up her forearms, linking sporadically to her gossamer sleeves. "He speaks the truth, Mithras. We must save our energy for what matters." She turned toward the army of legionnaires, headpiece gleaming. "Ensure that one's memory is adjusted."

Mithras's eyes bore into me, cold and shallow despite their honeyed color. I watched as he readjusted his expression, masking his hate with

something resembling indifference.

“Apologies, dreamer,” he murmured, giving a short bow. “It has been a long and arduous day. You understand, don’t you?”

I nodded and gave him an understanding smile, willing myself to hide the emotion warring in my veins. This was the Mithras of five years ago. If I caught his attention now, would he pay a visit to Norhavellis in the middle of Elliot’s sickness? I didn’t know if this was an illusion or if I was truly in the past, but it wouldn’t be wise to take the risk.

“Forgive me for striking you,” I offered weakly. “I was merely overwhelmed by your presence.”

But then—what if Mithras *had* visited Norhavellis five years ago? In five years, Norhavellis saw families ripped apart by death, crimes born of hate and misery, and the village’s steady descent into Corruption. Their recent cure hadn’t prevented any of that. If Mithras had come, would our fate have been different?

“You are forgiven,” Mithras said, lifting my chin. “It is rare for us to come across a dreamer who is aware.” He smiled sadly, as though he felt pity for me. “Hold on to this moment, as it will soon be taken from you.”

Ensure that one’s memory is adjusted.

“My memory will be erased, then?”

“Your memory of this dream will fade, but you needn’t be afraid. The demon you faced today will no longer haunt you.”

No wonder Elliot never told us about seeing a demon. The memory was taken from him.

“Why are the Weavers hiding themselves from Noctis?” The question stumbled out of me, uncertain but decisive. “We’ve been waiting—*begging*—for the Weavers’ return. Why erase our memories? Why let us think you’ve abandoned us?”

“You know nothing,” Mithras answered, looking at me as though I was an insect. “The Weavers sealed the Realm against all dreamers to protect themselves. While you sleep, peacefully cradled by the elixir, they’ve been busy waging a centuries-long war against the demons.”

“But what of the struggling villages?” I continued. Anger and disbelief burned bright behind my temples. “The people *dying* from Corruption who can’t afford elixir—what of them? How can you think that—”

“*Be still* .” Mithras’s eyes drifted over my body, settling on my hands. Did he sense the sword there, lying in wait? “Is your faith so meager?”

“This isn’t about my faith. This is—”

“And what do you think it is? What do you think you *know* ?” Mithras grabbed my wrist, forcing me forward, and his hand was upon my forehead before I could duck out of the way. “Go back to the life from which you came, dreamer.”

And then like glass the dream shattered.

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CHAPTER 30

THE SHADOW BRINGER HELD HIS BACK AS STRAIGHT AS HE COULD MANAGE, trying to stop his erratic breathing. His heart was a cracking, brittle thing; his eyes were half-closed, unseeing.

Darkness, everywhere.

It coiled around him, that endless shadow, squeezing the air from his battered lungs. It brought nothing except a faint, meandering wind that smelled of winter and night.

He was in the Beyond. He had to be.

"*No* ," he murmured, the word a mere glimpse of the horror that poured through him. His bones felt brittle and false. Was he alive? Dead?

He blinked hard, clearing mire from his thoughts. Shook his hands through his hair, kicked the ground with the heel of his boot. Darkness, everywhere.

Save for in *there* .

He staggered forward, leaning heavily on the wall as the starlit cavern swam around him. It was as he had left it, a shadowed cathedral with a living sacrifice at its altar. Esmer, too, was how he had left her, dark hair curling over the stone and face settled into an expression of serenity. She was beautiful. He had resisted thinking—or feeling—as much, but he couldn't deny it. Hadn't been able to since he first met her.

In a different time, perhaps he would have told her.

Except—

Was that her brow tensing, her mouth twisting into a grimace? The Bringer blinked again, struggling in vain to rip the image from his sight.

When she had first closed her eyes, sinking into the oblivion he had so carefully prepared for her, he imagined he would feel hope.

Relief.

Triumph.

Feel *something* besides the deep, roiling pit of regret and self-hatred.

Days ago, he walked through the depths of his tomb, clawing up to the surface where he would at last be free to claim his revenge. He had placed a hand over the stone entrance, feeling the damp and the grit of it clinging to his skin, and imagined what he'd do to the monsters who damned not only him but Esmer and her family, too.

But in cruel indifference, no matter what he tried, the door would not open.

And that had been days ago.

Now he was exhausted, dying of hunger and thirst. If he slept beyond the altar, his mortal body would perish within hours of entering the Realm, too malnourished to sustain itself. But if he slept atop the altar, his eternal, damned life would commence again.

No.

He should not—*should not* —go back. Seeing Esmer's face twisting in agony assured him of that. He needed to fight for her—and for what remained of his life. But he couldn't escape, either. He would rot in this earthly dungeon if he didn't join her, his body withering away as the bones of his comrades had.

He knelt down, dropping his face into his shaking hands.

After *everything* he had been through—the misery, the isolation, the fear—would there be a point in letting it slip away? Now, when he had drank from the true air and felt light upon his face for the first time in centuries? Esmer—it was *she* who dared enter his castle, *she* who summoned him here, *she* who now laid upon the stone, fear and desperation forcing her features into something unrecognizable and wrong.

She didn't deserve this.

He needed to go back.

A dry laugh sounded from his throat. He laughed again, half-delusional and amused that he sounded more like a dying animal than a man who held anything worthy of being saved. He crawled beside her regardless, breath fading into mist as he looked to the ceiling above. It had been crafted to

look like the moon and stars, purposed to remind him of the open sky even when he was deep underground.

Or so he thought.

Memories threaded into place the longer he was away from the Realm, bizarre and half-formed. Memories of Ceveon and Sorren. Memories of a glass castle and the eager dreamers. Fragments of conversation, the faces of beauty and horror, a glimpse of a sprawling, shadow-infested sea. An armored demon with red, smoking eyes.

If he returned to the Realm, would he lose them all again?

Part of him did not care. Did not mind the idea of losing his sense of self, dissolving back into the Shadow Bringer and away from this man called “Erebus”. But another part hesitated. Hesitated with a deep, angry longing for something *more* .

It was too late to decide.

His eyes were sinking into his skull, hands heavy against his sides.

The last he remembered was Esmer’s warm skin, so full of life against his own, a single tear of hers that he brushed away, and the vague, echoing thought that he might never wake again.

But he owed it to her to try.

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CHAPTER 31

A GENTLE WIND LAPPED AGAINST MY CHEEK, BRINGING WITH IT THE DEEP, lingering scent of a forest at midnight. It swept along the curves of the pillows below me, stirring up notes of juniper and rain.

I sighed in contentment, happily stuck in the in-between of wakefulness and sleep. It wasn't often that Elliot allowed an open window while we slept—something about him and a fear of birds—but he must have decided that the fresh air was worth the risk.

And Mother must be burning a new candle—or mixing some new curative.

I breathed deeper, trying to decide what the scent reminded me of. The Visstill? No, it was too complex, too *dusty* . It smoldered with something like incense, something similar to old wood, and twisted itself around a mist-covered field brimming with wild, beautiful things.

It was divine.

Elliot curled up next to me, his breathing even and slow. I smiled to myself as I listened to him breathe, reminiscing back to the days where he'd pile all his blankets and stuffed animals onto my bed so that he'd be protected from all sorts of things: winter winds that leaked into the creaking walls of our attic room, loneliness, or even the watchful eyes of a monster in the shadows. He was braver than he realized, my brother. Though he never quite understood why.

I reached out to tousle his hair, finding instead the stiff, cold skin of his neck.

"You're freezing Ell," I said, tossing him one of the blankets that towered over me. I adjusted my reach, curling a hand in his hair. It felt

softer than usual—not tangled and coarse. “Mother finally got you to brush your hair, huh?”

Elliot didn’t answer, so I cracked open an eye.

And about jumped out of my skin.

Sleeping next to me, nestled deep in an extravagant pile of pillows, was the Shadow Bringer. Black armor clung to his half-blanketed body, darker than ink and lustrous with newness and quality. Not a single piece was out of place; gone was any trace of the tattered, injury-soaked material of his earthly attire. And the Bringer himself was back to his true form: mouth irritatingly tempting, skin clean and bloodless, and moon-white hair pooling over the velvet beneath him.

His eyes flicked open, their pale grey irises finding mine. “This is how I am,” he murmured, voice thick with sleep. “Cold.” He gestured to where my hand still clung to his hair, and I choked on my response, scrambling to the farthest edge of the bed.

A strange half-smile ghosted his lips as he settled back into the pillows.

“It’s good to see you, Esmer.”

“You *tricked* me,” I ground out, embarrassment shifting into something coherent and sharp. My new weapon prickled under my skin, dancing with anticipation. “You put me on that stone so that I would replace you here. How could you?”

For a moment, he looked ready to deny it. Then he said, fixing me with a bright, unbreakable stare, “I did—and it was a mistake. I shouldn’t have left you here alone. It won’t happen again.”

I was *not* expecting an apology.

Nor for him to look like he did, expressive lips caught in an earnest expression.

“What have you been doing all this time? Spreading Corruption, growing your army of demons?” At his silence I barreled on, grabbing his shoulder without thinking. Even over his armor, his body was so *cold* . It felt like I was touching a corpse, not a man with blood running through his veins. “Who have you killed? What evil have you—”

“*Unspeakable* evil,” he answered seriously, mouth slanting into an expression that showed part of his teeth. “In one year, I razed Noctis to the ground and forced all of humanity into chaos and war.” Shadows rippled from his eyes, spinning like smoke. “All but those I deemed worthy are Corrupt.”

“You’re mocking me,” I seethed, moving to swipe at the rising shadows. He caught me before I could; while he felt cold, his body was solid, a weapon meant for battle and bloodshed. “I’ve only been here a few days. A year is impossible.”

“A year entire,” he confirmed, his smile growing wider. “Haven’t you figured out that the Realm works differently than your mortal world?” As he moved to still my thrashing, blankets shifting down from his body, I had the sudden realization that the scent of juniper, incense, and rain was *him* . Against my better judgment, a warm flush raced across my skin. “A year has passed, and my demon army is infinite, nourished by Corrupted souls. We are thousands strong, and I’ve returned to be their king.”

“*Liar* ,” I hissed. “How can you command your demons if they’re gone?” His eyes flashed, revealing the smallest shred of disbelief. Had he finally noticed the silence beyond his chambers? I continued, imagining the rage that was surely churning within him. “They escaped off your balcony —they’re *free* . If you hadn’t left the tomb, they’d still be here.”

Shadows rioted around his arm and swept over the skin where my sword hid. I dug my fingernails into my palms, readying myself for the fight that was surely about to come. I could still smell the blood of Elliot’s demon; I had reduced it from a colossus into nothing at all.

Use what you’ve been given and conquer all that you face.

The Bringer had tricked me. *Baited* me into taking his place. I had felt sympathy for him before—a likeness, even. But maybe that had all been for a reason—to get me here where I was at this moment, his exposed throat a mere breath from my hidden blade. Maybe this was my destiny—to rid the world of the Shadow Bringer.

He sat up straight, smile vanishing. “Esmer, I never left the tomb. I tried for days, but the stone wouldn't move.”

“I—what?” The shadows stilled and the blade in my palm felt distant; it slid away, no longer interested in a fight. “What do you mean you never left? So you really were lying—”

“I wouldn’t say *lying* , exactly. I thought you knew I was joking.”

“No one in my position would have assumed you were joking,” I snapped, incredulous. My pulse was racing; I didn’t know why. “You betrayed me.”

“I don’t blame you for your hatred, if that’s what you feel,” he breathed, turning his back to me and putting his feet on the floor. “I had intended for

you to take my spot, guarding the castle until I finished taking my revenge. It was a selfish and reckless mistake."

"Well, because of you and your reckless choices, the demons escaped. I couldn't contain them. I had no *chance* ."

He nodded, mouth set in a grim line. "If the demons are truly gone, Corruption will spread ruthlessly. It will be far worse than ever before."

"And I'm just supposed to believe you? How do I know you aren't lying to me now?"

The Shadow Bringer ran a gauntlet through his hair, appearing quite vexed. "Because guilt very nearly devoured me as I watched you sleep," he murmured. He made a small sound of disbelief, as if he could hardly understand it himself. "Is that enough to convince you I'm sincere?"

I shook my head vehemently. "No, it's not enough."

A resounding *crack* thrummed from the ceiling, sending a web of hair and a massive chandelier crashing to the ground. Dark stones ricocheted across the floor, cracking against the bed, and an obsidian statuette the size of my forearm slammed into the Bringer's back as Somnus unfurled from the rubble.

"Your escalating personal drama, albeit *enthralling* as it may be, is distracting." Somnus plucked one of the chandelier's arms from where it tangled in his hair, eyes narrowing in distaste. "Your castle is a wreck, Shadow Bringer. Have you not had enough time to do something about it?"

"Somnus," the Bringer snarled, shadows writhing about his shoulders and down the length of his hands. The room darkened, shadows deepening and drawing near.

"Shall we talk, or do you insist on violence?"

"*There are no words* ."

The Bringer let loose a primal, gut-wrenching roar as he leapt into Somnus. Shadows tore over them like a crashing wave, and they both fell through the front of the chamber, tumbling down to the floor below. I staggered out of the canopied bed, glancing at the hole where the chandelier once hung. A wisp of a blanket, one of the Bringer's silk-lined ones, hung by a corner in the rafters, the only evidence of where Somnus had made his perch.

Had Somnus *slept* there?

"I have spent *centuries* imagining how I'd kill you all!" the Bringer bellowed, snarling again as a massive *crash* echoed up through the

chamber. Somnus's laugh rang out, clear and full of mirth. "You are not allowed to come *here* —" *Crash. Bang. Crack.* "—and tell *me* what to do."

Another mirthful laugh echoed up, forcing another roar from the Bringer.

I ventured to the stairs leading to the Bringer's room, tucking back into what was left of the wall, and watched as the shadows poured below, seeping from cracks, corners, and under the edges of furniture. They billowed out from holes in the walls and floor, swept out from the underside of my hair. All rushing, desperately, to the Shadow Bringer's side as he raged.

And rage he did.

The Shadow Bringer was wrath embodied, his shadows a vengeful sea of bite and fury. With a slash of his hands they rose as one, and with a dip of his shoulders they eddied under and around him. They moved as he moved; he was a living, breathing shadow himself.

It was difficult not to stare—to not gape in wonder as he fought.

But Somnus moved like a shadow, too.

The Weaver of the Past was true to his name, flitting in and out of sight as though he were no more than an afterthought, a slip of some long-forgotten memory. The Bringer's shadows couldn't reach—couldn't quite wrap their tendrils around his ghostly form. He swirled around the room in wide, sweeping flashes, dodging the castle's deteriorating structure with the ease of a centuries-old legend.

Then it stopped.

The shadows slowed to a drip, inching forward like a crawling, sluggish thing, quivering around the Bringer's body as he halted midair, his face twisted in pure, unadulterated wrath. Somnus stood before him, lacing threads of silver through the air. They coiled outward, holding back the Bringer in an enormous web.

Somnus walked to a mostly upright armchair, sinking into it with a sigh. "And greetings to you too, Shadow Bringer. Willful as ever, I see." He thrummed the edge of the chair, vacantly draping a leg over a piece of rubble like a footrest. "I thought the years would have aged you. Though I cannot recall your hair being quite so pale, and you're quite a degree more angry than you ever were."

The Bringer, frozen in time, fought to speak, jaw clenching and eyes wild.

“What is that? I seem to hear something, but it eludes me,” Somnus murmured, feigning a deeply troubled stare around the room. When his gaze sharpened back to the Bringer, his lips angled up in a serpentine grin. “Ah, but you appear to be stuck in my web. Allow me to free you.” The web gleamed, visibly loosening around the Bringer’s upper half.

The Shadow Bringer took a deep, ragged breath. “*Let me down .*”

“My apologies,” Somnus said, his voice dropping into a conspiratorial whisper, “but my web will not loosen. You understand.”

The Bringer’s only answer was a curse under his breath.

“Esmer, come join us,” Somnus beckoned, motioning a bone-white hand in my direction. I took a seat atop an overturned chest, careful that its broken edges didn’t cut the backs of my legs. “We have much to discuss.”

The Bringer cursed again. “Do we, now? I don’t recall—”

Somnus threaded his fingers through the web; at his touch, the silvery threads tightened, earning a grunt of discomfort from the Shadow Bringer. “Oh, we do. And since your memories have returned—at least in part—I am finally able to intervene. That, and the demons’ escape broke the barrier preventing me from visiting you. However, I have a suspicion—” A thread quickly trimmed a piece of the Shadow Bringer and I’s hair, and another thread launched them toward a hole in the ceiling. As soon as the locks touched the air beyond the ceiling, they burned, shriveling into puffs of ash. I flinched, horrified. “—that something is still preventing you both from leaving this place.”

“Do you *want* us to be able to leave?” I asked, incredulous.

It would be strange—unbelievable, even—to think that the Weavers would desire the Shadow Bringer’s freedom. But perhaps they needed his help in gathering or destroying the lost demons. If that was the case, I’d desire his freedom, too.

Mithras’s voice rang clear though my memories, a frantic warning.

So above all else, do not harm the Shadow Bringer, and do not release him from his tomb or his castle. We need him there. I need him there. Swear to me, Esmer. Do not release him.

I shoved Mithras’s voice aside, trying to stay focused. Perhaps he’d have a different opinion now that the Shadow Bringer’s demons were released.

“It would be ideal, yes. The ward protecting this place has been broken, rendering you as vulnerable as birds with their wings clipped. That, and you

can both manipulate the dark.” Somnus crossed his arms, looking to the hole in the ceiling. “Corruption is festering past the point of no return. It needs to be wiped out for good, and I have a few theories about how your abilities can help us.”

“The Weavers placed the curse to begin with,” the Bringer said, clearly exasperated. “If they desire my help, summon the rest of them here, nullify the curse, and be done with it.”

Somnus’s thin mouth tightened. “It isn’t that simple. The Seven aren’t fully convinced of your innocence, and many are still in hiding.”

“What a surprise,” the Bringer muttered, not sounding at all surprised. “So if the Weavers refuse to help and the curse has yet to be lifted, why are you here spinning webs and cutting off locks of our hair?”

“There is something dark in both of your pasts that is haunting you. Something that appears to be looking for you still.”

“The only thing haunting me is *you* —”

Somnus sighed, and the Bringer froze, mouth frozen in a snarl. His eyes blinked, furious; it was the only movement he was capable of. “It seems you have lost all sense of civility in your imprisonment. You are filled with rage and bitterness and not much else.” Somnus’s eyes softened a touch at this, melting into what seemed like regret or uncertainty. Then he said, turning to face me, “Esmer, perhaps you have an idea of what haunts you. I sent you to visit a dream where the darkness was strongest—what did you see there?”

A winged demon peeked over this unfurling edge, its skull ringed in horns that crowned red, smoking eyes. Where its face should be was a mask of swirling darkness .

The memory of the demon slashed through my mind, filling me with dread. “There was a demon unlike anything I’d ever seen.”

“And what did it look like?”

“It had red eyes that burned like fire and its face was like a—”

“Storm,” the Bringer finished, no longer frozen. “And it has armor. And horns.” We locked eyes, an uncertain understanding forming between us. “I dreamed of such a demon as a child. And I saw it once more before the curse began.”

“Interesting,” Somnus murmured. “Then perhaps that demon is the link.” He placed his hand upon my shoulder, looking unexpectedly sympathetic. “Esmer, I have reason to believe this demon has been hunting

your family. First, your sister. Eden.” A chill raced over my skin, settling hard in my stomach. “Some years later, it found Elliot. That was the dream you experienced.” I squeezed my hands together, horrified at the truth beginning to unravel. “Most recently, it claimed your parents. Naturally, you’d be next. Or perhaps Elliot once more.”

“No, not Elliot. The Light Bringer swore he’d give my brother a life of dignity in Istralla. He’ll be taken care of, elixir and all.” I looked down at my feet, which I hadn’t realized were bare atop the castle’s chipped floor. Was I telling Somnus this to convince him or to convince myself? I wasn’t sure. “That leaves me.”

I chewed on my thumbnail, trying to come to terms with this terrifying revelation. If I dwelled too long on the fact that Elliot might be alone or in true danger, hunted by that demon with smoking eyes, I’d lose what little shred of control I had left.

The Bringer shifted in Somnus’s web, clearly uncomfortable with where this conversation was headed. “A demon hunting an entire family is unheard of, Somnus.”

Somnus smiled sadly. “It would be, yes. Except it has happened once before.”

“Once before—?” The Bringer trailed off, brow furrowed in confusion.

“You mean the Shadow Bringer and his family,” I suggested.

The Bringer shook his head again. “That’s impossible.”

“Esmer is correct. I have reason to believe this demon hunted you first, Shadow Bringer. It hungered for you, doing what it could to grow near. Even if that meant targeting your family and comrades.” Somnus paced across the floor, black hair skimming the ground behind him. “Which leads me to my proposal. I wish to send you both to visit three dreams where I sense the dark is deepest. Any more than three, and you risk getting lost. Any less, and you will not learn enough.”

“So, three dreams where this demon will be, then.”

“Theoretically, yes. Because if you can break this demon—or learn enough about it to determine *why* it hunts you both—then perhaps your curse will be lifted. Moreover, if it can be proven that this demon is connected to the root of Corruption—and I can see that memory lived out through your eyes in the dream—then the Weavers will be inclined to think of you both less like monsters and more like a boon.” Somnus stopped pacing. “Do we have a deal?”

I nodded. “Absolutely. If this demon truly is hunting me and my family, it must be dealt with. I need to know more about it.”

Before it can hurt Elliot.

The Shadow Bringer thrashed against the web. “He’s trying to deceive us, Esmer. If we get stuck in these dreams, we may never return to the present. It’s how he tortures his enemies.”

“So, do you not agree to my terms? Three dreams and an earnest shot at your freedom?”

“Unless your request results in both my freedom and your head atop a pike, I refuse.”

“Well, unfortunately for you, I value my head.” As if to emphasize his point, Somnus pulled his blade, its metal needle-thin and gleaming, out of his hair. “Every strand is worthy; they would serve no purpose without a life to guide them.”

“Your riddle-speak is infuriating,” the Bringer began, then stopped, meeting my eyes as the room began to shift, its every corner trembling with a strange, shimmering substance. I staggered from the chest, tripping into Somnus’s web.

“I hadn’t deemed this necessary,” Somnus droned, his voice slowing to a honeyed crawl, “but you leave me no choice.” Time around us stopped, freezing the room in silvered threads and lightless shadow. “Together, you must relive what is lost. Return to me after confronting the dark in three dreams of my choosing. However, fail this, and you will not live to see light outside these castle walls.” Somnus flashed his serpentine smile. “But upon the Maker, this I swear: your success will earn your freedom from this place. Forever.”

“We won’t serve the whims of a Weaver,” the Bringer snarled.

Somnus’s smile faded.

“Then you will die inside these walls. Your choice.”

And with that, he vanished in a swirl of black.

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CHAPTER 32

FOR THE FIRST TIME IN YEARS, I WOKE TO THE SOUND OF LAUGHTER.

It rang out from the belly of a child and boomed deep and hearty from the throat of an older man. Perhaps the child's father—or grandfather. Laughter in its purest, sweetest form. The kind of laughter that could drive out fear and replace it with something warm and beautiful.

The Shadow Bringer loomed above me, scowling.

"Can you stand, or have you lost the use of your legs?"

"Aren't you demanding," I remarked, matching his tone. "Perhaps I'd rather rest a moment and *not* follow your orders, considering they were what got me stuck in the Realm in the first place."

We were in an empty parlor. Lavish and pristine, its walls and floors were bedecked in patterned rugs, bookshelves carved into trees and horses, embroidered chairs, and several paintings of a happy, beautiful family—a father, mother, and their dark-haired child. I sat up, watching as mist filtered through windows that dotted the room's length. Its only opening, a towering archway, swirled with more mist, obscuring whatever rested beyond.

"Just come on," he sighed, stalking toward the arch. "Both of us need to be present for the dream to progress."

Instead of following, I ruffled through a vase of peonies and wildflowers, dipping low to breathe in their scent. A feeling of dread rose up, unbidden, and I found myself missing my family and worrying for Elliot. If I was with him, I'd feel much better. "I wish Somnus tried to release me. I'd rather face Mithras and his legionnaires than be stuck here with you."

“Noted,” he said, giving me a withering stare. “But bear in mind that if Somnus released you from the Realm, you’d just find yourself locked within the tomb. Is that truly the better fate?”

“I’m starting to think so, yes,” I muttered, burying my nose in another vase of flowers. The Bringer tipped the vase sideways, forcing my attention back to him. “So does that mean you truly couldn’t get the entrance open?”

“Correct,” he admitted, mouth taut in a grim line. “No matter my efforts, the door would not move, and I had no food or water to sustain my efforts. It was hopeless.”

I drew my arms around myself. It didn’t matter if I escaped the Realm to search for Elliot—not if the Tomb of the Devourer, inescapable and marked by death, was waiting for me when I woke up. A horrible feeling began to sink under my skin. A feeling of sinking, of dirt being shoved in my throat, and walls closing in.

From beyond the mist, laughter rang out, snapping me from my darkening thoughts.

I set the vase down, ready to clear my mind and move forward. “So, where are we? Do you recognize this place?”

He took a quick, cursory glance around the room. “It feels familiar. I may have lived here once.”’

“It looks similar to your castle,” I said, pointing to a landscape I’d seen in the Bringer’s antechamber. “Though yours is obviously darker. And in ruin due to its residents.”

“Residents who are no longer there,” said the Bringer, his voice lifting in false wonder. “A horde of demons unleashed upon the world. What would your Lord Mithras say?”

“The demons wouldn’t have escaped if you didn’t force me to be your sacrifice.”

“Sacrifice? I tried to make you my *heir* ,” he replied. “You inherited an entire castle and a kingdom to rule over. But how fortunate for you that—”

“*Fortunate* for me? If it wasn’t for you, my sister would be alive and I’d be home and at peace with my family. Not here with you in an eternal nightmare.”

“I already told you—I didn’t harm your sister. Or anyone in your family for that matter.”

“How can you be so sure? You don’t even remember how Corruption started, Shadow Bringer. You have no memory, even though the tales blame

you with absolute certainty.” I crossed my arms. “If I help you through this, you owe me something in return.”

“Your promised freedom should be enough to motivate you.”

“Not when my freedom means a pitch-black tomb with no food or water. Or Mithras deciding I’ve broken our agreement and deciding to hurt Elliot. I want to learn more about this demon—and hopefully it gets us closer to ending Corruption—but it still forces me to place a lot of faith in you.” I sank deep into an armchair, picking at the fraying edge of an embroidered lion. “Faith that I don't quite have at the moment.”

The Bringer shot me an exasperated look. “You’re overestimating the choice you have.”

Try me, Shadow Bringer.

Sweeping an arm out, I gestured toward the parlor’s several bookcases. Thick, leather-bound tomes sat within each one, some organized by color, others by topic or even length.

“Perhaps my *choice* could be to first read every single book in this place.” I chose one at random, flipping through its gilt-edged pages, then another, a red monstrosity with an embossed shield in its middle. Each held words—clear, coherent, words. This was the power of a Weaver. To create a vision so detailed and visceral that it existed as reality. “*Every single one* . Even the picture books.”

Like a warrior drawn to battle, the Bringer approached, armor gleaming wickedly. “Then I will destroy them before you can,” he threatened, shadows darkening the edges of the room and crawling toward his outreached hands. “Or I could pick you up and drag you with me. Your *choice* .”

There was that flicker again, just below my wrist.

Now wasn’t the time to battle the Shadow Bringer—not when I was pitifully untrained and he looked perfectly capable of strangling me with a single curl of his index finger. But the sword was insistent. It itched underneath my skin, forcing my attention as though it was suffocating on blood and bone.

The Bringer caught the uncomfortable expression on my face.

“You’re afraid of me,” he scoffed. “Fitting. Perhaps I won’t need force after all. You’d follow me regardless, fearful for your life.”

“I am not afraid of you,” I shot back, wincing again as the sword prodded my palm.

“See? You *flinch* from me.” The Bringer crossed his arms, mirroring me. “So, what would I owe you for your cooperation?”

“What I want is your knowledge,” I began, taking a small bit of satisfaction in the surprise on his face. “Teach me how to use the shadows—or other ways of power in the Realm. And then, when we’re free from this dream, you will do everything you can to stop Corruption and save my family from ruin. Even if that means partnering with the Weavers and treating Somnus with civility.”

“Stopping Corruption isn’t like bandaging a small cut. It’s a centuries-old wound as wide and weeping as a tempest.”

“Your memory is broken. Perhaps you’re just forgetting how,” I said through gritted teeth. “Even if you can’t remember or don’t know how, you will help me try.”

The Bringer pinched the skin between his brow, considering. Then he said quickly, meeting my eyes, “Fine. Yes, I will.”

“Good,” I said, nodding. “And teaching me things? You’re fine with that end of the bargain, too?”

“I don’t understand why you’d want to know the Realm or my power,” he began, the silver in his eyes churning in time with the shadows rising behind him. “What would you do with that power—my knowledge? Is it because it might be your power, too?”

Begging to be unleashed at the most ill-timed moment, the sword launched from my arm, warming with life the moment its hilt met my hands. It thrummed softly, as if it held a soul within. And maybe it did. The soul of a demon so powerful that it could warp mountains and blot out the sky. A demon so mighty that Xander, Theia, and Mithras sought to crush it with the power of three legions.

The Bringer recoiled, staring at me as though I grew a second head.

“You threaten me with a blade you don’t even know how to use.” He dropped his gaze to the sword, mouth thinning. “Did Somnus give you that?”

I gripped the handle tight. “I know how to use it.”

“Good. Then prove me wrong,” he said simply, unsheathing his own blade. It was a brutal, twisted thing; where mine held flecks of starlight that wound toward a handle of ivory and onyx, his was pure, light-eating black. “Show me you’re not afraid of the shadows that bind us.”

With a snarl he pounced, blade raised high and shadows storming in his wake.

Something came over me, then.

The sword unlocked within me some raw, instinctual knowledge about battle, destruction, and war. How to parry and block. How to handle the weight of a blade and prepare for the onslaught of another. How to study an opponent's body and react accordingly. So when I met the Bringer's powerful swing with a block of my own, his eyes widened—then gleamed bright with some feverish, unhinged thrill. Shadows ebbed to their corners as the Bringer launched forward again, slinking down into the floor as though he wanted this fight to be us and us alone.

But that's not what I—what the sword—wanted.

We wanted the dark, wanted the rise of shadow and night under our control. The shadows shifted toward me, responding to my call, clinging to my feet and dancing along the lines of my arms.

"They answer to you," the Bringer wondered aloud, cutting right and aiming a strike at my shoulder. I deflected easily, intuiting where to position the blade. "But can you control them?"

"That's where I need—" I ducked under another of his swings, using the rug underfoot to steady my balance. "—your *help* ." Shadows clung to the both of us now, rising up from our bodies like second skins. Around the Bringer they roiled, reflecting his fury and challenge, but around me they shuddered, quivering between varying levels of opacity. "*And you need mine.* "

A strong wind began to circle the room, overturning chairs, shattering glass, and scattering books across the floor. It centered around the Bringer, coiling around the shadows that now wrapped his limbs and towered high atop his back. In a few moments he had transformed completely, wings unfurling from his shoulders and new armor covering most of his skin in dark, sharp edges.

"Do I?" he asked, slamming his blade into the ground. Shadows exploded over the room, sucking away all light and color. "I've thought of a different proposal. One that involves ripping this dream apart from the inside—and then doing the same to Somnus. After that, we can end Corruption on our own terms."

The walls bent in and out, flexing like some giant, breathing creature. They shook under his destruction, rattling as he peeled away their layers.

But even as they fell, they resisted—reversed back into place as though their creator, somewhere else, fought to repair each broken piece.

Somnus and the Shadow Bringer, locked in a fierce battle of wills.

But then something changed. I saw it in the Shadow Bringer's face as it twisted from triumph to alarm; his eyes widened, and his jaw clenched against whatever internal demon he was battling. Underneath us, the floor gave way, collapsing in on itself as mirrors shattered and furniture fell into cracks, disappearing into the void below.

"You *idiot* !" I screamed. "Stop!"

I staggered aside as a bookcase nearly crushed me, tripping on a globe as it rolled into my shin. Shouting, I fell toward one of the widening cracks, scrambling to grip something, *anything* , as the void, gaping open like the maw of some ungodly monster, pulled me down. It was just a dream—*everything was just a dream* —but fear, dark and terrible, jolted through my skin, real as fear could be.

As if roused from a stupor, the Bringer's eyes snapped to mine.

He dove in a whorl of shadow and raven-black wings, pulling me against him just as the ground dropped away with a final *crack* .

For a few wingbeats we were silent, staring into the emptiness below.

The Bringer's breathing was more ragged than I expected, his chest rising and falling in deep, labored pulls. Even his eyes looked pained. Haunted. Guilty. It didn't make sense. He had tried to rip the dream apart—wasn't this what he wanted?

What was the point in regret *now* ?

My fingers clung to his shoulders, desperate for a better grip against the strange, shadow-marked texture that clothed them. One slip—or one change of the Bringer's mind—and I'd plummet.

"I would never drop you," he snapped. Still, he made a point to reposition his arms and tighten his grip. "Somnus clearly emphasized that this must be done together. Which can't happen if you fall into an abyss."

"Right, well, if this was our first dream, I think we failed," I muttered.

"I tested the dream's limit when I was not given the right to," he agreed, frowning. "I had doubts that it would *work* , however."

"You chanced our *freedom* on an *assumption* ?"

He grunted in confirmation.

"You're mad."

“I’m not in my right mind, no.” *And I haven’t been in some time* , he seemed to imply.

Debris continued to fall as the room disintegrated around us, swallowing any hope of its restoration. Stone collapsed into vapor, books ripped themselves apart as they burned, and the painting of the family tore itself into shreds. I half-expected Somnus to appear in front of us, shaking his head in dismay at our complete and utter failure.

The Bringer cried out in pain, arching his back as though he were struck by lightning.

Howls lurched from his throat, even as he ground his teeth against them. His limbs shuddered under the weight of whatever was attacking him, and in the chaos his grip slackened. I buried my hands in his armor, but the material was slippery, liquid—

I gasped, barely holding on as his body continued to thrash in pain.

“I’m—my power, it’s—*don’t let go, Esmer—!* ”

And before he could finish his sentence, the Bringer’s armor faded into ordinary clothing and black leather gloves, the shadows in his eyes stopped dancing, and the wings upon his back melted into dust.

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CHAPTER 33

I CAN'T REMEMBER WHEN I STOPPED SCREAMING.

Something wet pressed against my cheek, reeking of dead fish and rotting wood. I sprang up, horrified—only to find mud dripping from me. Cold, slimy, foul-smelling *mud* . It coated the side of my face, crawled down my neck, and burrowed itself all over the folds of my clothing.

Great.

I wiped it from my eyes, trying to focus on the dimly lit landscape that surrounded me. From what I could see, I sat before a dark pond, its edges webbed in cattails, haze, and scum. A shadow of something splashed atop the water before disappearing again, impossible to see below the surface.

At the sound of someone spitting, I whirled around. Dull grey eyes met mine through the mist.

The Bringer coughed, flicking mud from his hands in disgust. "My power is gone," he rasped. As if to demonstrate, he opened his fist, scowling as a small shadow appeared. It quivered pathetically before vanishing in a puff of smoke. "I have *nothing* . That bastard took it from me before we fell."

"How is that even possible?"

"These dreams are Weaver-crafted. As long as we're here, we're at his mercy." He made a frustrated, violent sound. "Somnus has the authority to show us anything. Do anything. *Take* anything. This might be the vision of the past, someone's actual, lived dream, or something new made specifically for us."

"And yet he gave us another chance." Erratic splashing of a large, unknown creature sounded again over the water. I added, shivering,

“Although I’m not looking forward to that demon finding us.”

He gave a small, dreadful smile, catching me off-guard. “Or we can find it ourselves.” Noticing me watching, his smile slipped, discarded like an ill-fitting mask. “Something about this place feels familiar. I think there is a village beyond the mist.”

“A village, out here? Are you sure?”

He tilted his head, considering. “Mostly.”

I sighed, eyeing the forest and the strange, clouded pond. A cottage, filthy and falling apart, stood at its edge, but there were no other signs of life. No lights, no voices. Only the sound of water lapping against mud and the occasional splash of some creature in the pond. I shivered again.

“Which way?” I asked.

And he took my hand, guiding me forward.

THERE WAS NOT a village beyond the mist.

There was an entire *town* beyond the mist.

Built from luminescent stone, a large town sprawled from the forest, fading into the distance as it trailed along the edge of a sea. A lively wind, rising up from the sea and swirling through the streets, dusted the air in salt, citrus—and something nostalgic and sad. I lingered for a moment, trying to place the particular scent, but as quickly as it appeared, it vanished into the night.

I glanced at the Shadow Bringer, who was analyzing the town with an unreadable expression. Recognition? Agony? Indifference? It was impossible to tell. The shadows that had lived within his eyes were broken, ripped away with the rest of his power.

“Do you know where we are?”

“It’s…” His mouth opened slightly, as if he were tasting the seam of some long-forgotten memory. “Istralla.” Then, more confidently, “This is Istralla.”

“The kingdom’s capital,” I murmured, looking around with a new sense of purpose.

Istralla was the fabled capital of rebirth—of hidden, slumbering Weavers and the illustrious Citadel Firstlight. It was also where my family had wanted to build their new life. And while this wasn’t *exactly* how I

envisioned seeing Istralla for the first time, it felt wonderful nonetheless, watching as the town sparkled with promise and light.

But the longer I looked, the quicker its fine edges began to unravel. Some structures made sense—quaint cottages, an open-air marketplace, a shop for dresses and hats—while others twisted into bizarre shapes and sizes. All around us, buildings shifted into trees, trembling between forms at the edge of our vision, while others faded in and out, disappearing and reappearing in time with our breathing.

The twisted beauty of a dream, I supposed: half reality, half but a shadow of truth.

I started to comment on this observation, but the Shadow Bringer was no longer at my side. Whirling around, I scanned the forest and the city's edge. Had Somnus forced him out of the dream?

Then, there he was—waltzing into a nearby inn.

"Are you *kidding* me," I seethed, hurrying to follow.

The inn seemed rather nondescript in comparison to Istralla's more extravagant buildings, filled with regular-looking people gathered around regular-looking tables and the warm glow of a hearth at its center. The Bringer was easy to spot, a smear of darkness amidst colorfully dressed patrons.

"I take it you have some kind of lead?" I asked under my breath.

He ignored me and stalked toward a noisy group of men, glaring daggers into the deepest parts of their souls as they laughed around ale and a half-eaten roast.

"Begone!" The Bringer snarled, seizing a dinner knife and brandishing it over his head. "You have no place here. Leave, and I will spare your throats."

I sucked in a breath. He was hopeless. An utter *fool* .

Without his powers, how could he antagonize an entire building of people—some of which were armed—and survive? Dream or not, a battle was still a battle. Taking a step back, I ducked behind the largest man I could find, his belly spilling over the table at which he sat. If I could hide, maybe I could avoid being associated with the Bringer altogether.

"My companion and I have need of your table," he added, gesturing to where I hid. I recoiled, waiting for people to start staring. Or attacking. But the men didn't so much as glance up from their food and drink. Irate, the

Bringer continued, lowering his voice into a deadly command. “I will not ask a second time.”

Still, the men refused to move. They continued joking and carousing, drinking deeply and laughing heartily. I watched, mildly amused as the Bringer’s expression slipped from disbelief to utter fury.

“I warned you,” he said simply, slamming the knife’s hilt into the nearest skull.

Except it didn’t *slam* , exactly.

The hilt bounced harmlessly off the man’s head, no more a threat than a push from an infant.

The man reached up to pat the spot where the Bringer hit him. “Aye, boys, I’m thinkin’ there’s a bug flyin’ ‘round here. Just bit me on the head!” The Bringer tried again, throwing his full weight into the swing. “Aye, ouch! It just ‘appened again!”

His companions gave a pointed look about the room, laughing wildly.

“Mate, there ain’t any bugs flyin’ ‘round here.”

“No, I swear it! The spot’s itchy an’ everythin’,” the man protested, much to the hilarity of the others. Huffing, he pointed dramatically at a fly buzzing around the ceiling. “See? *See* ? There it is!”

Another man chimed in, jabbing him playfully in the side. “More like yeh’ve drank too many ales for that thick skull of yours to ‘andle.”

“Aye, shut it,” he responded, shoving himself away from the table—nearly colliding with a visibly disturbed Bringer—and stormed out of the inn. His companions followed shortly after, quickly downing the rest of their ale on the way out.

After a short pause of his own, the Bringer sat down, selecting the most shadowed part of the table to sulk.

“No effect, huh?” I asked, sitting across from him. On my way over, no one acknowledged my existence. Not one single person looked up, even if I nudged their back or waved my hands in front of their face. “It’s like we’re ghosts.”

The Bringer grunted in agreement, steepling his hands under his nose. “It means we’re in someone else’s dream. Something Somnus dredged up from the past.”

“Someone else’s dream? So could this be *your* dream?”

He ignored me, instead sweeping his hands across the table to grab an empty cup and plate.

“What are you going to do, eat? I think we have more important things to figure out.”

He shot me a withering look. “Do we, now.” At my confused silence, he touched the edge of the cup, concentrating as it filled itself with a ruby-red liquid. Wine, likely. *Or the blood of his innocent prey,* I thought darkly. At another touch, the plate—and then several more—bloomed with fresh fruit, seared meats, and a slice of mysterious dessert. “Go ahead, figure out your important things. Then you can watch me eat, if that’s what you would prefer. The demon will be found regardless.”

I crossed my arms. “I don’t want any of your food.”

“Good. Because I did not offer you any.”

Irritating bastard.

“How is this allowed, anyways?” I asked, gesturing at his admittedly delicious-looking creations. “I thought you couldn’t use your powers.”

Selecting a cut of lamb, he took his first bite, frowning slightly as he chewed. “If an act of creation does not disrupt the dream’s purpose, then it is allowed.”

As I watched the Shadow Bringer eat, I wondered at the point of it all. Was it for the sake of normalcy, to eat and even sleep in a dream? It made sense, I supposed. If I had been locked in a castle for centuries, maybe I’d want to keep normal habits, too. He brought the cup to his mouth, drinking deep. But when he brought the glass away, lips flushed with dark liquid, he still wore a frown.

“For someone eating food fit for a king, you sure scowl a lot.”

“Envious, are we?” he asked, taking another sip. Still, the scowl stuck.

“No. I’m not hungry,” I protested, crossing my arms. Just as my stomach unleashed an absolutely pathetic-sounding growl. An instinctual reaction at seeing food, probably.

The Bringer’s mouth ticked up, taking pleasure in the fact that he caught me in a lie.

“This is a *dream* . I don’t need your imaginary food.”

“Suit yourself,” he drawled, leaning back to glare at the ceiling and finish his wine, which refilled itself whenever the liquid dropped too low. “I will continue relishing my *food fit for a king* .”

I eyed an especially beautiful strawberry, unable to ignore the hunger prying at my insides. Maybe I spoke too soon. Why *wouldn’t* I want to partake in a feast fit for a king? Plopping the berry into my mouth before I

could think otherwise, I closed my eyes, awaiting a delicious, tart burst of juice.

Rancid, sickly sweet *slime* filled my mouth.

“A hatred for strawberries. Interesting.”

“What? No. It was *rotten* —” I choked as its taste clung to my tongue. Grabbing the nearest cup, I motioned for the Bringer to fill it. “Fill this—please—*ugh* .” I took a drink before the liquid had even pooled halfway up the glass, desperate to rid the foulness from my mouth.

Except I almost spit *that* out, too.

I hadn’t taken more than a few sips of wine in my entire life, but the taste of it never bothered me. No, normal wine was fine. It was the fact that the Bringer’s concoction tasted watery, mud-like, and vaguely sour.

“Is there a problem?”

I gaped at him. “Do you not taste it—or smell it? It’s all wrong.”

At first, the food and drink appeared perfect, pristine. But now the truth of each smell was unmistakable: the fruit was rotten, the meat was burnt leather, and the dessert looked to be powdered with ash, not sugar.

“Ah.” His eyes widened, a rare glimpse of mortification dawning there. “My ability to craft food was stunted in the castle. I may have forgotten the taste of things.”

His sense of taste was *forgotten* ? More like absolutely *destroyed* .

“How long has it been since you ate something?”

“Besides the Light Legion’s pathetic attempt at roasting wild duck, I haven’t eaten proper food or drink in…” The Bringer stopped to consider, still drinking from his glass. “Five-hundred years, give or take. Though the Realm clouded me from remembering or properly experiencing the majority of them.”

My mouth dropped open. “Five-hundred *years* ? Maker, stop drinking that—you’ll poison yourself.”

“It is fine enough for my tastes.” He avoided my attempts at stealing his drink, waving the glass just out of my reach. Still, when he took another sip, his mouth twitched in displeasure. “But if it is not to yours, craft your own.”

“How?” I inspected an empty cup, willing it to fill to the brim with a rich, fragrant wine. When nothing happened, I sat back in frustration. “It’s not working.”

“In my castle, you designed an entire dream from memory. A cup of wine or a slice of bread should be simple.”

“Coming from someone who can’t even make a strawberry taste edible,” I muttered, earning a stiffening of the Bringer’s posture. “What?”

He moved closer, the wine staining his mouth looking more and more like blood. “You insult me casually for someone who claims to desire my knowledge.”

“Show me how, then. It can be the first thing you teach me. As per our bargain.”

“That’s what you want your first lesson to be? A tutorial on the art of food?”

“I’m just interested in the act of creating things, is all,” I said, bristling.

And it was true.

I wanted to be free from the Realm, but part of me also wanted to learn more about it. What it meant, how it worked—how to move within it and become powerful enough to withstand a demon’s attack. Dreaming had proven itself to be a double-edged sword of beauty and pain, reality and illusion, and I couldn’t deny that parts of it were fascinating. If that meant cooperating with the Shadow Bringer, then so be it.

I just prayed that Somnus had a greater plan behind offering him his freedom.

“Are you, now?” With a slight furrow to his brow, the Bringer grabbed my empty cup. “Perhaps I’ll attempt to explain. But I’m expecting something edible.”

I couldn’t help it. I almost smiled.

He must really miss food—even though he’s trying to hide it.

“Then I’ll make you the finest wine in all the world.”

He arched an eyebrow, nearly smiling. “We will see.”

The Shadow Bringer explained the process with a surprising amount of care, detailing the importance of past experiences and memories when creating something in the Realm. Even if the creation was a new object or special ability—something like wings or erupting fire from one’s fingertips—it was always drawn from memory.

But when honed correctly, imagination could be even stronger.

A dreamer with a strong imagination could craft extraordinary, lifelike creations, drawing from thoughts as powerful as memory itself. Untamed, however, imagination held risk. An imagined sword might erupt into a serpent. Or a candle. An inferno, even.

As I concentrated on the glass in front of me, I leaned into both techniques, remembering a summer drink of plum juice and crushed rose petals, but also imagining what it might feel like to taste liquid silk. The glass filled slowly as I decided upon the right color, finally settling on a shimmering, purpled ruby.

I drew the glass to my lips, expecting something dreadful.

At the first sip, it tasted wild. Fragrant rose, oak, and plum. It wasn't wine, exactly, but it wasn't juice, either. And the texture was exactly as I had imagined—softer than silk upon the tongue, it slid down my throat like a caress, tingling as it moved. The Bringer must have noticed the delight in my expression—or the rapidly dwindling liquid in my cup—because he snatched it from my fingertips, looking quite smug as he brought it to his lips.

"Hey, I wasn't—"

The Bringer gave a throaty, contented sigh as he finished the drink, likely not intending for the sound to be heard. His eyes flicked up, a command plainly written there. For a moment, I wondered what it would be like to not taste food or drink for five-hundred years. Was it really possible to forget something as basic as *taste* ?

Based on the Bringer's euphoric expression, it seemed so.

"Fine, fine—I'll fill it again. Just—stop staring at me like that. I have to concentrate."

This went on for some time. I would imagine some new drink or food, and we'd partake in it together, the Bringer in a constant state of muted awe as he remembered what was lost. And he loved it all—bitterness, acidity, sweetness—and demanded more, tempting me to try new and outrageous creations from my own imagination. Milk in the form of a cake. A crunchy peach. A sugared flower, its petals dusted in a honeyed perfume.

We were in the middle of trying an edible moon, its glowing surface made of lemon and airy, cake-like dough, when the inn erupted in a cheer. I nearly fell out of my chair at the sound, so used to the quiet hum of the inn's chatter.

"Too much wine?" he asked, leaning forward to steady me.

"Of course not," I snapped, unwilling to admit that I did, in fact, feel a bit lightheaded. An imagined feeling, but one I couldn't quite shake.

"You—here." He swept a finger underneath my lip, brushing off a stray droplet. "As I said before, imagination reigns supreme in the Realm." He

examined his thumb, now slightly damp, then licked it. “Experiences feel real here. Sometimes more so than they do in reality.”

“Well, I feel more like a ghost, considering we don’t exist to anyone here.” Alarmingly, I could sense a flush rising on my skin; I hoped it wasn’t visible. “What about our creations?” I eyed the half-eaten moon, wondering what would happen if I threw it across the room. “The people here can’t see us, but can they see what we’ve made?”

“Likely. But they’re too hollow to care. The original dreamer, however, may notice. If the governing Weaver wills it to be so, that is.”

“The dreamer…” I mused, scrutinizing the faces around us.

None seemed aware that we—or the heaping plates around us—existed. And if the dreamer was a past version of the Bringer, no one looked even remotely like him. Not that anyone could, exactly. Not with his otherworldly features and moon-white hair. And was *his* face a little flushed from the wine, or was I imagining that, too?

Definitely my imagination.

I stood up, pointedly ignoring my dizziness, and attempted to see what the crowd was staring at. How much time had we mindlessly wasted? Had we missed something important—some clue about the next part of the dream?

From between the crowded bodies I spotted a raven-haired boy, his eyes warm with the inn’s light. He waved a ribbon overhead, its length glistening like scales, and began to recite some kind of wild, theatrical tale as the crowd looked on, mesmerized by his every word. I leaned in closer, trying to make out what he was saying.

“Come back,” the Shadow Bringer protested, vaporizing a few plates to make room for more. A thread of shadow—just a shiver of his power—snaked out and grabbed the back of my dress. “Next I will try a vegetable. A carrot, perhaps.”

“We just ate a *moon* , and you want a *carrot* ?” I asked, laughing. The Bringer returned my mirth, a crooked half-smile on his lips. I dragged a hand through his thread of shadow, snapping it. “I’m trying to listen to that boy. Maybe he’s important to the dream.”

“I do not care about some pointless child.”

Maker, he *sounded* like a child.

“Well maybe you should, considering we have no other leads to go on.”

The boy raised his voice, almost as if he knew the Shadow Bringer was ignoring him, and continued on with his story, flinging up his ribbons in a dramatic sweep. When they stretched to the rafters they turned into a trio of serpents, writhing their gilded bodies as they soared overhead.

This caught the Shadow Bringer's attention.

"—and I battled them all!" The boy shouted, wielding an imaginary sword as he pretended to fight the serpents. "They threatened our lives. They wanted to drag Istralla into the sea!" He ducked as one of the serpents dipped lower; the crowd backed away, muttering in astonishment.

"That boy—is he the dreamer?"

The Bringer muttered something noncommittal.

"But do not fear. I vanquished the demons! So you are safe now—you owe your safety to me," the boy declared, grinning with all the pride in the world. And he bowed low, the hem of his oversized cloak touching the floorboards. "Now," he continued, straightening himself, "My winnings, please."

The crowd didn't move; they were too preoccupied with eyeing the flying serpents.

"Oh. Uh. Sorry," the boy said sheepishly, turning the serpents back into ribbons with a wave of his hand. "I had them under my control, you know."

The Bringer returned to drinking his wine, no longer interested. "Greedy child. Desperate to rid the poor of their coin, even while dreaming."

It wasn't coin that the boy was after, though.

As he moved about the inn, he collected donations of food and drink, using his cloak as a makeshift pack to carry it all. He arranged his growing collection as he went, ensuring that nothing spilled. Loaves of bread, a small sack of potatoes, three bottles of milk—he took it all, thanking each patron with a beaming smile. When he made it to the back of the room, nearing where the Bringer and I sat in our shadowed corner, his eyes lit up.

"Now what is *this* ?" the boy wondered aloud, bounding over to our outlandish plates and scooping up the half-eaten moon. He was a striking boy: fine, noble features and black hair curling to his shoulders. "A ball of cake or something? Huh."

"Ridiculous child," the Bringer scoffed, making the moon disappear with a quick wave. "These creations are not for you."

“Was that really necessary?” I whisper-shouted. Even though it was clear the boy couldn’t hear or see us, I still felt like he could. “He could be the dreamer.”

The boy stared at his empty hands.

“It is already happening,” he muttered, his airy voice brimming with great sorrow. “I must hurry—no time to waste.”

He snatched two of our plates, tucking them into his cloak and hurrying away before the Bringer could react. Halfway through the crowd, the boy turned around, rushing back to our table to snatch a cinnamon cake from under the Bringer’s nose.

“Why you—” the Bringer started, grabbing the boy by the wrist. It was useless, though—the boy couldn’t be held. As if he had grasped smoke or water, the Bringer’s hand merely slipped away.

But not before the boy glanced up and showed us his eyes.

Expressive and framed in dark lashes, the beginnings of small, silvery shadows danced within their depths. I didn’t have to guess; I knew immediately who that boy was.

And, based on his stunned expression, so did the Shadow Bringer.

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CHAPTER 34

We sprinted through Istralla under a film of salty mist, trailing the boy as he ducked into the surrounding forest. Even with his pack of food and drink, he ran as though he carried no extra weight, darting under boughs and avoiding roots with expert precision. The mist didn't burden him, either; it was denser now, clinging to every surface and suffocating the air.

"So that boy—he's really you," I panted, struggling to match the Bringer's pace.

"Evidently." The Bringer lanced me with a brief, annoyed look over his shoulder. "Remember what I said about imagination. Keep up."

Keep up, huh?

My legs felt like rocks and my head swam from all the wine, but I was dreaming—and I was running like I wasn't. I should be nimble, not trailing behind the Bringer and tripping every few steps.

Working through my imagination, I shielded my feet from rocks and twigs, lightened my limbs, and lengthened my stride. My dress was next. It was useless and flimsy in this terrain, so I altered it into dark, close-cut pants and a belted tunic. A biting wind cut through the trees, impossible to ignore or numb, so I added a silken cloak lined with thick, comfortable velvet, taking inspiration from the Bringer's clothing and giving it properties of smoke and shadow. Running became easy, instinctive. The more I focused on what was in front of me, the simpler it became. So I fixed my eyes on the Shadow Bringer, mimicking the way he moved.

And the Bringer moved as he always did—like a thing of living darkness.

Even without his shadows to strengthen his steps, he ran through the forest as though he were a spirit that dwelled within it.

“Do you know where we’re going?” I asked, releasing a stream of pent-up air. I didn’t feel like a thing of living darkness, but at least I was keeping up. “It’s your dream—you should know.”

“I have an idea.” The Bringer spared a glance over his shoulder, evidently surprised that I was still there. Or maybe it was a surprise that I now looked a little like him. “Your heart doesn’t beat in the Realm,” he added, picking up his pace. “Eliminate its influence and you’ll stop gasping for breath every five steps. We breathe merely out of habit.”

“I’m not gasping. And my heart is fine.”

“You are. And it is not.”

Unconvinced, I brought a palm to my chest. And my wrist. And my neck. But my body was quiet. Nothing but a hollow, silent shell.

“Where is my heart?”

“Ask the Maker.”

“I’m asking *you* .”

He sighed. “The Maker designed it, fearful that mankind would forget themselves within the Realm. It’s one technique of many used to determine whether one is awake or simply dreaming. Out of habit, however, dreamers still tend to breathe.”

“Strange,” I murmured. “I hadn’t even noticed.”

In the Realm, blood spilled. Pain bloomed. Emotions burned with rage and chilled with fear and loneliness. The Realm could look and feel real even during its most unbelievable moments. But no heartbeat? The Realm was a strange place, but this was perhaps its most unnatural quality of all.

The Bringer stopped, and I collided into his back. “What are you—”

“Get down,” he hissed, yanking me to the grass.

We had arrived at the pond. The cottage, its walls decaying and covered in filth, were no longer dark or silent; its windows glowed with light, and conversation drifted from between its cracks. Inside, the boy could be seen talking with two adults—his parents, perhaps, as they shared his dark, finely crafted features—as he offered bundles of food with a hopeful smile.

“I thought we couldn’t be seen by the dreamer,” I observed, shifting so I wasn’t eating the leaves of the undergrowth the Bringer had thrown us into.

“No, we cannot,” he said simply, peering intently at the cottage and everything else beyond it. Mist passed around us like a shroud, lingering

atop our backs and turning the Bringer's hair into a veil of its likeness. "Somnus hasn't designed it to be, so we follow his rules."

"Then why are we hiding, exactly?"

The Bringer looked at me as though I were an idiot. "The demon."

I ripped my attention away from the cottage, eyeing every shadowed corner within the clearing. And there were *many* shadowed corners. Most of which were also draped in mist.

"You're the *Shadow Bringer* ," I remarked, sounding more nervous than I wanted. Where was the demon hiding? What could he see that I couldn't? "Subdue it or something with your wicked might."

The Bringer reached out as if to grab me by the chin, but stopped, instead fixing me with an exasperated stare. "If I were its lord, then why would I be hiding in a bush? You're a foolish creature."

"I'm no more foolish than you," I shot back. He made a logical point, but his tone irritated me. I wasn't a foolish child—I wasn't something to be ignored or thrown aside. And I had a name. "I'm nineteen. Stop talking to me as though I'm not."

He arched an eyebrow. "Age does not beget maturity."

"That's interesting, considering you've been alive for centuries and are still a—"

"Time doesn't exist when you're a ghost," he said angrily. "It stopped for me the day I was sentenced to rot in my castle."

"I see," I said, biting my tongue against another retort.

"If you wish to prove your worth, *Esmer* , then call out your sword and give it to me. I have a demon to kill."

"Use your own sword," I snapped, bristling. If I gave my sword away, my *only* weapon in the demon-infested Realm, I wasn't sure I'd get it back. And I really didn't want to find out. "It's mine."

"Somnus stole my power. Not yours." He moved closer. "Give it to me."

"I don't think so."

His scowl twisted up a bit, revealing the edges of his teeth. From the angle I was at, they looked more akin to fangs. "Am I to strangle the demon with my bare hands?"

"I'd love to see it. I'm sure you'd fare just fine."

I backed out of the thicket. My palm was tingling, thrumming with power and urging me that the sword underneath wanted out. Gritting my

teeth against the discomfort of burning skin, I willed the sword to return to the depths of its original resting place.

But the sword fought back.

It sprang to life in my hands, gleaming wickedly, and the Bringer pounced, making to pry it from my fingers. Except the sword resisted, slamming him hard on the ground with a blast of light.

He gaped at me from where he was thrown.

“You willed it to *attack* me,” the Bringer spat, thumbing a bit of dirt from his mouth.

“I warned you first. It listens to me, not you.” Except I wasn’t sure *why* the sword exploded like that, throwing him back with monstrous force, but he didn’t need to know that.

“Do you want to fight the demon all by yourself, then? Because that is about to be our immediate reality.”

I frowned. “No, but—”

The door to the cottage swung open, revealing the raven-haired boy. His face was red and splotchy, tears shining silver upon his skin, and the half-formed sounds of a violent argument followed him.

“You wretched beast!” screamed the man inside. From the window he had appeared handsome; now his face was skull-like and quickly turning grey. “You are a curse to all that know you. Filthy, filthy, *filthy* boy!”

The boy tried to speak. “I just wanted to help—”

“You are not our son,” the woman joined in, flinging her own words of condemnation into the night. She, too, had been beautiful, with black, flowing hair and fine, feminine features. Now her skin festered, sagging into deep, dripping wrinkles that opened into sores as they melted off her face. “Sons would not make their parents choose between their lives and the life of their child.”

“Sons would not dream when they should be working to provide.”

“*Sons would not let their parents die!* ”

Together, they screamed at the boy for stealing their food and leaving them to starve. They blamed him—damned him—for *everything* . Their hunger, their poverty, their pain, and even their deaths.

It was all his fault. It would always be his fault.

The Shadow Bringer looked away, cursing low and deep.

Surely this man and woman were the Bringer’s parents. And if they were, this dream was terrible and cruel. It was the kind of dream I was

warned about as a child—dreams of unimaginable terror, brought on by a demon who sought nothing but to devour souls. But this dream of a young Shadow Bringer from over five-hundred years ago was all wrong. Dreams like this weren't supposed to exist back then.

They *couldn't* .

Not before mankind's betrayal and the rise of the Shadow Bringer.

Before the demons rose, dreams were crafted by the Weavers to educate and influence on the Maker's behalf. They often contained lessons, memories, or visions of the future, but they never contained this level of darkness and hate. Evil served no purpose for the Maker; therefore, it did not belong in the Realm.

"*Their food always disappears!* " the boy howled into his empty hands. Except they weren't empty—not exactly. Two ugly, red welts bloomed across his skin, wrapping down his palms and up his forearms. "Why? Why does this always happen to me?"

The Shadow Bringer cursed again. "It's coming."

From the pond a creature began to emerge, a behemoth of dark, purpled skin. Its skull was distorted, its mouth a mass of long, curling fangs that bent all the way back into its spine. It lacked arms or legs, so it dragged itself to the shoreline in heavy, sliding pulls, and red, smoking eyes peered around, searching for something. It looked different than it had appeared in Elliot's dream, but I knew in my soul that it was one and the same.

Demon.

Before the fall of dreaming, demons were locked in the Beyond. They didn't exist in the Weaver-guarded Realm, and they definitely didn't terrorize young boys as they delivered imaginary food to their parents. The existence of it here didn't make sense, I realized.

Could the boy have summoned it, somehow?

"It never lasts," the boy lamented, throwing his fists into the ground. He didn't seem to notice the demon; the cottage started shaking, its dirt-covered walls leaking something dark and foul. "*Why does nothing ever last?* "

The boy didn't *seem* like a threat to humanity. He was regular, ordinary. Not the Shadow Bringer, not the Devourer, not an enemy of mankind.

But perhaps he had more power than he let on.

The Bringer stiffened. "I think I remember what happens. I killed the demon myself."

“Really?” I asked. The boy hadn’t even noticed the demon yet; it continued to drag itself to shore, working its fangs as it tasted the mist. Everything in me screamed in resistance, battling our silence. Our stillness. I wanted to say something, *do* something. The boy, alone and visibly helpless, didn’t stand a chance. “You don’t even *see* it yet.”

The demon was to the shoreline now, pulling its body from the water.

“I—” The Bringer paused, visibly working through something. “Any moment now.”

The young Bringer looked up then, finally aware of the monster in front of him.

“And what are you doing here?” he asked, grey eyes unflinching. “Are you here to mock me? I’ve seen you before. I am not afraid.”

“*You should be afraid, human,* ” the demon growled, rising up to show its full height. “*Do you think me some feeble part of your imagination?* ”

“Everything here is from my imagination,” the boy said simply. His face scrunched in concentration, almost as if he were willing the demon away. “It is time for you to leave.”

“*How prideful.* ”

The boy laughed. “Just wait. You will be gone before your next breath.” But as he stared, focusing on the beast’s every limb and distorted feature, nothing happened. The demon was still there. When the boy spoke again, his voice cracked. “You’re still here. Why are you still here?”

“*From the lake I have watched you, observing your failures. You will never save your mother. You will never save your father.”*

“Shut up.”

“They will starve, they will wither. ”

“I said *shut up* !” the boy screamed.

“*They will die.”*

“You don’t know that!” The boy ground his teeth, glancing at his mother and father. They pressed against the grime-stained windows; tears fell from their eyes, curving down their cheeks only to fall into their screaming mouths. “You know *nothing* of me or my family.”

A pit formed, heavy and horrible in my stomach. This dream was not intended for my eyes—this was private, fragile, raw. Dreams, Weaver-crafted or not, always held pieces of reality; their various parts might be fantastic or bizarre in nature, but the core of it, the very deep and innermost core, was tied to the dreamer’s reality. And if this dream was an indicator of

the Shadow Bringer's past, it indicated nothing but a life riddled with fear, poverty, and hatred.

And a hopeful, imaginative boy trying to tie its pieces together.

"They will hate you, even in your dreams. You will never be loved again."

"You can't know that," the boy protested. But his words were weaker now—aching. Doubting. "How can you know that?"

"You have no purpose. What do you live for?"

"What kind of question is that?" The boy swiped a tear from his eye, the skin underneath blooming red with frustration. "And you never answered my question." Behind him, the voices of his parents rose in anger and bite. "Why are you still here? Why can't I erase you?"

"Because I am not of you, human."

"Then what are you?"

"I am no one," the demon divulged, *"but I can become you. I will ease your hardships. I will right your injuries. "* The demon slid forward; the growl in its voice softened, contrasting with the violence pouring from the cottage. *"Let me free you from your life. Come forth and I will gift you eternal rest. "*

Beside me, the Bringer cursed.

I whirled to face him. "You said you *killed* the demon. That's a little different than letting it devour your soul."

"I did kill it," he insisted. "But I don't remember when it happened. Or how."

As the Bringer and I deliberated what was happening—and if we should do anything about it—the boy appeared to be considering the demon's offer. His shoulders drew in, heavy with some unseen weight, and his eyes closed in concentration.

"*Come to me* ," the demon purred, lowering its head so that it was level with the boy's, "*and never again will you feel pain or sorrow. Your loneliness will ebb into darkness. And in the dark is where you belong. "*

"Where I belong?" the boy echoed, lifting his eyes. Gone were their lively sparks of shadow; his eyes had flattened into something hopeless and sad. "The dark has followed me since before I can remember. I am tired of the dark."

"That is only because you have resisted it," the demon answered easily. *"You are a part of the dark. And the dark is a part of you."* It twisted its

maw into what resembled a smile. *“It is your purpose.”*

“I have never known a purpose,” said the boy. “What would I do with it?”

The demon began to move; wherever it slid, a piece of the boy’s dream fell into decay, and when it breathed in a deep, guttural inhale by the cottage, the voices inside were silenced. I twisted my hands in the grass, unable to watch any longer.

“Bringer,” I hissed, hoping that he would agree with what I was about to say. “Before you came back to the castle, Somnus showed me my brother’s dream. I saw this demon there, too—but I was able to reduce it into nothing with my sword.”

“What are you implying?”

“Well, if I can do that again, maybe I can save you.”

“This is a dream. A *memory* .” Still, something new dawned in the Bringer’s eyes, mingling with doubt. “We shouldn’t have the ability to alter it. Only the Maker can alter dreams in that way.”

“But what if we could? This is the past, but we’re from the present. The *future* . Maybe *we* were the ones who attacked this demon. You don’t remember how it happened. It’s not—”

“Impossible. The other Weavers would never allow—” In front of us, the boy froze, staring up at the demon as it coiled around him. Its mouth widened, revealing the abyss-like length of its throat. The Bringer snarled in disbelief. “Why am I not doing anything? Why am I letting it get so close?”

And then, with a delighted scream, the demon swallowed the boy whole.

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CHAPTER 35

THE DEMON SLID OVER THE COTTAGE, SWEEPING A LAZY TONGUE OVER ITS teeth.

"It devoured you," I said absently, looking to the Bringer for clarification.

"Yes—and no." The Shadow Bringer's lip curled in contempt. "If it had truly devoured my soul, we wouldn't be here. Without a dreamer, the dream collapses."

The demon yawned from atop the cottage ruin, spreading wide his jaws. From within, the boy screamed.

"Damn you," the Bringer growled, surging from the ground. Had he his powers, a whorl of mist and shadows would be rising with him. Instead, he had only me. "Release him."

"*You are not of this dream.* " The demon blinked as he beheld us, inhaling a slow, scent-seeking breath through its nostril slits. "*Or of this time. But you both have darkness within you. What is it you seek?* "

"I said to let him go," the Bringer repeated. "He's not yours to keep."

"*But he is* ," the demon rasped, dropping its head so that it was beholding its midsection. The skin there was smooth, motionless. No sign of life from within. "*The dark is where he belongs. I am defending his birthright. His fate.* " It grinned, flicking its tongue as it slid toward us. "*It is a symbiotic bond. As it is with all humans. But especially this one. And perhaps you as well.* "

"You're wrong," I said, standing my ground beside the Bringer. "Demons steal birthrights and destroy fates." Angry tears burned at my eyes, reminding me of every twisted, Corrupted body I'd seen. Corrupt

children, their lives broken forever. Men and women who would never experience a true, restful sleep. Lives ripped and torn apart before they could be fully experienced. “We will never share a bond with you.”

“*Oh, but you already do,* ” the demon purred. “*This is the beginning of something glorious.* ” It was close now, the arch of its skull touching the trees above us. “*I’ve always wondered what it would be like to breathe your mortal air.* ”

The Bringer motioned me closer.

“On my call, distract it,” he whispered.

“*How* , exactly?”

The demon rumbled on. “*I want to wear your skin. Bleed your blood.* ”

“Might I remind you that you ‘reduced a demon to nothing’?” The Bringer looked very much like he wanted to roll his eyes. For the sake of my dignity—or more likely his own—he didn’t. “Or so you claim. So just do as you did before in your brother’s dream.”

He was right. This wasn’t the time to cower. I had to be strong, somehow. I nodded grimly, biting the inside of my cheek.

“*Soon I will know how it feels* ,” the demon said, eyes glistening in ecstasy.

I felt the Bringer’s hands on my shoulders, a brief graze of cool fingertips. Then he shoved me forward—right in front of the demon—with what I *swore* was a chuckle. I spun back to yell something unkind, but he wasn’t there.

The demon fixed its red eyes on me, saliva dripping from its teeth.

“*Your skin is soft. Your blood is fragrant. I think I prefer you to the child inside me.* ”

Shivering in disgust, I lifted my sword in front of me. It glistened with life, even in the murky half-light, and the demon beheld it, considering its level of threat.

“You won’t take either of us, demon.”

“*Come here, girl. A truth for one of your teeth.* ”

The demon moved to attack, handling its body with startling speed and flexibility. As it slid, bones began to grow out from its back, forming into the shape of six arms. Arms edged in long, brutal claws. I lurched sideways, trying to dodge, but I was too slow—a claw caught my side, ripping my tunic and the skin above my ribs. I crashed into a tree at the force of it, gasping as I worked to catch my breath.

How could I heal myself? Was the process the same as other things—making a glass of wine or a coat lined in velvet? The injury throbbed, dripping wet down my ribs. I tried to focus on its pain, its length, its shape—but the demon moved again, fast, too fast, striking me down a second time.

The demon dipped its head, considering me. "*You fascinate me, dreamer. Fragrant indeed is your blood. How might I spill it more? Let us see.*"

A flash of something dark and quick caught my eye—the Shadow Bringer, under one of the demon's arms. He had become a shadow, a ghost, a memory, silently threading something around the demon's arms, spine, and head. Something thin, hair-like.

Threads of shadow, spiraling out from the Bringer's hands as he wove them tight.

Was he planning to bind the demon, somehow?

I gritted my teeth against the pain blooming in my side, determined to do what the Bringer had demanded. *Distract it* . I struggled to my feet, meeting the demon's gaze. "You're stronger," I ground out, holding my bleeding side. "How did you manage to grow all those arms?"

"*I am fed by the one who sustains me. I am made strong by his blood, his bones, and his darkness.*"

My stomach churned in response.

How many children perished in the bellies of demons? How many rotted into Corruption there, believing every lie that their cursed dreams fed to them? Gently, meagerly, light began to unfurl from my sword. I focused on growing the blade's light, letting my anger and desperation fuel its strength, and imagined that the light could move, quick as a whip and as fluid as the wind.

The demon chuckled. "*Bind me, bind the boy. Kill me, kill the boy.*"

At the demon's threat, I hesitated.

What if the demon was right and I *did* hurt—or kill, even—the boy? Would the Shadow Bringer die too, then? Demons were masters of lies and half-truths. Still, it seemed possible. After all, Corruption bound a demon, physically and mentally, to its chosen human. Maybe that truly was the dark reality of it all; that to kill a demon, its human must be killed, too.

There was no salvation without death, similar to the Light Bringer's creed.

“*You may join him, if you would prefer,* ” the demon rumbled. “*I can arrange it. Or do you prefer that which you cannot have? The older male—the chosen, the damned?*”

I glanced toward where I thought the Bringer stood, but he was nowhere to be seen. I had tried to be brave, tried to play the hero, but fear threatened to crumble it all. The demon was a monster—a *monster* .

“Let him go,” I said, my voice fiercer than I expected it to be. “What do you want from us?’

“*I will make you a bargain. The boy’s soul for yours.* ” The demon made to taste a blood-tipped claw, its face bright with triumph, but its arm jerked to a stop before it could. Bound by the Shadow Bringer’s threads, the demon couldn’t move. It roared, struggling mightily against the bindings even as they cut deep into its skin. “*Cursed dreamers—what is this?* ”

The Shadow Bringer burst from the forest, using his patchwork of threads to climb the demon’s back. As he climbed, he sent a breath of shadow into the demon’s red, smoking eyes, blinding it. The demon roared again, and quickly, wildly, the pond began to rise. Its scum lapped against my feet, ankles, shins—the Bringer finished his climb, making to wrench one of the demon’s horns from its head.

And the horn broke free.

The demon hissed, thrashing in its blindness—it caught the Shadow Bringer off guard, and he fell, crashing through his threads, snapping them. He cursed, making to grab a thread, a bone, a horn—but they slipped from his hands, just as the demon broke free an arm.

It happened fast.

The demon threw its arm into the Bringer, slamming him into the pond-soaked earth. I expected him to rise immediately—to shrug off the demon’s arm that pinned him underwater—but the demon persisted, leaning its weight into his back as he drowned. I ran forward, raising my sword just as the demon grabbed for its fallen horn. Hissing, growling, *grinning* , it drove the horn down, stabbing clean through the Bringer’s armor and piercing through his chest.

“*No!* ” I screamed, shuddering in agony.

It was as if the horn was in *my* chest. I couldn’t see the Bringer, couldn’t see if he was moving—only dark, bloody water, pooling from where he was pinned.

The demon turned. Its vision had been restored; hatred burned in its eyes.

“*Now it is your turn,* ” it said simply, just as its bindings dissolved.

It rocked forward, widening its mouth into a colossal, endless hole. I couldn’t move—mud clung to my legs, rising up with the water. Frantically, I lifted my sword, desperately calling to its light—too late.

The demon brought its jaws over my body.

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CHAPTER 36

THEY BOUND THE FINAL CORRUPT, STRUGGLING TO OUTMANEUVER ITS LONG limbs and gnashing teeth. A cut lanced across its face, temple to jaw, framing long, wild hair and dirt-smeared skin. It was a nasty injury to be sure, but not one that was unearned. It had brought it upon itself when it resisted their incense and nearly bit a legionnaire's finger clean off.

Something deep within Mithras quite liked him.

Silas approached, exhaustion—and resignation, perhaps—creeping into his posture and stride. Beneath his mask, his jaw twitched. Mithras noted it, like he noted most things, and waited, expectant.

"Which have you chosen, my lord?"

"That one—" Mithras gestured to the injured Corrupt. Its eyes glittered like emeralds, snake-like. They fluttered once, twice, then closed. "It will come with us to the Citadel."

"And the rest?" Silas questioned, vaguely glancing at the other Corrupt. They laid in piles nearby, waiting to be gathered. Some were still—sleeping, peacefully; others twitched or groaned as the incense took hold. "There are…many."

As Mithras beheld them, some small, distant part of him felt ill.

They were unclean, clothed in mud and other filth. Mothers, fathers, children—all from another village too deprived and too desperate to afford or regulate elixir. He knew that none were suitable. It was in their eyes, mostly—but it was also in the way they looked, smelled, *fought* .

Mithras arranged his face to reflect remorse. "None."

"But we took so many from Norhavellis," Silas began, shifting from one foot to another.

“It is the Maker’s will. His glorious purpose.”

Purpose . Mithras could almost taste the word. Earthen, cloying, deceptive.

Uncorrupt villagers, the remaining few that would remember the day the Light Legion came to cleanse them of their sins, hesitated at the Legion’s perimeter, faces twisted with wonder. They whispered, dizzy with relief, about their Corrupted loved ones. Before today, their hope had withered.

But today, in the anticipation of the Light Bringer, hope lived.

To be purified was to have purpose, even beyond the brutality of Corruption. Purification was salvation—a cleansed soul made true by the Lord of Light. Only Mithras could absorb the Corrupt’s parasitic demon and leave the original soul bare and free. A transformed soul, a beautiful, *clean* soul, ready to be welcomed by the Maker.

Lies, all of it.

The truth was much simpler. It involved shovels, dirt, and a bit of discretion. At Mithras’s call, unsuitable Corrupt were dispatched and buried. Purified not by the Light Bringer, but by dirt and their own mortal, diseased bodies.

Perhaps these souls still made it to their Maker.

Or perhaps not.

Silas nodded, turning to gather a few of Mithras’s most trusted men. Before he left, he added, quietly, “The legionnaires will ask why they weren’t spared—why the Norhavellian Corrupt were brought to Istralla, but these were not.”

“I will speak to them,” said Mithras, glancing at the remaining villagers. His attention drifted past them, toward where a young boy stood, waving an incense staff in one hand and pressing his borrowed mask, about three sizes too large, to his face with the other. Admittedly, Elliot was a useful worker, eager to prove himself while his parents wasted away, all so that Esmer might be released from her sentence sooner. It was noble—and foolish. To himself, he murmured, “Perhaps I will say their Maker has forsaken them.”

How fitting , Mithras thought. *Because He has already forsaken me.*

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CHAPTER 37

IN THE BELLY OF THE DEMON, I FOUND THE YOUNG SHADOW BRINGER.

He knelt in a shroud of mist, framed by a void of black. There wasn't much to him, really. Just a tangle of skinny limbs and too-large clothes, eyes wide and sad under curls of raven hair. A far-cry from his future self—what he would one day become. His hands grasped at the mist, as if he wanted to squeeze it into submission. Or maybe it was simply to ground himself to something. Anything.

I approached him, surprised when his grey eyes lifted.

"I thought I was alone," the boy whispered. He sounded distraught that I was there with him. "Did the demon devour you, too?"

"I think so," I croaked. My voice was surprisingly raw and painful. Had I been screaming?

I took a moment to study the demon's pit. It sloped up on all sides, globe-like, and at the very top, just beyond its limits, was a violent, churning sky. The sky hummed faintly, dripping down at the ends into the fog that trembled, crawling, over the ground. Time, light, and color didn't exist.

There was only the young Shadow Bringer and me.

It was disturbing that I hadn't woken up—that I was truly *here* , rotting inside a demon's stomach. I let out a tense, frustrated breath. This was the Bringer's childhood dream, but it also felt real. Present. *Alive* , somehow, and not just a memory.

Turning back to the boy, I asked, "Are you hurt?"

"I don't know," he admitted, frowning as he examined his arms and legs. "I don't feel anything." He didn't appear to have any physical injuries,

but his expression told of a different kind of pain. His real wounds were hidden, sharp, suffocating. He met my eyes again, as if he wanted to say something but wasn't quite sure how. "The demon said I would never feel pain or be lonely again. So why do I—" Suddenly, his face crumbled. He turned away. "I don't know why—"

Without thinking, I put a hand to his back. It was how I comforted Elliot when he was sick or scared; a touch to remind him that he wasn't alone. The boy flinched at first, hesitating, but a breath later and he relaxed, slumping forward to rest his chin atop his knees.

In an instant, the young Shadow Bringer had become what he truly was: a boy.

And I realized I didn't even know his name.

"I'm Esmer," I offered quietly after a few moments had passed. "I know you don't know me, but I want to help you get through this. *We* will get through this."

The boy lifted his head. "Esmer," he echoed, testing the word. "We share something in common, for I have a unique name, too. My name is Erebus."

Erebus.

Erebus watched me, gauging my reaction. Another tremor threatened to bite through my arms, but I held it back, forcing my limbs into stillness.

"I think your name is—"

"Did the demon promise you anything?" Erebus asked intently, interrupting me. His voice sounded colder. Lonelier. I had only meant to say that his name was interesting—poetic, even. I wanted to scrub away some of the ugliness his parents had surely told him. "It told me I would find where I belong. My purpose."

I think I prefer you to the child inside me. A truth for one of your teeth.

I could almost feel the demon's dry, rotting breath on my face.

"It seemed more interested in how I would taste," I said, shaking my head in disgust. "We didn't get to the part where it promised me riches or a good fortune."

"I hate demons." Erebus made a face, an understanding beginning to dawn there. "You know, the demon said it knew me, but it never even said my name."

Demons were wicked and powerful creatures, but they had a weakness, too. They craved what they didn't—couldn't—have. Humanity. A living,

breathing soul and a life of freedom outside the confines of the Realm. To achieve this, they watched. They observed humanity's most beautiful and painful moments, waiting in the shadows until the day the veil slipped. The day the elixir was forgotten, lost, stolen—or became impossible to afford.

They were parasites, desperate to become what they consumed.

"Demons are liars," I answered, trying not to think about the demons that haunted Erebus's castle. The demons who were released because of me. "They enjoy it—they lie for us to believe what they want us to believe. Maybe the demon had a few of your memories or guessed at what you were feeling. But it didn't know you. They never truly do."

I walked to the edge of the globe and placed a hand on its surface. It resisted my touch; something on the other side was pushing back. It didn't feel like the inside of a stomach.

"I think this pit is one of their tricks. An illusion, maybe. We just need to figure out how to break it."

Erebus watched me with a mixture of curiosity and dismay. "It's rare to speak of demons like that." He drew closer. "Are you from Citadel Evernight?" He must have seen the genuine confusion in my reaction, because he continued, adding quickly, "Never mind. Someone from Evernight wouldn't be here. Weavers don't care whether we live or die."

A distrust in the Weavers, even five-hundred years in the past?

"Why won't the Weavers come? Aren't they supposed to be protecting the Realm?"

I thought back to the tales. The Seven prospered before the Shadow Bringer supposedly rose into power, gifting humanity with handcrafted, Maker-blessed dreams. It would be years until the first outbreak of Corruption. So why *was* Erebus left to face a demon by himself? Weavers protected the world from demons, hunting any that slipped through their veil. Would they not go after this one?

"You really think that?" Erebus spat, clenching his fists. "They never protected me. Not from this nightmare. Not from the demon. Not from anything. They *abandoned* me." I began to hear the similarities between his voice and the Shadow Bringer's. The hatred and the deep, burning sorrow. "Everyone else dreams like we're meant to. Everyone else can fly and do magic and *see* things. My dreams turn into nightmares, and they end with my parents dying. *And it's always my fault.* "

Erebus placed his hands next to mine. Instead of pushing the globe, he pulled, and the substance melted into shadow as it stretched, clinging to his hands. Several handfuls later, the globe still held firm. Huffing from the effort, he turned to me.

“My mother and father thought I was special. Funny, isn’t it? They said that the Weavers would bring me to Evernight and they’d never go hungry again.” Shadows danced in his irises. His face, childish yet elegant despite his age, was caught between calculated fury and something more desperate. Colder. “But then they died. And no Weaver ever came.” Softly, he added, “The demon told me the dark was my purpose. You said it doesn’t know me, but I think you’re wrong.”

As if in response, the dark deepened around us, encroaching on the mist. It moved over the boy who would one day be the Shadow Bringer with shadows dancing on his fingers and sorrow swimming in his eyes.

An image of the Bringer flashed before me.

Was he still in the dream, crushed under the weight of the demon’s horn? Again, as if in response, the globe began to change. Water pooled at our feet, falling from its sky and seeping thick down its walls. The more I thought of the Bringer, bleeding and broken at the bottom of the pond, the faster the water rose.

I fought back the memory of him, fighting for control of the globe’s form, and the water stilled. But as the water stilled, the dark drew nearer. It tugged at my hair, crawled spider-like down my throat. And with the dark came unspeakable thoughts. Visions of sobbing mothers with their terrified, hollow-eyed children. A village armed with smoking torches and bloody mouths. Noblemen dreaming peacefully in their beds of gold and bones.

Erebus stood silent and wide-eyed beside me, seeing visions of his own.

“Erebus, look at me—”

Erebus worked his mouth open and shut, but no words came.

“No one is made for the dark. You might control the dark, but becoming it isn’t your purpose.”

Shadows burst in from all directions, swirling up in a thick, bubbling fog. They began to obscure Erebus from me, as though they were set on eating him alive.

“How isn’t it?” Erebus finally shouted, whirling to face me. “The dark listens—and I listen back. It knows me better than anyone.” He showed me his hand. Even as the dark obscured him, it danced around his fingertips. It

was beautiful, in its own way, shimmering faintly. “It scares people,” he said, lowering his voice. “It scared my mother and father. It scares you, too. You’re afraid of me.”

Erebus held himself tall, daring me to tell him otherwise.

My heart broke for him—broke for him and his distorted view of himself. How could the dark be someone’s purpose? Why did it linger around Erebus—around a boy who should be safe in a Weaver-crafted dream and not rotting in a demon’s stomach?

I held myself as he did, bold and unwavering. “I’m not afraid,” I said, meeting his defiant glare. “I’ve seen the dark, too—I’ve lived in it.” As a child, I spent days adventuring in the Visstill. I enjoyed reading by the barn and loved delighting in the reckless joy of a season without Corruption. There were beautiful days in my childhood. But I also remembered when the days turned—when the shadows stretched and the sun dipped behind the trees it once smiled upon. I remembered the circle of torchlight, wavering in the long night. I remembered the shadows forming in my Father’s eyes. “Knowing the dark doesn’t make you a monster. It’s what you do in the darkness—and how you rise to overcome it—that matters.”

“You’re lying,” Erebus hissed, taking a step back. “*No one* knows what it’s like to live in the dark. Not like me.” His eyes brightened in the fog. “You’re not really here, are you? I imagined you to protect myself.”

I reached for his hand, just as he began to melt into the dark.

“Erebus, *no* —”

“If my purpose is evil, then what good am I?” At this point, he was nearly gone. His limbs were caught in the shadows, half-eaten. “Where do I belong if I’m a monster no one wants? Nobody loves or protects me. Perhaps my mother and father did, once, but they’re dead now.”

Lunging, I managed to grab his arm. The shadows retreated at the contact. As they overlapped, folding in and out, their light, just a handful of tiny shimmers a moment ago, grew strong. “Just because there’s darkness, that doesn’t mean all the light is gone. Look—see? And you do have somebody, Erebus. You have me.”

And I have you, too.

“I—”

Erebus began to whisper something but stopped, watching the light dance within the shadows. Together they radiated from his hands,

blanketing the pit, and the violent sky—as well as the endless, hopeless darkness around it—disappeared, replaced by a sea of stars.

Together, we looked in awe at the transformation.

Soft, twinkling light came to rest upon Erebus's face, reflecting the hesitant wonder in his gaze. Slowly, his desperation faded. Slowly, his breathing quieted.

"I never knew," he whispered, lifting his arms. At his call, some shadows dropped, coiling elegantly around his shoulders and forming a cloak at his back. Others tangled in his hair, shaping into a loose crown. Power radiated from him, wild and true. "I thought the dark was a terrible thing. But this feels different. I can control it." More firmly, he repeated, "I can control it."

The sides of the globe began to splinter and crack.

"These walls aren't going to last much longer," I observed, side-stepping a piece of the globe as it fell. "I don't know what will become of us if that happens—or if we can still escape. But we need to try."

Erebus turned to me. His eyes were burning. "I'm going to rip us straight from the demon's stomach. I swear it."

From the ferocity in his expression, I believed him. "Good. Then it can't hurt anyone ever again."

Nor will it continue to hunt me, my family, and the Shadow Bringer.

Erebus nodded. A swathe of darkness pulled itself from the sky, moving to rest atop my shoulders, too. It felt warm. Comforting, even. I leaned into my new mantle, savoring its touch.

"I'm sorry for saying I imagined you." He smiled, then. It held sorrow, but amazement, too. "It just seemed too good to be true, is all."

Erebus held out his hand. I took it.

And the globe cracked in two, bursting with the light of a million stars.

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CHAPTER 38

Am I dead ?

For a time—too long—there was nothing but stark, blinding light.

It surrounded me with its fullness, swallowing my screams. I searched for a shape, a shadow, a movement, *anything* . But the light persisted. It existed on its own, overwhelming despite its emptiness. It reminded me of the void in the demon's pit.

Only instead of a deep, relentless black, it was white.

Hair curled to the sides of my face, fluttering along the edge of my cloak. Slowly, I began to feel light. Free, even. But it was wrong. It was suffocating, this light. This silence.

If this was death, I didn't want it.

And what had happened to Erebus? I glanced at my hands. They were empty, missing the boy's brave, reassuring grip. He had wanted us to escape the pit together. A thought slammed into me: maybe I didn't make it—maybe I really was dead or lost, stuck in some eternal Realm afterlife. But maybe Erebus *did* . Maybe he was out there, past the light. Maybe he was changing the world on his own accord. Vaguely, I felt something brush my fingertips.

It was nothing—it *should* be nothing.

I reached through the light, grasping for what I had felt. If it was Erebus, I wanted him to know that he wasn't alone. But as I stretched, the light expanded outwards, drenching my face and crawling into my nose. I squeezed my eyes shut.

I'm dying.

My throat was full, bubbling over.

I’m dying—

The light stilled, dampening into grey. Just as something—*someone* —finally reached back. Their hands were armored and as cold as ice, but they held on. My eyes flew open.

And for a moment, the world stood still.

The Shadow Bringer, more statue than man, was suspended in a pool of silvery water. His eyes were closed, lashes resting atop frozen cheeks, and his hair pooled about him in a ghostly crown. Gone was the lifeblood from his skin; he was pallid as a corpse, lips drawn together in a pale line. It struck me again, how beautiful he was. And separate, somehow, from anything one might imagine a man to be.

But, as I now knew, the Bringer was once just Erebus. A mortal, a *boy* , with fear, hope, and dreams in his bones. And he had a name.

Erebus.

My eyes drifted lower, noticing the ripped clothing at his chest. The demon’s horn had been thrust through his ribs, pinning him to the bottom of the pond.

No—

I shuddered, imagining what it would feel like to be impaled like that. To be left to die, speared to the mud like an insect. How long had he been down here, frozen and alone? What had the demon done to him after I left?

I grabbed for the horn, hoping that I would be able to dislodge it from his chest. Death and life in the Realm were mysterious, fickle things. The Bringer *looked* dead, but he also didn’t have a heartbeat. And neither did I. My chest was empty, motionless as his.

It was then I realized I hadn’t been breathing. And I didn’t need to.

Something dawned on me, then. Before, when I thought I was drowning in the Bringer’s cavern, perhaps it was only because I *believed* I was drowning.

Maybe there was hope after all.

Gritting my teeth, I held the horn and *pulled* . I groaned at the weight of it; bubbles poured from my mouth. But it was useless. The horn was too heavy—too slippery under my hands. I couldn’t lift it, even as I tried to imagine it as light, weightless, and brittle. Suddenly, my attention snapped to something lurking in the distance.

A large, misshapen body moved through the water. A thing that looked very much like the red-eyed demon.

No—this can’t be happening. The demon can’t still be here.

I wrapped my arms under the Shadow Bringer’s shoulders, moving closer to him than I had ever dared. A few strands of his hair, silky and ticklish, brushed against my face. If I couldn’t lift the horn, maybe I could lift the Bringer from it. I just had to angle him correctly, pull him up before the—

I stilled, panicking.

The demon was close—too close. It kicked up sediment from the bottom of the pond, clouding the water and obscuring its body. Just a few seconds more and it would be upon us. Holding the Bringer tight, vaguely noticing how cold and how empty his body felt, I swam up with all my strength.

The demon lunged toward us, stretching its mouth wide.

Too late—it’s too late—

Its body circled us, breaking through the sediment. I looked on, horrified. We were weak. Powerless.

We *failed* .

And the cost was devastating.

Because of this demon, I would be imprisoned to the Realm forever, never able to return home. Never again would I see a sunrise—or breathe fresh autumn air as it whistled through our home in Norhavellis. Because of this demon, I’d never again taste my mother’s stew, fragrant with spices and herbs. I’d never again hug my brother. I’d never watch him grow up.

I buried my face into the Bringer’s chest, shutting my eyes as its teeth closed around us. The Shadow Bringer wasn’t a monster. He wasn’t some creature in the dark worthy of being hated and feared. Not like this demon was.

But just as its jaw began to squeeze shut, surely sealing our fates, it broke. The demon disintegrated into black dust, melting back into the water.

And just like that, everything changed.

The pond’s waters shifted from murky and threatening into something pure and crystalline. I could nearly smell it. *Taste* it. Floral and crisp—mint, wildflowers, and fresh air. Below the water, the pond floor, slick with mud and decay, solidified, hardening into a slab of dark sapphire. Any debris—anything other than pure, sparkling water—dissolved. Golden light, filtering down from above, washed over it all, hinting of a radiant sunrise just beyond the surface.

Though I wasn’t breathing, I wanted to. I wanted to drink it in; I wanted it to fill my lungs.

Even the Bringer was changing. His skin warmed, lips shifting from deathly grey to a pale pink. The demon’s horn disappeared, too. It left nothing in its wake, through his ripped clothing, the Bringer’s chest was smooth and whole.

With the horn no longer pinning him, we began to rise.

As soon as we broke the surface, the change in the dream was evident. The cottage was gone, as were the scum-lined cattails and perpetual haze. Instead, a field of flowers swept as far as the eye could see, each glowing as if they held a candle within their petals. Trees curled over the field, immensely tall and impossibly magnificent; their bark was iridescent and their leaves glittered like precious jewels. A sunrise shimmered above it all, glowing plum and gold.

And the middle of it all, shadow and light spinning from his hands, was Erebus.

He was smiling—*beaming*— as he worked, forming rolling hills and emerald rivers, clouds of silver dust, and a million stars to rest within his golden sky. From the ashes of his family’s cottage grew an obsidian tree, its many branches filled with the same glowing flowers in the field. I had never seen a boy so happy, so *free* . Even Elliot, ever the sweet, brave optimist, never truly looked like Erebus did now.

Without demons or Corruption, was this what dreams had the power to be?

It was carefree joy and endless possibility. It left me longing for something I didn’t quite understand. Like I had missed something important —something critically significant to my happiness and purpose—my entire life.

Still damp from the water, I scarcely noticed as tears slid down my face.

I pulled the Shadow Bringer to the bank, setting him in the flowers. They fluttered against his body, an array of glowing colors swaying gently in the breeze, and their light, mingling with the sunrise, softened his edges and hollows. He looked as though he was one breath away from opening his eyes.

And surely he *was* breathing.

Right?

The Bringer had said that breathing was a habit—that dreamers did it regardless, despite not having a true heartbeat. I knelt over his chest, waiting for a breath's telltale rise and fall. I gave it a moment, then another, counting my own breaths in the meantime.

Thirty seconds passed. Sixty. One hundred.

His chest remained motionless.

Strangely, I felt irritated. He was the almighty *Shadow Bringer* , for Maker's sake. Yet here he was, drowned, freezing, and powerless, defeated by the very monster we needed to overcome. It made me feel angry and anxious.

"You're not dead, and the demon is gone," I said, wanting to grab him by the shoulders and shake him. "You're going to miss the rest of the dream, Bringer. Wake up."

Beyond us, Erebus continued to weave new creations. A great bird, its wings a blanket of midnight. A cloak of stardust, onyx, and velvet, which he threw over his shoulders to trail along the ground. Sometimes he flew, sometimes he jumped, sometimes he simply stood within his flowers and smiled.

For a moment, I thought he looked my way.

"Erebus!" I waved my arms, straining so that he could see me. The flowered meadow was wide, and its iridescent trees partially obscured the Bringer and I. Erebus started to move toward us, but another moment passed and he turned, walking away. "Erebus, I made it out! You did it—we —"

A hand grabbed me by the sleeve, pulling me down to land half-draped across the Shadow Bringer's chest.

"Don't say that name," the Bringer rasped. He coughed, struggling to find his voice as his hand dropped from my sleeve to my thigh. He didn't seem aware of the touch; his shadowed eyes weren't fully focused. "I am no longer that man. It shouldn't be spoken."

Deep, soul-rending relief washed over me.

It felt like a pressure had been lifted from my chest; no longer did I hate, fear, or doubt this man. I don't know when it happened, but I did know that I felt something inexplicable when he was near. Felt something inexplicable—but had never given myself permission to consider what that might mean.

“You *are* him, though,” I said, throwing my arms around his shoulders. A laugh slipped out, bubbling into tears before I could stop them. “You’re more like him than the monster called ‘Shadow Bringer’.”

Surprisingly, the Bringer leaned into my touch. He wrapped his arms around my back, holding my hips with one and my shoulder blades with another. Though his arms were armored, they weren’t uncomfortable. In fact, I was surprised by *how* comfortable they felt.

“I’m so glad you’re here,” I whispered, leaning back so that I could see him. Shadows slowly spun in his eyes; they were more beautiful than I’d ever seen them. “I’m so glad you’re alive.”

With a low, anguished sound, the Shadow Bringer slowly brought his hands to my jaw, pressing against the line of tears that still slipped down my skin. “I remember the rest of the dream now,” he said, drawing me back into his chest. “You pulled me from that dark place. It’s rare for the Maker to allow a lasting influence on the past, but it was *you* . My anchor.” He cursed, almost as if in disbelief. “And to think I used to consider you my enemy and my ruin.”

“Likewise,” I said softly. “And for that, I’m sorry.”

“I wasn’t in my right mind when I left you alone in the castle,” he murmured, breath ghosting my cheek. “In my delusion, I thought I’d make a difference. But what is revenge if it means to lose yourself and the only person alive that—” He swallowed, cutting himself off. “I only mean to say —thank you. That’s what you need to hear. Not anything else my imagination conjures up.”

Warmth burned from where his hands ghosted my skin; I’d never felt such a sensation before. I wanted more of it.

I wanted *him* .

But the Bringer was oblivious to what I was feeling. He looked past me, his gaze settling on the flowers and trees instead of the flush racing across my face. “Where are we?”

“We’re still in your dream,” I answered. He instantly tensed, scanning the sky. *He thinks the demon is still alive.* “The demon is gone,” I added, waiting for him to relax. But the tension didn’t ease from his bones.

Instead, he looked even more agitated.

He peered down, noticing the gaping cloth at the center of his chest. “Ah. Now I remember.” His voice dripped with venom. “I was staked to the bottom of the pond and left to rot.” The shadows in his eyes sharpened

around his irises. “If that demon is still hunting us, we need to find it again. And soon.”

I swallowed, the intensity in his gaze made my neck burn. “You should try speaking to your younger self. We might be able to learn more about why the demon was hunting you.”

The Bringer closed his eyes, slowly shaking his head. “The past self cannot communicate with its present or future self. But perhaps you can.”

I waved at Erebus, hopeful that he could see me. He was so close to us —looking our way, even. Surely he’d be able to talk, just as we had done in the demon’s pit. But the more I waved, the more it was apparent that he couldn’t see us. We were hidden from him, just as we were at the start of the dream.

“Give up. He can’t see you.”

Ignoring his dismal tone, I asked, unable to hide my wonder, “Can all dreamers do what you’re doing?”

“Do what, exactly?” He was looking at Erebus, too. “Spin in circles? Grow a flower? That is nothing.”

“How is any of that nothing? You’re creating a world of your own from that *nothing* . It’s amazing.” The dream was gaining life and depth; different sights, sounds, and scents continued to bloom around us. It felt far more vivid than a dream should be. “And you look so happy. Like you finally found your purpose.”

“Is that what you see?” The Bringer shifted so that he was mostly sitting up, hands slipping from my back. He watched Erebus for a few silent moments, pain spinning from the shadows in his eyes. “You’re wrong. I never knew my purpose.”

“Maybe you forgot it,” I challenged. “But that doesn’t mean you never had one. Or that you still don’t.”

Erebus had a future. A fire for life. A *heart* .

What happened to him that he lost it all?

“And if I asked you of *your* purpose, what would you say? Would you tie it with happiness? Family?” His jaw clenched as his tone turned spiteful. “Or perhaps self-righteousness. To *justice* . To ridding the world of evil— and of monsters who belong better in the dark. ”

Of people like me , his eyes seemed to add.

“That’s a ridiculous thing to say. The dark isn’t the end. What you manage to create out of darkness—” I motioned wildly around us. “—is

what matters.”

“So you have sympathy for my fate and hope for my future?” His upper lip curled. “Careful. You’re almost making me believe it.”

I was mad. Fuming. He was *impossible* . “I might have hope for you, but I definitely don’t have sympathy or pity,” I snapped, lifting myself from the ground. The sudden movement made me dizzy, but by standing, I could see so much more of what Erebus had created. It was overwhelming. “Unless you want to talk about how pitiful your castle is—”

The Shadow Bringer laughed, not entirely disagreeing with me.

A mist descended over the sunrise as Erebus looked on, settling over his creations. From the mist, a lone figure appeared. The figure’s hair dragged through the flowers as he walked, dusting over robes made of feathers and dark, plated silver. An ivory crown, rising up into sharp, blade-like points, adorned his brow. His face was skeletal, black eyes listless and wise.

Somnus .

Erebus didn’t move. In fact, he stood taller, facing Somnus without fear.

“Erebus,” Somnus said in greeting. If Erebus was surprised Somnus knew his name, he didn’t show it. “Your creations echoed throughout the Realm. It is no small wonder for a dreamer to create without a Weaver’s guidance.”

“A Weaver’s permission, you mean,” Erebus remarked. Despite the bite in his words, his tone was flat.

“That is because the Realm is dangerous, dreamer. Particularly when it is stretched by your own hand.” Somnus selected a flower at random, holding it up to the rising sun. “One slip of your mind and something innocent grows fangs.”

The flower burst into flames; he closed a fist over it, sending smoking tendrils into the air. When he next opened his hand, he offered it to Erebus.

“What is this?” Erebus asked, incredulous. He stared at Somnus’s hand, neither taking or refusing it.

“The Seven have been watching you, Erebus. Join us at Citadel Evernight.” Softly, he added, “You are worthy.”

The Shadow Bringer launched himself forward. He half-ran, half-staggered to where Somnus and Erebus stood, a weak shroud of shadows trailing his shoulders. They couldn’t see him—they didn’t so much as blink in his direction as he approached—but that didn’t deter him.

Though weakened, the Bringer, mantled with the ghost of his power, moved with violence in his blood.

“They can’t see you!” I shouted, running after him. “What are you even __”

“You say you have hope for my future,” he began, charging for Somnus just as Erebus stepped forward, “but this is the moment that my past begins to rot. If there’s a chance I can stop it, I need to try.”

Erebus was going to accept Somnus’s hand—there were embers of power and pride in his eyes. It was the expression of a boy who had finally been *seen* —but not without trials and hardships. A boy who knew the value of what was being offered, despite his distrust of the Weavers.

“*Don’t take his hand!* ”

The Bringer crashed into Somnus, but it was like hitting a wall.

A wall that could also *explode* .

He flew backwards upon impact, skidding wildly through a patch of Erebus’s brightest flowers. A tree halted his momentum; he crashed to a stop against it, head slamming sideways into its jeweled bark. If he cried out in pain, I didn’t hear it.

Erebus placed his hand in Somnus’s. And just like that, the dream collapsed.

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CHAPTER 39

THE NEXT DREAM CAME IN WAVES.

Water lapping against a shore. The deep thrumming of bells and a low, melodic humming. The scent of something pure and promising—but distant and nostalgic, too. Above was a deep, golden light lined in silver, purple, and midnight blue. A sky clothed in eternal twilight.

And when the dream finally pieced together, revealing itself in its entire glory, my breath held.

In Norhavellis, water pooled in shallow rivers and cattailled ponds. It poured from the sky, collected in puddles, and forced pastures into muddy pits. It sat heavy in grey clouds, fell like fingers against my bedroom window, and soaked into my shoes as Elliot and I raced home from Absolver supply rounds in the village. Anything grander—seas, lagoons, lakes so wide a fleet of ships could sail through them—was a tale to be read about. A story tucked away in a book. Briefly, I had glimpsed the sea near Istralla. But in the dream it was half-formed, distorted by mist.

This was something else.

The sea in this dream was *alive* .

Part of its body rolled and surged like a willful horse, swelling into the sky. Other parts dipped low, cowering like a wounded fawn, or stretched taut and still. Its crystalline skin, reflecting the twilight sky, stretched over each wave and melted into the horizon. It was wild, glorious, and mesmerizing. Peaceful—and not. Silent, but loud. The more I stared, the more I felt it could—*would* —take me. That it would turn at any moment, raging over the shore, swirling over my head, and pulling me down into its depths.

But it never did.

Despite its wildness, the sea was contained; glossy stone, shaped in a perfect arc, formed its limits, and an iridescent tower anchored its center.

Standing at its edge, staring out into the sea as it dove and swelled, was the Shadow Bringer. Bits of shadow clung to his edges, trailing down his newly armored arms and back. They had grown in number since the last dream. Perhaps Somnus decided he needed his power after all.

“Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” he snapped.

Stubborn, stubborn man.

“You don’t have to hide your hurt from me, Bringer. I’m not going anywhere.”

“That’s only because you *can’t* run,” he said simply, as if it were the most matter-of-fact thing in the world. “If you had the choice, you would.”

I shook my head, exasperated. “No, I wouldn’t. Where would I even go?”

He scoffed, lowering his head. I couldn’t see his eyes, but his shoulders were rigid and unyielding. “Even if I wasn’t fine, I need to be. I’ve had five-hundred years to come to terms with my fate. I shouldn’t be throwing my burdens onto you.”

“But that’s the thing—you *don’t* have to be fine. No one is forcing you to be fine.”

He turned, briefly looking at me before facing the sea again.

“This is the Nocturne, as I’m sure you’re aware,” he announced suddenly, gesturing at the swelling waves.

Changing the subject. Of course.

“You say that as if I should know it,” I replied, staring out into the waves as he did. I was fully transfixed by the sea—its color, its depth, its call. Maker, even its *scent* . It smelled of salt, moss, and violets. “The Weaver tales never mentioned anything like it.”

The Bringer sighed. “There’s more to the world than a single book of Weaver tales. You’ve never even seen a sunset outside of your village.”

“I’ve been to places other than Norhavellis,” I said, bristling.

“A distorted, half-formed dream in Istralla hardly counts.”

“I don’t see why not.” I raked through my memory, searching for another example. “And there’s also your castle.”

His eyes, ringed by his shadows, narrowed. “Paying visits to my castle counts even less. You need to see more of the world, Esmer. I wish that for you, even if I can’t be there with you when it happens.”

He stormed off to a different part of the shoreline, shadows hesitating a moment before trailing him.

“I don’t know what things were like five-hundred years ago, but people’s fates are a bit more limited now. We don’t have dreams—” I matched the Bringer’s pace, walking shoulder-to-shoulder with him. “—or adventures—” Pointedly, he avoided looking at me. “—so forgive me for not being as knowledgeable as you—”

He spun to face me, catching me by the wrist. The movement was impossibly fast, marked by shadows with a faint glint of starlight within them.

I snatched my wrist away, darkness trailing behind. “I see your powers are back.” For a moment, the Bringer looked confused. Then he glanced down, noting the shadows as they rolled off his body. “You should be happier now, at least.”

His eyes snapped to mine. “I’ve lived with these shadows for centuries. They’re a part of me, but they aren’t a source of my happiness.”

“You *have* a source of happiness, then? What is it?”

He scowled, turning to face what he had called the Nocturne, and my face began to heat with a surprising amount of regret. We had just relived a deep, vicious trauma from his past in the last dream, and here I was questioning his happiness. Of course he wasn’t happy. How could he be?

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean—”

“Enough,” he muttered. “I’ve heard enough for the moment.”

Glimpses of color and light began to shimmer within the Nocturne. If I focused on a particular area, the color and light sharpened, briefly taking shape. In one section, I saw a moonlit house with a family embracing on the porch. In another, a girl walking through dry sands, white pillars, and winged statues. Then a woman, smiling by a field of shining crops. A man riding a horse down a narrow road with a cave at its end.

“What are those things in the water?”

“They’re dreams. The Nocturne holds them all—both Weaver-crafted and those of the ordinary kind.” He pulled his gaze from the waves and settled it on me. “What do you know of the Realm? Its configuration and how it functions.”

“Well, there are—or were—seven Weavers.” I counted them on my fingers. “Somnus, Xander, Theia. They control dreams of the past, present, and future. Then there are the elemental Weavers: Fenrir, Nephthys, Ceres, Lelantos. Fire, water, earth, and air.”

I could have sworn the Bringer rolled his eyes. But maybe it was just a trick of the Nocturne’s lights. “And where do they reside in the Realm?”

“They each have a domain. They’re like kingdoms in the Realm.”

“Exactly,” the Bringer agreed. “They call their lands—which include any permanent acolytes—domains. And all seven domains border the Nocturne. The nearness is important, since that’s how the Weavers access their intended dreamers.” He pointed at the Nocturne’s tumultuous waters. “Over there. See the mountains? The barest hint of clouds? Lelantos’s domain.” Sure enough, there was a faint mountain range in the distance. He pointed in another direction, toward a darker sky and shimmering line of emerald. “Ceres’s forest. Nephthys’s domain is next—you can tell by how it glitters. She thoroughly enjoys her jewels.”

“Are the Weavers there, right now? In their domains?”

He considered the question, thinking. Remembering. “In a sense. Their spiritual selves manifest within the dreams of the Nocturne. But their physical selves could be anywhere—feasting and drinking with kings and queens on earth, creating pretty things within their domains, or persuading dreamers into following them as acolytes.”

“Then we’re still in the past. None of that exists in the present.”

For a moment, genuine concern flickered in his eyes. Then it faded, quick as smoke. “As you have claimed.” He made a dismissive gesture. “I don’t know what happened to the Weavers after I was banished. It is difficult to watch the world when you’re confined to demons and the dark.”

I shivered. I couldn’t help it. It was madness—*madness* —to consider what it would be like.

Letussouttletussouttletussoutt!

How many times had he borne witness to those hellish screams? That he was even capable of a smile—or a coherent sentence—was a testament to his strength.

The Bringer ran a gauntleted hand through his hair, unaware of where my thoughts had turned. “Next to Nephthys—you cannot tell from here, but there’s the most idiotic looking palace. Fenrir’s. He—” The Bringer finally

noticed me watching him instead of looking wherever he was pointing. “What?”

“Nothing.” I managed a smile, much to the Bringer’s irritation. For all his supposed hatred of the Weavers, there was no mistaking a genuine interest in his explanation. And if he knew each of these details, his memory must have returned, too. Or at least in part. “Continue on, please. I’m learning quite a lot.”

“Are you?” he asked, scowling. “I don’t see how you’re learning anything at all by watching *me* .”

I suppressed a laugh, instead motioning toward the massive structure at the Nocturne’s center. It was a colossal, beautiful thing, glowing through its various spires and archways, and as the waves dipped, several bridges were revealed, spanning from it like spokes on a wheel.

“Whose domain is that?”

The Bringer’s eyes darkened a shade. “That is Citadel Evernight.”

Evernight.

I knew that name.

“In the demon’s stomach, your younger self asked if I was from there. And Somnus—” I searched for the right word. Invited? Called? Coerced? I settled on the first. “—invited you to it.”

“Invited?” Apparently the Bringer didn’t like my choice. “I was not invited to Evernight. I was *forced* to Evernight. After years of silence, the Weavers cornered me at my weakest. If it wasn’t for them, perhaps my fate would have differed.” For a moment, a smile ghosted his lips. “You know, it was considered an honor to be chosen as a permanent dreamer of the Realm. To be summoned by a Weaver to hone your dream talents at Evernight. You’d even have your family generously compensated in return.” He turned to me, suddenly asking, “Do you want to know how my parents died? Or how they were in life?”

The voices of his mother and father, shrieking at a young Erebus through the walls of their decaying home, came rushing back.

Sons would not make their parents choose between themselves and their children.

Sons would not dream when they should be working to provide.

Sons would not let their parents die!

I shook my head. “The last dream depicted them cruelly.”

He smiled again, but it felt cold. “My dreams were always that way. They would begin one way and twist into something else by their end.” His hands clenched at his sides, shadows twining between his fingers. “That is how I first learned how to manipulate them.”

“And by being able to manipulate your dreams—you thought a Weaver would notice you. You thought you’d be chosen.”

He nodded. “Only the most exceptional dreamers could form a dream to their will. And I was one of them.” His voice chilled as he continued, slipping into something lifeless and bitter. “But months passed, and no Weaver ever noticed me.”

“Because your power stemmed from shadows and not something simpler, like fire or water?”

He nodded. “And when my mother and father found out the truth of my powers—that they were grounded in shadow and not an element or a time construct—they began to despise me. They said I was evil. A cursed child, sent to ruin them. And in a way, I did.” He fixed his shadowed gaze on me. “In my time, families with wealth and power hired dream interpreters. Sometimes dreams were simple in meaning. Sometimes not. An interpreter ensured that the Maker’s message was clearly heard and followed.”

“That sounds like an incredible amount of responsibility.”

A cold half-smile. “Indeed. And if the dream’s interpretation was incorrect or ill-received…” He drifted off, and my imagination began to wander. “My mother and father interpreted dreams for a wealthy family in Istralla. They were well-known for their interpretations—clever, precise, and true. They eventually caught the eye of the king.”

“So they began interpreting for him?”

“For a time. And for a time we lived in luxury, with our own wing in each of his palaces. But it’s a funny thing, wealth. Power. They destroy as easily as they create.” He laughed, the sound cold and miserable. “Our new status destroyed my mother and father. As I grew older, they consulted me for their answers. They told me the Maker dulled their understanding, but I think they just grew complacent. Lazy. So they came to me. Even in their hatred, they came to me. Me—a child—secretly interpreting the dreams of royalty.”

A shiver of cold crawled over my skin. I didn’t like where this was going.

“One day, I was asked for my opinion of the king’s dream. In his dream, he saw a great, blazing sun and a shadowed moon. At first, the dream was peaceful—all was in perfect balance. But as the dream went on, the moon crept closer to the sun, ate it, and became something else. Something *other.* A thing made evil and cruel.”

“That’s horrible.” Shivering, I pressed my hands to my side, willing them to warm. “But why was the king having a nightmare? Before Corruption, they weren’t meant to exist.”

The Bringer walked closer to the waves. For the briefest of moments, It appeared as though he would walk into their depths. “When you speak of dreams, you act like you regret not having them. But dreams were never kind to me as a child. I only dreamt in demons and nightmares.”

The Bringer sighed, shaking his head as if to clear it.

“The king’s dream wasn’t a nightmare. Nightmares are personal—they uproot the dreamer’s deepest fears. His was a vision of the future. A warning. After the moon ate the sun, it bathed the land in darkness, swallowing all light. The king saw this happen. He also saw something emerging from the dark—two swords. One white, one black.”

A vision of the dream appeared from the Bringer’s hands, formed by shadows of every size, color, and texture. I watched as the storied king rose up from between his fingers, desperately swinging the swords against an unconquerable evil. It was a violent, hopeless fight. One I never wished to see again.

The king’s swords shattered before a single blow was even landed.

“The sun represented the king, and the moon represented a great demon. The dream’s warning was complicated and deadly. It warned that the king would be Corrupted by evil, and someone would seek to defeat the king with two powers: justice or logic—the white sword—and war or power—the black sword. But neither would suffice.”

The king’s mouth widened in a silent scream.

“The future would come to pass regardless.”

With a clench of the Bringer’s fist, he was put out of his misery.

“The dream was intended to warn the king of his fate. It was up to him to recognize the impending evil and to prepare for it in different ways. When I gave my opinion of the dream, it wasn’t well-received. My parents chose to tell the king a different interpretation—one that smoothed the dream’s warning into something more palatable. But someone close to the

king had overheard my original interpretation.” Absently, the metaled ends of his fingers flexed open and shut. “The king was furious. He condemned my parents—banished them for it. Made them starve. They died of disease within a year.”

“What happened to you, then?” I whispered, horrified. An image of him sprang up—of a young boy, desperately trying to feed his parents with food that never satisfied. A nightmare meant to trap and destroy. “You were just a child. You interpreted as you knew how.”

The Bringer saw the look on my face. Saw the other questions, lingering there.

Were you punished—like your mother and father? Were you left to a rotting shack in the forest, left to starve?

“I wasn’t punished for their crimes.”

“Why?”

“There were other uses for me. I was kept in the palace as the king’s chosen interpreter, for one. It was there that I met Mithras. He was the king’s only child.”

“*Mithras* ? How is he still alive? I thought only the Weavers were immortal.”

“I don’t know what sustains him, but he isn’t a Weaver. Maybe he’s cursed like I am.” A strained, irritated breath passed through his nose. “In those early years, we grew to be something like brothers. Though I was rarely allowed to leave the palace, he did everything in his power to ensure I was treated as an equal. Hell, we’d even share clothes and eat from the same table.”

“That’s difficult to imagine.”

He pulled his gaze from the Nocturne to me. Something burned there, simmering deep within the shadows. “Agreed. But loneliness can command a strong and desperate pull.”

We stood in silence for a few moments, looking out across the Nocturne. It was a horrible fate for a child—a wretched foundation on which to build a life. It explained more than one of the shadows that darkened the Bringer’s eyes.

“The Weavers oversaw two Citadels,” he began, switching subjects. “One in Noctis—Firstlight—and one in the Dream Realm. Evernight.” The Bringer walked toward one of the Nocturne’s seven bridges, shadows lapping at his pointed boots. “Firstlight allowed for Weavers to maintain

relations to earthly rulers. Sponsorships from various kingdoms and such. It is also where Weavers' physical bodies slumber. Evernight is…beyond explanation."

I looked to Evernight—at its glowing spires and impossible proportions, beckoning to us. Without understanding why, I took a step forward. Then another. Before I realized it, I was staring into the Nocturne, wondering what it would feel like to swim beneath its waves. Could I swim through it—all the way to Evernight? What would it feel like? Would it warm my skin or chill it further?

I studied a particularly tall swell, considering.

The Bringer yanked me back, pulling me by the elbow into his side. "Careful. It's known to call dreamers to its depths."

I gritted my teeth, willing the Nocturne's call to fade but less willing to leave the Bringer's hold. "What would happen if I fell in?"

"Most of the time, dreamers *walk* in. Willingly." He frowned. "Trained at Evernight, you'd enter the Nocturne in order to influence the dream of another. On behalf of your bonded Weaver's directions."

"And untrained?"

"Untrained, you would lose yourself in the Nocturne, jumping from dream to dream until you lost all sense of who you were and why you were in the Realm in the first place." A wicked gleam formed in his eyes. "Dreams are feeble things, meant to live and die by the will of the Weaver who built them." He drew near. "You'd wake a hollow shell of your former self, unable to recall the most basic elements of your identity."

"That's horrible. Why would the Maker—" Then I noticed a faint smirk on his lips. "You're *joking* ," I said incredulously. "You're actually *joking.*"

"I am not," he insisted. But the smirk grew, widening his mouth as it bloomed. "There are many things I do well. There are less things that I do willingly. Joking is not something I do well *or* willingly."

Without warning, a deafening sound echoed across the sea.

Dmm. Dmm. Dmm.

It sounded like a death knell. No—louder.

Dmm. Dmm. Dmm.

After the seventh bell, the air stilled. The Nocturne's waves fell at once, smoothing into glass, and seven great bridges were fully revealed, spanning across the sea from Evernight into their separate territories.

The Bringer's grip on my elbow tightened.

I expected the worst. A monster, rising from the Nocturne, water dripping down its scales. Or an evil darkness, devouring Evernight like the moon in the king's dream. Something—anything—evil, terrible, or wrong.

Instead, the Shadow Bringer asked, rather nonchalantly, "Have you ever been to a ball, Esmer?"

The question was so unexpected that I laughed. "They're not exactly commonplace in Norhavellis."

But Eden and I always dreamed of what it would be like to attend one.

The smirk was back—almost a smile, this time. "Then let us disrupt one."

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CHAPTER 40

I'M NOT SURE WHAT I EXPECTED, BUT IT WASN'T A BOAT.

The vessel rose up from a waterway in the middle of the nearest bridge, gleaming proudly in the twilight. It was a sleek, elegant thing, adorned with two throne-like chairs. As soon as the Shadow Bringer and I sat, the boat tilted forward, cutting soundlessly through the channel.

I fidgeted in my chair of tufted silk, wishing I had something to brace myself against. I had some experience riding horses, and I had been inside a carriage once. It wasn't a *working* carriage, exactly. More like an empty shell that sat forgotten behind Norhavellis's blacksmith. But still.

A boat was another thing entirely.

I bit my tongue against a sentence that would betray my unease and forced myself to stop glancing down—at the Nocturne, with its eerie stillness and faint, slithering shadows—and to instead look up at the towering structure that was Evernight. Closer now, its walls seemed carved from a mountain. It rose up in jagged swathes of stone, forming the base of seven massive arches, and within each arch flowed a waterfall, pouring into the ancient sea below. The tops of the arches seemed to be circling something—what, exactly, I couldn't tell.

It was too far up in the sky to see.

The boat rocked to the left, almost sending me careening into the Bringer's shoulder. I tried to counteract the next motion—which would surely be a dip to the right—but I guessed wrong. My hip slid awkwardly against the silk, sending me off the seat and onto the floor. Reflexively, I grabbed onto something to steady myself.

Unfortunately, that something was the Shadow Bringer's thigh.

He stiffened at my touch, thoroughly forced from whatever musings he had been lost in.

“Easy,” he muttered. But instead of ridiculing me, or throwing me off the boat into the Nocturne, the Bringer simply offered me his hand. I took it gratefully, settling back into my seat with no small amount of embarrassment. “The Weavers enjoy making the Realm as lifelike as possible. Some of their creations translate better than others, as you have just discovered.”

Other boats could be seen in the distance, carrying their appointed dreamers in vessels similar to ours. And sure enough, they rocked and swayed just as much as ours did.

“Interesting,” I managed, gripping the edge of my seat. “I can’t say I understand the logic. They could have made it glide—or fly.”

The boat suddenly righted itself, cutting through the water like a hot knife through butter. As it picked up speed, a soft wind, touched by twilight and the scent of the Nocturne, gently lifted my hair. The only indicator of the Bringer’s influence was a haze of darkness at the ship’s underbelly.

And the Bringer hadn’t even twitched a finger.

“If you’re going to control the boat, you might as well make it pretty,” I challenged. I was impressed, but I refused to give him the satisfaction.

He arched his brow. “Like this?”

The boat tripled in size, stretching itself tall and wide as it grew to fill the waterway. A carved figurehead emerged from the front, shaped into the visage of a one-winged angel, and black sails, glistening like a blanket of stars, unfurled from its new mast. And, much like it had been saturated in ink, the boat—now a magnificent ship—became a thing of darkness.

The Shadow Bringer gave me a pointed look, clearly amused with his capabilities.

I rolled my eyes. “Now you’re just showing off. But yes, like this.”

I found myself leaning into the wind, smiling even as Evernight loomed overhead. It was a strange feeling, being whisked away to a Realm ball with the Shadow Bringer at my side. I considered what we were about to face and wondered if it would be a nightmare, like the dream before, or something else. Either way, we’d be facing both the demon and a part of the Bringer’s memory.

And this one seemed important.

Because even while the Bringer seemed at ease in his ship of darkness, there was trepidation in his eyes. Like he knew what was coming. Or, if he didn't, his instincts knew.

I didn't have time to ask.

A crowd filled with dreamers was gathering in front of Evernight, stepping from their various ships. I couldn't tell who was a Weaver, who was a regular dreamer, or who was a student of Evernight. To me, they all looked the same—clothed in outrageous colors and textures and outfitted to look like kings and queens. But even in their finery, it was us they stared at. Hundreds of eyes, staring bright with envy—no, *hunger* —at our ship's power and beauty.

They were staring at us, too.

"They're staring," I hissed. We couldn't be seen in the last dream, but that clearly wasn't the case in this one. "Why are they staring?"

Unbothered, the Bringer leaned back into his seat. "Because I gave them something to stare at. It's as you demanded, remember? The ship needed to be *pretty* ."

"Right. Well, they look like they want to eat us." I mimicked his posture and leaned into the silk. If he wasn't concerned, then maybe I didn't need to be, either. "If they attack us, I hope you're as confident in your weapons as you are in your ship-building. It'll be you versus a few hundred."

"Just me? You have a habit of using the shadows, too," he drawled, clinking the tips of his armored fingers together. "You should be perfectly capable of defending yourself. Myself versus half."

"Taking your power by coincidence does not mean that I know how to fully use it."

"That sounds like a personal concern."

"*Personal* ? My concerns are your concerns, Bringer. We're in this together, whether you like that or not."

"Let's go with the latter."

Once our ship slid to a stop in front of Evernight, I fully expected the crowd to storm us, surround us, then climb up and over the ship's side to attack us. But as we stepped from the ship and it sank back into the water, their eyes drifted elsewhere. As if the ship had never existed at all.

As if *we* had never existed at all.

"My ship wasn't a part of the original dream, so it cannot be remembered for long," the Bringer explained, making his way to

Evernight's main entrance. There were three passages cut into the mountainside; the left went down, the right went up, and the middle went straight. So far, none of the dreamers had approached the middle; masked gatekeepers, clothed in black with silver insignias on their chests, directed them left and right. "And we will be invisible here. Neither truly seen or fully remembered. It's why I didn't remember you saving me from the demon's pit. I only knew that someone—or something—had lifted me from my darkness. And that I cared deeply for them because of it."

I care deeply for you, his words seemed to imply.

Face burning, I noted the crowd's excitement. They were radiant, beaming, and chattering like they were about to experience the most glorious event in all their lives. Still, I questioned whether they truly couldn't see us. Some looked as though they were purposefully *avoiding* eye contact with us.

"Think of this as a frozen memory," the Bringer continued, failing to notice the dreamers that had secretly begun to watch him. They whispered as we passed, glancing at him from the corners of their eyes. Some looked in awe or admiration, others in outright fear. "We can do whatever we wish within it."

"*His hair, what do you suppose— "*

"*Perhaps it is the theme— "*

"*But that look in his eyes, don't you think— "*

And some looked at me, too. Not so much in awe or fear, but jealousy. Anger, even.

"*No one has ever seen her here before— "*

"*A new scholar, perhaps— "*

"*He would never be— "*

"Evernight is permanently housed within the Realm, so there is never a primary dreamer," the Bringer continued, oblivious. As we passed through the crowd, some of the bolder ones reached out to feel the edge of his cloak. "No singular Weaver in control, either."

I swatted at a man's too-eager hand. "Bringer—"

"Lord Erebus," announced a gatekeeper, stepping in front of us and sweeping into a bow. He adjusted his collar as he rose, fixing me with a curious once-over. A silver mask covered most of his face, framing the top of his mustache. "You may pass, of course, but the Seven have decreed specific attire for the dreamers."

The Shadow Bringer stared at the gatekeeper as if he had grown a second head. As if growing a second head would be more likely than him actually *seeing* us—and, consequently, *talking* to us—like we were regular dreamers and not the Shadow Bringer and his companion from five-hundred years in the future.

“I must also take your p-partner’s name,” the gatekeeper stammered, flustered by the Bringer’s silence. “She is not listed on the register—we did not know you would be bringing a guest—but I will, of course, make all suitable arrangements. How nice it is that you brought someone—”

“She is my—” the Shadow Bringer began, cutting the man off.

“It’s Esmer,” I interrupted. I tried to look as pleasant as possible, even as my name echoed in the crowd. *Esmer. Esmer. Esmer.* By the fourth *Esmer* , my name was written on a scroll that appeared from thin air. “What attire is appropriate?”

The gatekeeper straightened. “It is the Revel of Rebirth, lady. Weaver Lelantos has prepared the appropriate specifications to honor the occasion.” He pointed at the left passageway. “Evernight scholars will attire you within.”

“Thank you,” I said, trying for nonchalance. As if I knew exactly what he was talking about.

I gave the Bringer a pointed look. ‘Frozen memory’ this was definitely *not* . It all felt strange—*wrong* . Like we were intruding, wrongfully so, on a life already lived. Was it possible that the Bringer did something to skew the dream? He ran a finger along the armor at his neck, fidgeting with one of its points. I had never seen him *fidget* before.

The Bringer noticed me looking at him. Shadows spun slowly within his irises as he unhooked his hand from his neck.

“Have a glorious Revel, my lord,” said the gatekeeper, bowing again to the Shadow Bringer. He bowed a third time, this time to me. “As may you, Esmer.”

At once, a silver-masked girl with golden brown skin and hair braided like a crown emerged from the left passage, wearing black robes lined in silver. An Evernight scholar, I assumed, based on her intelligent, appraising eyes and the quiet, confident way she carried herself. She appeared to be my age, if not younger, and I found myself wondering what Weaver she had pledged herself to. Ceres? Theia? I bit the inside of my cheek, unsure. I had no way of knowing what her gifts were, so guessing would be useless.

“Welcome to Evernight, dreamer. My name is Aris,” she said, regarding me with polite curiosity. It was different from the curiosity of the gatekeeper—or the judgmental crowd. “Please, follow me. I can escort you personally.” She nodded to the Shadow Bringer, as if her escorting me was a personal favor. “Have a glorious Revel, Lord Erebus. Ceveon and Sorren are inside.”

The Bringer’s face twisted into cold indifference. “Of course they would be.”

And maybe he would have said more, but Aris gently touched my arm, cuing me forward. Evernight gleamed overhead, beckoning me to experience something that was only available through the pages of a storybook, but I still hesitated.

I should be excited, I told myself. Elliot would be excited.

Eden would have been, too.

I looked at the Shadow Bringer one final time, perhaps seeking his approval or reassurance, but he didn’t notice. He was too busy glaring at Evernight like it was a foe to be conquered, killed, or strangled with his bare hands.

I turned back to the passage, frustrated.

Maybe I was right to be worried after all.

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CHAPTER 41

THE MOMENT I STEPPED OVER THE THRESHOLD AND INTO EVERNIGHT, A warm breeze licked my boots, curled around my legs, and skimmed my back. Then it cupped my face, examining me, before whisking through my hair and away to something else.

"What was that?"

Aris squeezed my elbow. "It's Evernight. It does that to dreamers—skims their bodies and reads their minds. Like a thorough guard. Or nosy grandmother."

"Bizarre," I breathed, wondering what Evernight saw when it examined me. Did it know that I was from a different time? Did it even care? I glanced around, half-expecting to see eyes on the walls.

"When it first happened to me, I thought it similar to the attentions of a dog," she said, chuckling softly. "But don't be alarmed—it happens to all of us. Some, every time. Others, once and never again."

"What does it do if it doesn't like what it finds?"

Aris shrugged. "That depends. Evernight could deny you entry or throw you out. Or it might hold your secrets and deliver them straight to one of the Seven."

I did not like the sound of that.

"So did I pass, then?"

"Possibly. But sometimes Evernight chooses to do nothing, even if it questions your origins or intent."

I *definitely* did not like the sound of that.

Before I could ask more questions, the passage opened into an excessively opulent chamber. My eyes burned from the brightness of it, just

as my nose burned from the smell. Jasmine, lemon, rose, pear, vanilla. Other things that I couldn't name. Things I had never smelled before, but wanted to. Mirrors lined the walls, each with its own golden chair, and botanical arrangements in glass vases sat between each mirror, growing so long and so wild that they trailed to the floor, eventually crossing stems and growing into intricate shapes, whorls, and paths.

Aris stood by me as I stepped to the side, watching as women in an array of colorful dresses, each more gaudy and more intricate than the next, filed in. They chatted excitedly amongst themselves, taking their seats in front of the mirrors. Once seated, male and female scholars, dressed in black with the silver insignia of Evernight on their robes, began at once assessing and changing the women's appearances. It was a kind of magic that only a dream could produce—instant changes of hair color, makeup, adornments, clothing—and I couldn't help but stare. It was fascinating, and most scholars only needed a minute to work their magic.

One minute of concentration and anything was possible.

Hair of all colors, textures, and lengths were shaped into elegant styles without a single pin. Dresses were shortened, fabric loosened, colors lightened into ivory, rose, peach. Masks were added last. And while the dresses, makeup, and hair varied from woman to woman, every mask was the same ornate design: carved ivory, inlaid feathers, and rows of delicate beadwork lining the edges. But even masked, as the women left the chamber, they looked lighter—unburdened.

Well, most of them.

"Hideous. This color doesn't suit me at all," a woman at the mirror complained. She pinched her skin as she examined her eyes, lips, and cheeks. Her scowl deepened the longer she looked. "Sorren always used a shade darker—less plum, more berry." The attending scholar brushed a hand over the woman's face, delicate as a breeze, and the makeup changed. I had thought it looked fine before. But the woman smiled, pleased. "There. I look beautiful now, don't I?"

The scholar nodded, bowed quickly, then promptly moved on to the next dreamer.

"He probably thinks he's too good for this work anymore," another woman remarked. A scholar was in the middle of fixing her hair into a loose braid atop her head. "You saw how he looked at us the last time. Pride is such a sin."

The first woman rolled her eyes, adjusting her flowing skirts as she rose. “And a houseless is still a houseless, no matter what friends they keep. One would think Sorren understood that by now.”

“One would think,” the second woman echoed. Her attendant finished her hair, and she beamed at herself in the mirror. “Lovely.” To the first woman, she said sweetly, “Have a glorious Revel.”

The woman returned her saccharine smile. “And a glorious Revel to you, too.”

Aris gestured at a chair to my left.

“May I?” she asked, waiting for a nod before setting her hands on my head. Her fingers meandered through the strands, gently lifting them from my scalp. “Your hair is a fine color—and quite full. It needs little else.” She let the strands fall; at once they became untangled, glossy, and loosely curled. “Unless you’d prefer something more eye-catching?”

Aris gave a subtle nod toward the woman at my right.

The woman was in the middle of admiring her hair, which didn’t look that different from a large bird’s nest. Even for a Realm style, I imagined it must feel heavy and awkward, but the woman seemed pleased with herself, ignoring her attending scholar’s suggestions.

I winced. “Definitely not.”

“Good. And besides, you don’t need the distraction,” Aris agreed, turning her attention to my face. She brushed a hand over my cheeks, my nose, my eyebrows. Lightly pinched my chin. Took the edge of her nail and lightly traced the shape of a half-moon on my forehead. “I think I will accentuate your eyes, add amber flecks to catch the light, and use a darker rose for your lips. What do you think?”

I looked at myself in the mirror. Tried—and failed—to envision what she was planning. My eyes, lashes, and brows were already dark. My natural lip color was muted. Unremarkable. I didn’t know what dark rose lips would look like or what ‘amber flecks’ were and why they needed to ‘catch the light’.

“I don’t usually wear makeup,” I admitted, trying not to fidget under Aris’s scrutiny.

“Oh, this is far better than makeup. Promise. Now, let me see…”

And before I let out my next breath, my face changed.

It was as she had promised. Deep browns and simmering golds to highlight my eyes. My features darkened—became more defined and

commanding—and the color on my lips made them appear fuller. Tempting, even. And at my temples, brushed artfully into my hair, were shimmering amber flecks. I had worried she would make me unrecognizable, but I still looked like myself. Polished and perhaps even beautiful, but myself.

Aris gave an approving nod. “You look lovely, Esmer. Lord Erebus will surely think so, too.”

I blushed. Actually *blushed* . Over a simple compliment.

Aris must think I am incredibly vain. Someone easily swayed by pretty words—just like all the other women here.

“It is not wrong to acknowledge or appreciate your beauty,” Aris remarked, as if guessing exactly what I was thinking. “In fact, I think it is a rather honorable thing to recognize beauty in yourself. No matter which form it may take.”

She was sincere. But I had already looked away from the mirror.

“I…thank you,” I managed. “Truly.”

“Of course. Now, for your attire,” Aris took a step back, assessing. “You will want to match Lord Erebus, I presume. He does enjoy his black, but this Revel requires a lighter touch.”

I bristled. “I don’t have to match him.”

She gave me a peculiar look. “You are his guest, are you not? It is tradition to honor your Realm host.”

“And I would honor him by matching him?”

I pictured the Bringer and I entering the ball together. Envisioned the hundreds of eyes as they swiveled to stare, fixating on our matching dramatic capes, devilish armor, and pointed boots. What a pair we’d make. A very obvious, not-blending-in-at-all pair.

“Yes,” she said with a smile. “But your attire would not be identical to his, if that is what you are imagining.”

“It wasn’t.” *It was* .

Soft grey fabric cocooned itself over my old clothes, squeezing, shaping, and stretching them into something new. As the cocoon unfurled, it revealed floating layers of dove grey fabric, delicate sleeves that fell from my shoulders, and a wide, somewhat revealing neckline. Soft slippers cushioned my feet, molded to me as if I had worn them my entire life. Lastly, a mask nestled itself to my face, curving elegantly over my nose and eyes. It was grey—not ivory, like the others—and a simple, flattering shape that matched the rest of my dress.

My breath caught as I studied myself.

I had imagined, once, what I might look like in a princess's gown. Eden and I shared many of these daydreams as girls, describing what we'd purchase when we could finally visit a proper dress shop. What we'd wear to balls or garden strolls with wealthy lords and handsome princes. What we'd wear to our own weddings, even. In truth, we had little understanding of what people wore outside of Norhavellis. What colors were popular or what quality satin or velvet felt like. All we had were storybooks and the imagination of children. Still, even with all my daydreams, never in my life had I imagined wearing something so magnificent.

"Go on, take a twirl. I know you want to," Aris said, grinning. "This may be my best work yet. Come on—" She guided me into a spin, making a sound of approval as my dress gently floated behind me.

"How long have you been a student here? You're very talented."

We completed a second spin. "I was recruited at thirteen with my twin brother."

"Are you assigned to a Weaver, then? I've always been curious as to what that is like."

At once, she dropped my hands. "I should escort you to the Revel. I've taken enough of your time."

Wait, no—

"If I said something wrong, I'm sorry," I said quickly, stiffening at the disgust and irritation in her tone. What unspoken line had I crossed? If I had already blundered this severely, I wouldn't last five minutes at the Revel. "Erebus has told me some things about Evernight, but he tends to be a little cryptic. My question wasn't intended to hurt you, but I apologize if it did."

She held my stare, challenging me. Finally, she let loose a sigh. The fight in her weakened. Snuffed itself out like a dying flame. "No, I overreacted. You clearly weren't intending harm, but I took it as such. To answer your question, I have no house. I have yet to be selected by a Weaver."

"Why not?"

"It is…unclear. But I have yet to show significant potential in any of the Seven's specialties." She added, voice lowering, "If I'm not selected by eighteen, I'll become houseless and either work to maintain Evernight until the end of my mortal days or be banished from the Realm forever. I'll never be able to join a Weaver in their domain or do anything of any true purpose

or importance.” She squeezed her hands together. “My brother and I turn eighteen at the end of this year.”

I shook my head, contemplating the reality of that fate. “And your brother? Is he facing the same future as you?”

She nodded, eyes downcast. “And if he isn’t chosen, it will devastate him. We’ve both trained years for this, but he’s the one it will hurt the most.” Aris coughed, straightening her black skirts with a flourish. “I’m sorry for rambling. I should get you to the Revel before Lord Erebus hunts you down himself.”

Before we left, I caught my reflection a final time. I almost stumbled, noting something different in my eyes.

There were shadows in my irises, swirling and vibrant.

Just like the Shadow Bringer’s.

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CHAPTER 42

I SMELLED THE NEXT ROOM BEFORE I COULD SEE IT.

Salt and flowers. The wormy smell of fresh earth. The brush of a storm-soaked wind. Tree roots, pine needles, and sun-warmed fur. Damp rocks and cracked acorns and sweet dandelions. Tart berries. Gentle touches of lavender, sage, mint. And roses. The soft, powdery scent of roses. Peonies. Tulips.

And about one hundred other things that I couldn't name.

"It smells…" I trailed off, unsure of what word, exactly, could possibly do it justice.

"Most say 'heavenly'. But I've heard one or two dreamers who thought it too rustic. As if the smell of earth is a thing reserved for animals." Aris took a deep, cleansing breath. "Or those of common blood," she added, frowning.

"That's ridiculous. It smells incredible. Like joy and wonder."

She led me to a glass bridge that split the center of a cavernous antechamber. Except there was no ground under the bridge—and no visible ceiling, either. Only pillared walls connected the room's various parts. Under the bridge was a vista of a great forest, and above the bridge, where the chamber's ceiling cracked apart, was a cyclical sky. Dawn, day, dusk, night. The sky rotated quickly, mesmerizing in its pure depiction of the sun, moon, stars, and clouds. It illuminated the bridge and the forest with new colors every few steps.

It was life itself, captured in a room.

No, it was more than life, idealized beyond what would be possible outside of the Realm. The trees were too even, the sky too wondrous, the

flowers too full, the rocks too precisely placed. Still, I couldn't help but to recognize the majesty of it all. It was, after all, the essence of earth made into its fullest potential. And as we walked across the bridge—my footing unsure in my new slippers—I breathed deep and examined all that I could.

A strange emotion welled up in my chest, hollow and aching. I wanted to share this experience with someone—wanted deeply, achingly, to share in what I was seeing, hearing, and smelling. Elliot and Eden would have loved Evernight. And the Bringer—

I'd very much like to watch his eyes as he beheld the room.

"Every year, a different Weaver is charged with furnishing Evernight," Aris explained, softly interrupting my wandering thoughts. "It is Ceres's year."

Furnishing Evernight.

As if the scene was no more important than a rug or a houseplant.

She pointed at the sky, growing heavy with the colors of dawn. "This room is enchanted to change at precise points on the bridge. But only to the beholder." She gestured at a family ahead of us. They laughed as several plumed birds flew overhead, circling once before diving underneath the bridge. "By the time we reach that point, it will be day. But they will be further along—so they will see the onset of dusk. Three cycles pass before we reach the end."

"It's beautiful."

"It is. And tedious," Aris sighed. "And a few hundred paces too long."

"What's the purpose of it, then? To be beautiful and tedious?"

She shrugged. "Evernight serves a different purpose for each of its inhabitants. And it's best to be aware that some purposes are darker than others."

At its end, the bridge forked into three paths; the dreamers, dressed in their finery, continued forward. Their accompanying scholars did not. With a quick curtsy or bow, the scholars left them to continue on. Alone.

"Go to the middle bridge," Aris directed. "Revels are for the Weavers, their acolytes, and dreamers. The scholars have other matters to attend to."

"Like making dreamers look acceptable?" I asked, fluffing the folds of my dress.

"You look more than acceptable," she said approvingly. "You should be thankful I found you. Others would have put you in yellow. Or worse, pink."

“If that’s the case, I’m *very* thankful. I doubt Erebus would recognize me if I was wearing pink,” I said with a grin. Aris returned my smile, but her expression felt a little sad. And expectant, somehow. “I hope you’re chosen by a Weaver,” I added. And I meant it. “I hope your brother is, too.”

Aris bowed, and when she stood again, she straightened her back and held her chin high. “Enjoy the Revel. Perhaps I will see you again, one day.”

And she left me to continue alone.

I hesitated at the end of the path, centering my breath. In the flurry of being whittled into a finer, more elegant version of myself, I had nearly forgotten where I was. And, perhaps even more importantly, where the Shadow Bringer was.

And where *was* the Shadow Bringer?

More dreamers passed by, continuing to the Revel. Women in floating gowns and glistening makeup. Men, some in makeup, too, in equally brilliant clothes. Supple fabric, open necklines, dramatic hemlines, intricate layers and beadwork. There were a few children, too; some of the younger ones beamed with excitement, but others seemed listless, as if they’d already been to Evernight a thousand times and this was just another boring familial requirement.

Men, women, children. Beautiful, chattering dreamers of all ages.

But no Shadow Bringer.

Maybe he decided to pursue whatever it was he wanted to do now that we could be seen and felt. Maybe he figured I’d only get in his way. I gritted my teeth, considering. Okay, so maybe I *would* get in his way. But that would only be because I was brave enough to try.

But damn it all if I would sit here waiting for him.

I decided to follow the next family—a man and woman with their son and daughter—slowing my pace so as to not draw attention to myself. The mother and father walked with fluid movements and raised chins, maintaining their grace and poise even in the casual audience of their immediate family. Even the guise of Realm attire couldn’t hide what—or who—they probably were.

Royalty. Or near enough to it.

My mother and father had tried to mimic that kind of elegance once. Tried to fold it into their steps and smear it over their hard edges and dirt-covered lines. A tired king and his dutiful queen.

I folded my arms over my chest, frowning at the turn my thoughts had taken.

Who was I to judge my parents? I was just as broken as they were.

If not worse.

The middle passageway brightened significantly as we neared the exit, widening and arching up in time with our progress. At the top, the bridge paused in its ascent, caught by a swirling veil of mist that obscured our steps.

The daughter visibly balked, shivering as soon as the mist touched her skin. “This had better be good,” she said with a sigh. “The last time they did the mist, it was so dull. Who even cares about old war demonstrations? They’re already dead.”

The brother glared at her, more than ready to participate in a battle with his sister. “You think everything is boring. I should throw you over the bridge. Then you wouldn’t have to suffer the intolerable dullness any longer.”

“How creative,” she hissed, flicking her hair over her shoulder and quickening her steps. “Is that how you punish your servants, too? Throw them over your fancy drawbridge? Find your imagination, brother. Or did you lose it at the last Revel? With that ugly lord’s son—“

“Ugly?” he hissed back. “Ugly? What’s ugly is your gross stain of a dress. Why would you let them make it orange?”

“How does this look orange to you? It’s *peach* ,” she snapped, nearly shouting. But she picked at her dress anyway, examining the fabric. “Just—just stop talking to me. I don’t need the validation of an idiot.”

Their mother spun around, her mouth frozen in a serene smile. Which made it all the more frightening as she said, “What is *dull* and *ugly* is sitting in your bedchamber, miserable and alone, as everyone else in society is enjoying the Revel. Your father and I can see to it that you never attend one again.”

The brother and sister immediately straightened their backs and squared their shoulders, as if to remind their mother how prim and perfect her children truly were.

I couldn’t help it. I laughed.

The mother had already turned around, no longer bothered by her children’s bickering, but the brother and sister spun at once, eyes wide behind their masks.

“The audacity,” the sister gasped, mortified.

The brother frowned at me before dragging his eyes from my feet to the top of my curled hair. Then he smirked, as if discovering some strange, disturbing secret. “You’re some fledgling acolyte’s new pet, aren’t you? You must be so overwhelmed. Or—” He made a point to look around us. “Oh, I’m sorry. Have you been forgotten already? You poor thing. The acolytes can be so fickle.”

“I’m no one’s pet, thank you very much,” I snapped. “And my *friend* is waiting for me inside.”

“It really is a pity to be alone on a Revel. And in such a depressing dress, too,” the sister added.

The brother cocked his head and thumbed his chin. “Actually, it’s quite a nice dress.”

“It is *not* ,” the sister insisted.

“Who made it? And your makeup. The glamour that they did with your eyes is striking—”

“Why do you care? *Ugh.* You really are the worst.”

They turned their backs to me, more fascinated with their argument than my dress or my makeup. The mist snapped at their heels, partially obscuring them despite their nearness.

And just as quickly as they lost interest in me, the mist lifted.

The coliseum that appeared before us fell straight out of the pages of Elliot’s favorite Weaver book. Rows upon rows of gilded seats circled the coliseum floor, filled with dreamers enjoying the finest of food, drink, and entertainment. Chalices automatically refilled themselves with sparkling liquid, and platters were always full and brimming with colorful, strange, and fragrant foods. Dreamers filled the seats in their beautiful attire and pristine masks smiling, laughing, flirting—vying mightily for the attention of others.

Everything felt vibrant, fresh, *alive* .

Some dreamers swiveled to regard me with a curious or scrutinizing eye, but I was mostly left to wander without interruption. If they remembered who I was from the Shadow Bringer’s dramatic entrance, they didn’t show it. The food, the drink, the company—it was all more tempting than a lone girl who may or may not be associated with their Lord Erebus.

I took a seat and picked up a stray goblet, interested in what an Evernight drink might taste like. I knew I needed to find the Shadow

Bringer, but couldn’t I enjoy myself in the meantime?

Stop thinking about the Bringer—he clearly isn’t thinking of you. Or looking, for that matter.

Clarity burst through me as I drank from the goblet, cooling my skin and tingling across my tongue. It tasted of fresh rain, morning mist, and a little like the gasp of air you take while running—the breath you force into your lungs when you’re at the peak of exhaustion, giving you a glorious burst of raw, powerful energy. It tasted of freedom and redemption and hope.

A bit like the sky, I thought.

So I took another sip. And another. I tried all kinds of drinks and food, each tasting more brilliant and more invigorating than the next. And the more I consumed, the more I craved.

I wanted *more , more , more* .

For what felt like forever—and not nearly enough—I laughed and smiled and drank and ate with the masked dreamers around me. Watched as great winged beasts flew overhead. Smiled at the compliments of men and women. Of my dress. Of my skin. Of my beauty. Everything was lost to me. Time, purpose, and logic. Anything that wasn’t the here, the now—none of that mattered.

And the more I felt like I belonged among these mysterious, beautiful people.

Maybe I didn’t want to go back home after all. If I forgot my purpose, maybe I could stay here forever. Here I could be who I was meant to be: beautiful, glorious, free.

Free!

As the night—or day, because who could tell?—spiraled on and the winged creatures stopped their flight, the conversation slowed to a deep, vibrating *thrum* . At the height of the silence, the dreamers’ attention snapped to a mist-veiled archway on the opposite side of the coliseum.

“Has that always been there?” I asked, taking another gulp of my drink and settling back into my chair. The young man beside me—a cousin of a king of some faraway kingdom—wrapped his hands around me. “I hadn’t even noticed.”

“It has,” he whispered into my hair, toying with my curls as he added a small braid. He took his time, deliberately forming the braid as slowly as possible, but I was strangely unbothered. I was more transfixed with his

eyes of molten amber. “The Weavers are about to make their procession. How thrilling.”

Glee built in my chest, heavy and overwhelming. Glee the anticipation of something new, something *better* —

Fenrir the Fire Weaver appeared first, stalking out of the mist like a lion after a long and glorious hunt. His body, loosely draped in robes the color of wet blood, displayed a wealth of black tattoos. They clawed up his chest, stopping at his jaw; his face was bare save for a ruby crown and a dominating, white-toothed grin. But his eyes were something else—something unnatural and indicative of his power. They burned with a fire so bright and so wild that it hurt to even *look* at him—even from across the length of the coliseum.

His acolytes fell in line behind him, all clothed the color of wet blood, too. They bore their lord’s sigil proudly, rubies gleaming from their throats and hands, and walked down the coliseum steps with power, glory, and purpose.

Nephthys the Water Weaver came next, more stunning in person than any storybook illustration. Sea-green hair curled down her bronze shoulders, falling proudly across shoulders dusted in jewels, and ocean eyes sparkled above a mouth pursed in mischief.

And pride, I thought.

A sapphire crown arched across her brow, matching the blue pearls beading her bodice and skirts. Her dress moved as water would, pooling from one step to the next. Like Fenrir’s, her acolytes emerged behind her, wearing extravagant blue silks, matching sapphires, and beaded slippers.

Then there was Ceres the Earth Weaver, garbed wildflowers, undergrowth, and leaves. A horned headpiece curled from her scalp, embedded with emeralds yet dripping with what looked like spiderwebs, roses, and small skeletons. She was a walking contradiction; the contrast between life and death, growth and decay. And her followers held themselves as she did. Steady feet and steadier hands, rooted in the earth. Only they didn’t wear spiderwebs or dying things. Layered in green robes and dark leathers, they looked practical—grounded. As they walked, their emerald amulets glittered.

The three time Weavers emerged next: Somnus, Theia, and Xander.

Somnus slipped from the dark like a snake unbound, clothed in black and a crown of bone. Xander stepped to his left, the immortal warrior with a

king’s all-knowing gaze, crowned in gold and flanked by floating swords. Theia completed the trio, draped in translucent fabric and a brilliant diamond crown.

Their acolytes emerged together, all in armor. They looked ready for a war, not a party, and they held themselves as such. Trained. Expectant. *Aware* .

The man beside me—a prince or a cousin to one, I couldn’t remember—put his mouth to my ear.

“The two strays are next,” he whispered. His breath was hot on my skin and as sweet as rotten plums. “How delightful.”

I angled my shoulders away from him.

“Who?”

He drank from his chalice, not bothering to wipe away the liquid that dripped down his chin. “You really haven’t been here before, have you? The special little lords of darkness and light.”

Two figures, both in finely tailored dress leathers, appeared under the arch. The left wore a circlet of gold; the right, a circlet of silver. At the top of the coliseum stairs, they shared a warm smile.

Mithras and Erebus.

Two men flanked Erebus, now a young man with raven-black hair, as he made his way to the coliseum floor. The first man walked with confidence and easy grace, nodding at the patrons nearest to him. He was tall—taller than Erebus—with deep caramel-brown hair, light brown skin, and an easy smile. The second kept a quieter, more calculated presence. Pale and mean-eyed, with sleek black hair falling to his jaw, he glared at the stands as if making a judgment about every patron in attendance.

“Lowly bastards,” the man beside me grumbled. “A houseless should never be made into something they are not. It’s like giving a pig a crown and calling it a king.”

“How are they houseless? They look to be quite powerful,” I said, ignoring the man’s crude dig.

“Houseless, scum, pigs—they're all the same. Erebus and Mithras were both scholars at Evernight, but they never possessed a specific affinity.” The man shook his head and took another sloppy drink from his chalice. “Fortunately for them, they demonstrated power in other ways and became the Realm’s most illustrious demon hunters.”

“It sounds like they’re of benefit to the Realm, then.”

“The Weavers may think so, but that doesn’t mean we agree,” he responded, low and guttural. For a moment, his eyes darkened, becoming something evil and wrong. But it was only for a moment.

He took a final swig. The darkness was gone, replaced by mild boredom.

My skin prickled, buzzing with anticipation and fear that carved away my clouded edges. It didn’t seem possible that Erebus and Mithras would be friends—even five-hundred years in the past—but there they were, chins raised high and smiling across the coliseum as if they were celebrating something magnificent. They frequently turned to each other, sharing some secret joke or another.

They looked happy. As if the world no longer weighed on them.

And just like that, the host of the Revel finally appeared.

Lelantos jumped from the sky in a burst of blue, sparkling lightning. As he dropped, he splayed his arms wide—and the sky changed, shifting from twilight into clouds heavy with storm. He pulled the clouds closer, closer, and *closer still* , forcing them to spiral around the coliseum. The clouds moved quickly, spinning faster and faster, sparking with light and booming low with thunder. And as the clouds spun, the colosseum began to spin, too; it slowly rocked on its axis, tilting slightly to the left. Then the right. Finally, it *cracked* . In a rush of wind and lightning, the coliseum lifted into the air.

I gripped the edge of my seat, trying to anchor myself to something—anything.

The amber-eyed man laughed at me. “Easy. It’s not as though they’d make us fall into the Nocturne—” I stood up. Shoved myself out of his hands. His eyes burned with rot, twisting into malice. “Where are you going? You don’t have anyone here. Boring little dreamer, all alone.”

He stood up, squeezing my shoulders as the coliseum shook. No one noticed or cared. They were too busy laughing about the Revel’s newest entertainment.

At that moment, I was back in that clearing, a wild-eyed boy pinning me to the ground.

Fingernails ripped into my skin, tearing lines in my neck. I swiped at his face, kicked at his shins, but it was useless, useless—

The man’s lips bent into a sneer all the way up to the edge of his mask. “You don’t belong here. Why don’t you just *wake up* —”

He didn’t get to finish his sentence. Wings, unfurling in a snap of feathers, burst from our backs.

And just as the coliseum rose, it fell.

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CHAPTER 43

IT WAS SOMETHING OUT OF A STORY—A FICTION.

A *dream* .

Now clothed in the revel's biggest surprise—*wings* —dreamers and the Weavers with their acolytes floated in the clouds above the Nocturne. The coliseum had dropped, settling back into Evernight like a dog curling up in its favorite burrow, and the amber-eyed man had turned his back to me, no longer interested in my attention. Gone were our drinks, food, and tepid conversation; now came freedom, possibility, *flight* .

And having wings wasn't so bad, I decided.

They worked without any conscious input, moving behind me in long, graceful beats, and if I positioned my body in just the right way, they responded instantly, moving with me. If I angled my shoulders to the left, they angled, too, twisting me sideways. If I leaned to the front, they lifted up slightly, carrying me forward. It took no time at all to become accustomed to my wings—to flying. It was as natural as breathing, as smooth as walking.

Dream logic.

Lelantos flew above us, darting between the clouds, mist, and lingering sparks of lightning, fine-tuning his finishing touches. He summoned a flat panel of clouds to rest below our feet, marking the boundaries of his creation, and twisted other clouds into spires that mimicked the shape of marble pillars. He left us open to the world, as he formed no ceiling over the pillars, but there wasn't much to see. The panoramic view of the Nocturne was marred by his storm.

When he was satisfied with his ballroom in the sky, Lelantos floated above us all, his great, tawny wings forcing a wind to thread through our whimsical clothes and carefully placed masks. His own half-mask of bone curved over one side of his face, framing one-half of his hawkish gaze. He wore robes of fur and leather, leaving his broad chest open to the air, and his full lips were curled in enjoyment.

“Dreamers!” Lelantos shouted, silencing the crescendoing music and lingering chatter. “Welcome to the Revel of Rebirth. You were brought here for a purpose, as you always will be. Rebirth comes when a nightmare is disturbed by the dawn of freedom. Rebirth is hope, glory, *wings.* ”

He paused, letting the weight of his words sink in. The air became heavy in his silence, weighted by possibility. Even Erebus and Mithras, now in matching white wings, looked to Lelantos in anticipation. For what, I didn’t know.

And how convenient that the Shadow Bringer was still missing.

Uneasy, I glanced around, trying again to find him among the dreamers. He should be obvious enough, but everyone’s wings made it difficult to see. The wings obscured, masked, hid. Just as I swore I saw his moon-white hair or armor of liquid night, a wing obstructed my view, hiding whatever I thought I saw.

“To you, I am the Air Weaver—the king of the sky, ruler of the winds, and harbinger of change,” Lelantos continued. “But tonight, I am the master of this Revel. And a glorious Revel it shall be. Now, the storms will cease, the rain shall recede, and the dawn of freedom will be upon us.”

Lelantos spread his hands wide, and for a moment, I could have sworn that his pale eyes met mine. But just as the moment came, it passed, and with a final flourish of his wings, the skies listened. The storm quieted to a purr. The clouds dissolved. The rain, mist and lightning ceased. And millions of stars, as gloriously bright as the heavens could be, slid into place around us.

The dreamers had been silent in respect of Lelantos; now, they were silent for a different reason altogether. It was as the Air Weaver said—this was hope. Possibility. Freedom.

Rebirth.

Wind, fresh with the scent of the Nocturne, swept in among the dreamers. Salt, moss, and violets. As the wind swept in, so did the music, commanded by some unseen source.

And like dolls on invisible threads, we began to dance.

The steps were intricate and grand, but I didn't need to know them. As long as I relaxed my body, it moved without my input, falling into the natural ebb and flow of the dance. My wings spun me in place or guided me to a new partner; my hips twisted and my arms dipped of their own accord.

Some partners were talkative and genuine, complimenting my dress or sharing in the latest Realm gossip. Others were like the amber-eyed man. Enchanting at the outset and interested in learning more about who I was. My past, my status, my hopes, my dreams. But a few steps later, their darker nature would begin to leak through. Their eyes would gleam red, their grip would tighten, and their mouths would wet.

My current partner was like this. He was an older man with a greying beard and a warm, booming voice. I had thought him kind, at first. Charming. But he had since lost that purity. Now as he looked at me, all I saw was a terrible, gnawing violence. It smoldered in his blue eyes, puffed out from his nostrils like smoke.

I wanted out, out, *out* —

Suddenly, my wings faltered, as if forgetting the next step in the dance. The man and I stumbled, falling into the path of other dancers. I glanced around, desperate to catch the eye of another partner. Even Mithras would be preferable to this monster.

"Get *away* from me," I hissed.

The man smiled, as if my struggle entertained him. "This isn't how you treat a nobleman."

Then the man—*monster* —caught my wrist, trying to pull my body back into his sweat-slicked hands. I resisted, slamming an elbow into his chest, but his grip was like iron. I couldn't break free. Why wasn't anyone watching? Why did no one *care* ?

But then someone did.

Erebus.

His partner, a beautiful woman in a rose-colored dress, gazed up at him in adoration. But Erebus's smile was stiff, his eyes distracted.

Searching for something, just as mine were.

As his eyes settled on mine and he dropped his partner's hand, a jolt snapped like fire through my bones. The feeling wasn't dissimilar to the drink I tried earlier: a flash of breathless power.

Suddenly I became all-too aware of myself. The neckline of my dress, the color on my lips, and the soft shade of grey fabric that complimented his own attire. I hadn't realized it earlier, but now it was glaringly obvious.

Aris had *matched* me to him.

Alter it. Alter it like you did in the last dream, shift it before he can see —

But nothing happened. Even my blade, which had jumped through my skin before, felt tired and dull. Sluggish, as if in a deep sleep.

"Your turn is over," Erebus told the bearded man, smiling thinly. His voice was as commanding and as rich as the Shadow Bringer's, but he wielded it with more volume than the Bringer ever did. "Find a new partner."

After only a moment's hesitation, the man released me.

"It was a memorable dance, dearest lady," he said, dropping into a bow and pressing a prickly kiss to the back of my hand before I could snatch it away. "Enjoy the rest of the Revel."

Erebus's silver eyes meandered along the lines of my body, much like a man might look at his lover, but there was no warmth in his gaze. His unmasked eyes were sharp and guarded as they beheld the folds of my grey dress. The way my curls fell over my shoulders. The jewelry at my throat.

"You're wearing my favored color," he murmured, taking my hand and pulling me to his chest. His gloved thumb brushed over the spot the man had kissed me, even as the dreamers around us stared. "Most dreamers prefer bright colors, but I would rather be surrounded by the depths. Isn't that strange?"

"Not at all. There's a certain comfort in the dark," I answered honestly. "Especially in a place so filled with chaos."

"You understand, then." He smiled, squeezing my hand as if in reassurance, but his eyes were still cold. "Are you a lord's daughter? A cousin of the king? It is rare to see a new face; I'm curious."

"I'm of no importance." I pulled back a step, conscious of the way his eyes betrayed the forced warmth in his smile. Speaking to Erebus felt strange; it was almost as if he knew I didn't belong there. "Just a dreamer at their first Revel."

"In one way or another, everyone is important here."

"Especially you, it seems. The dreamers can't stop looking at you."

He pulled me back to him. Grazed the tips of his wings over my own. “Are you so sure? Look around—it is only *you* that they see.”

He was right.

The dreamers’ stares were brimming with jealousy and anger, and in their collective rage, no one so much as blinked at Erebus. A different girl might have felt fear or even triumph at that jealousy—at all that bitter, ridiculous anger fixed upon someone who stole the attention of their beloved.

I turned back to Erebus, meeting his guarded stare with a curious one. If Somnus had made it a point for the Bringer and I to be here, surely this night held something important. But what was it?

And where was the demon?

“Why did you ask to dance with me?”

He hesitated. As if even *he* didn’t know why he asked.

“You were due for a new partner,” he said finally, guiding me into a slow, graceful spin. My wings complied, following his lead.

“But I wasn’t. The dance was only halfway through.”

“Was it?” he asked, feigning indifference. “I thought it was nearly over.”

Maker, this man is as irritating as his future self.

I skimmed my hand along his shoulder, moving it absently toward the black hair that rested there. What had turned it white? Had the Bringer’s castle leeched all color, all *soul* , from his body, rendering it bitter and bloodless? Erebus shared many similarities with the Shadow Bringer, but he radiated power and life in ways that the Bringer did not. Erebus’s eyes were sharper, skin darker, and lips more precisely defined. And there was a certain sense of self-assuredness in the way that he carried himself. He was less haunted and burdened. More sure of his path and his purpose.

Our eyes met again. This time, whatever he saw in my gaze gave him pause.

He dipped his head, bringing his mouth to graze the edge of my ear. “Listen carefully, and respond as truthfully as you are able. What is happening outside of the Realm? You’re new here; you will be able to answer more clearly than the others. Has the sickness spread?”

“Sickness,” I echoed, a chill spreading over my skin. *Corruption.* Did he not have a word for it, yet? “Do you mean Corruption?”

Erebus's mouth tightened. "That is an accurate way of describing it. What have you seen?"

"It's horrible," I whispered. The dreamers around us were switching partners, but we did not move from each other's arms. "It found my parents and killed my sister. Eden," I clarified, as if her name mattered to him. "She was young." My voice caught, tangled by emotions that twisted my heart into knots. "She had her entire life ahead of her. And I—I—"

I killed her. I encouraged her to dream, and a demon found her. I caused the shadows underneath her eyes. I caused the blood on her skin and the splinters on her coffin. I ruined a life that was not mine. Then her death broke an honorable mother and father into committing the unspeakable, ripping apart the lives of countless others.

The shadows in Erebus's eyes swirled, pooled, darkened. I first guessed the emotion to be anger or horror, but it felt different. More depthless and aching.

Sorrow , I realized.

Was he trapped here, in Evernight? Why couldn't he just wake up and see the answers to his questions for himself?

So I asked him.

He blinked, a flash of sadness breaking through his careful guard. "It is not as simple as that." He dipped me in perfect timing with the other dreamers, causing my feathers to brush the clouds underfoot. Once upright again, he spun me back to his chest. "I intend to fix this world," he murmured into my hair. "There will be no more sickness or death. The dark must be destroyed."

I realized something, then.

Erebus was indeed more certain of his path and his purpose, but his purpose wouldn't lead him to glory or happiness. It would lead him to five-hundred years of torment at the hands of a thousand monsters and a new name.

The title of *Shadow Bringer* .

"Whatever you're about to do—it doesn't end how you wish it to." The words stumbled out before I could stop them. "I don't know why—or how—but your fate ends in disaster."

Five-hundred years of darkness. Five-hundred years of rotting away in the dark.

Alone.

“Who are you?” he asked, silver eyes searching mine. “Have we met before?” His grip tightened. I wasn’t sure if he was aware of it. “You look…” he drifted off, analyzing my face. For a moment, it seemed as if he was going to rip off my mask.

Far below us, perhaps within the halls of Evernight, a bell clanged, and the skies darkened.

Erebus stopped, suspending us in the air.

“I’m afraid that’s all the time I have left,” he said, smiling sadly and releasing my hand. “I hope I will see you again one day. I intend to revisit this conversation.”

“Wait, you don’t—”

But he had already turned his back to me and dove between the clouded pillars.

Gone .

My wings beat behind me, silently churning the air. What was I supposed to do? What was my purpose here?

And just as I almost dove after Erebus, I finally felt *him* .

The Shadow Bringer.

I spun around.

Unsurprisingly, he was still in his black leathers, sharp boots, and taloned gauntlets. The armor gleamed wickedly in the half-light, so at odds with the soft hues of the other dreamers, and his matching mask was lined in obsidian points. But no one cared—no longer was anyone looking. The majority of the group had moved toward a new offering of food and drink.

Which left the Shadow Bringer and I alone in the deepest, starless dark.

His wings were velvet-black and glossy; they stretched behind him, complimenting his form and making him appear taller and more intimidating than he already was. It made me regret thinking that wings looked natural on the other dreamers. How they looked on the dreamers was *nothing* compared to how they looked on the Shadow Bringer.

His were menacing and tempting. I wanted to touch them.

Strange.

The Bringer took in my dress. I could have sworn his masked gaze lingered there—in the shape of it. In the folds, the fabric. Of my wings, soft and grey. And lastly, my eyes.

His mouth slackened. I wasn’t sure he even noticed.

“You look to be in your element,” I managed, heat rising to my temples. I had meant to tell him about Erebus, but the thought had promptly drifted away. “Your wings suit you.”

“I could say the same for yours.” It seemed like he wanted to say more, but he shut his mouth before he could. His skin betrayed him, though; a flush was definitely at his temples, too.

The music soared. We were the only two not dancing.

“Where did you go?” I finally asked.

I was looking for you. I missed having you by my side.

“I didn’t intend to leave you for so long.” He swallowed hard, as if fighting whether or not to tell me a truth or a lie. “I was catching up with old friends.” His voice broke a little at that—cracked and splintered at that single admission. “Or…watching them, really. What can a man say to his ghosts?”

So, a truth. A haunted, heartbreaking truth. But a truth nonetheless.

“Mithras was my friend, once,” the Bringer continued, looking out at the sky. “But he betrayed me. I do not remember how; I only know that he did. And I think it happened tonight at this Revel.” He ran a gauntleted hand through his hair, then brought it down to cross over his chest. “My memories come in pieces. There will be some cue—I should recognize it and know.”

“So we have some time, then?” I asked. Then I tried for something more playful—to ease the sorrow in his eyes that so clearly mirrored Erebus’s. “We could dance.”

“I am not dancing.” He added quickly, “I don’t dance.”

“Your past self would disagree. I was just dancing with him, actually.”

The Bringer tilted his head, considering. “Were you, now? You should know I only learned to dance so I could appease the Weavers who hold these cursed parties.”

“So what you’re saying is that you are indeed *very* capable of dancing.”

He grabbed my hands and pulled me to him.

“Only this once,” he warned. “Just to stop your pestering.”

Despite his hesitation, he guided me through the music, keeping up even as the pace frenzied. Our wings beat in unison; we twirled across the clouds, lost in the soaring violins, the complicated spins, and the beauty and wonder of it all. And before the first song ended, he was already flushed and smirking.

And so was I.

“How can you do that without flinching?” he asked, guiding us to a more secluded part of the clouds. Toward the pillars and the stars.

“Do what?”

“Touch me,” he answered, bringing his gauntleted hand to the back of my neck. "Like this.”

Like—*oh*. My left hand was perched in his shoulder, absently threading through his hair.

“My fear of you must have been overcome by your impressive dancing skills.”

“Hmm,” he murmured, bringing his hand back to my waist.

“It’s nothing, really,” I insisted. “Your hair looked soft, is all.”

The fingers around my waist tightened, metal talons digging into the bindings. *Oh? So this isn’t anything either, then?* It seemed to suggest. But he pushed too hard, talons pinching my side, and I flinched.

The Bringer made to pull away from me, taking his hand from my waist.

“I have nothing against your hands,” I said, making a point to squeeze the taloned hand that held my right. “But right now they are encased in knives.”

He cast a fleeting glance downwards, apparently startled by the realization that his hands were indeed encased in metal.

“They’re meant to be a type of protection—to keep dreamers isolated and from forgetting what the Realm truly is. If we forget, then we might never choose to wake. We might forget where we are, who we are, and *why* we are.” He added, eyes darkening, “The sensation of touch is a powerful thing. I’ve rarely allowed myself to enjoy it.”

He looked at his hands again—weighing, considering. Finally, with a slight shift in his eyes, the gloves drew back, melting into the spires that lined his forearms. His right hand, now unbound, stretched against my back; his left hand roved the curves of my fingers. The shadows in his eyes were on the brink of shattering. He clenched the fabric at my back, as if that would anchor him.

I couldn’t help but wonder again how long it had been since he’d felt the touch of another. There was solace in the comfort and warmth of human touch; to have that feeling dulled or removed entirely was unthinkable.

The Bringer’s expression changed; the cold, indifferent mask was coming back. Without thinking, I pulled his hand to my face.

“Bringer. Look at me.”

For a breath, his hand stilled on my skin. His expression was guarded, unreadable. But then his thumb brushed my jawline. Long fingers stretched across the curve of my neck, winding into my hair. The braid the dreamer had given me gave him pause, so he unbound it—whether by his power or his hands, I couldn’t tell—then snagged my lower lip with his thumb. The shadows in his eyes darkened, beckoning, then eddied away.

“You’re beautiful,” he murmured, skimming his thumb across my mouth. “I’ve always thought so. Did you know that?”

Maker, my skin was warm. Of course I didn’t know that.

I brought my hand over his, guiding it from my lips to my neck. With his hand moved aside, I leaned in closer, bridging the gap between us, and softly placed a kiss on his jaw, right near his ear. “I could say the same, Shadow Bringer. You’re the most beautiful man I’ve ever known.”

His breath hitched as he pulled me closer, titling his face so that his mouth hovered over mine. In that suspended moment, uncertainty flickered in his eyes, as if questioning whether I truly wanted this. Needing to erase his doubts, I cradled his face in my hands, fingertips tracing the contours of his face left exposed by his mask. I could feel the tremor in his touch, but I also felt his longing—his desire to bridge the distance between us.

But instead of my mouth, his lips unexpectedly found my neck.

I gasped, arching into him and giving more access to the skin there. The skin that was absolutely and unequivocally *burning*. He yanked his mask off, sighing when he was able to reach more of my neck without it, then dragged his teeth down the column of my throat.

Teeth that I had once imagined would tear through my bones and devour my soul.

Time had stopped. The darkness was full—and something was terribly wrong.

“Esmer. I remember,” he said, his voice suddenly cracking in horror.

Something snapped in his eyes. Something wild, fierce, unbound. He stumbled back, wings shuttering. Hesitating. He flew to the pillars, just as Erebus had. It was all so similar—his expression. The urgency.

The look of death in his eyes.

Only this time, when he jumped, I followed.

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CHAPTER 44

I THOUGHT I COULD FLY.

I was wrong.

Outside the bounds of the Revel, my wings were worthless, limp, *dead* —and of just the same use as two feather pillows tied to my back. Wind ripped into my face, swept through my hair, and tangled in my dress's delicate layers. A slipper—then another—fell off my feet. My mask slipped past my chin, catching at my neck, and I clawed at the silk ribbon and beadwork until it, too, fell away. I cursed, loudly. The roar of the wind carried that off, too.

But I was dreaming. *Dreaming.* I should be able to fly.

Why couldn't I fly?

I tried to summon my imagination, but my thoughts were jumbled, erratic, *lost* . I couldn't think beyond the roaring wind. Couldn't see beyond the hair that cut into my eyes. My wings twitched, slowly slumbering into life, but it wasn't fast enough—it was too late—

Without anything to steady me, I plummeted like a rock. And slammed face-first into the Shadow Bringer.

He spun around with a snarl, wings flaring, and twisted a hand in the front of my dress, pulling me close. With his other hand, he unsheathed his blade and thrust it under my jaw. It was all so instinctual—a cloak of violence worn a thousand times.

"You *fool* !" he shouted, stopping our plummet with a single push of his wings. "I nearly cut off your head. I thought you were a demon. Or a—"

"Do I *look* like a demon?" I snapped, clinging to his chest even as I pushed his blade away. "And since when do demons wear dresses—or silk

slippers?”

His eyes were unusually sharp as he stared at me. “You can’t control your wings.”

“Clearly not.”

“Then why did you jump?” he asked, repositioning me in his arms. “It was pure idiocy to follow me.”

I thought I could fly. And I wanted to help you.

“Take me back to the Revel so I can continue dancing, then,” I said, but the words snagged. Felt dry and wrong.

“It’s too late for that,” he said, eyes narrowing. “I have a future to amend. If I’m not already too late.”

“How? This is a *dream* , Bringer—a *memory* —”

“I have to try. The Maker can allow Somnus to make small adjustments in time if He wills it. Just as He did with Elliot’s dream. And my dream, too —when I met you as a boy.” His chest heaved against mine, betraying every emotion that hid behind his wall of shadow. I had never heard him sound like this. So broken and frantic. “Five-hundred years. *Five-hundred years* of rotting away in the dark. How can that be my fate? My *purpose* ?”

The Nocturne stretched below us, still as glass, reflecting the sky’s last stars. Near the horizon, the barest hint of dawn trickled in. For a moment, it was just us, the clash of sky against sea, and our mingling breath.

“Your village and its Corrupt have broken your life. They confined you. Stifled you. Forced you to live a life you didn’t want for yourself.” His voice broke, then. “Now consider what that reality would do to you for more than five lifetimes. Five lifetimes—*alone* .”

Visions—*memories* —flashed before me, demanding my attention and pulling me under. They made me into the Shadow Bringer—Erebus. Made me see and feel the world as he did.

He drifted into the Nocturne, cloak dragging underneath its starlit waters.

This was what he had waited for. His power—his purpose.

It was all for this.

But when he placed his bare hands upon the waters, the Nocturne changed. To his horror, it darkened, twisted, and boiled. Cracked apart like hollow bones. Demons roared under its waves and broke free from its

depths. They screamed violently into the night, desperate for blood and dreamers' souls. The Nocturne's shadows—its darkness—could not be cleansed. He could not do it. He had failed.

He stumbled back.

Mithras was wrong. Their plan was wrong.

He was no hero. His powers held no noble purpose. He was a blight, a curse, a disease.

And for it, humanity would be destroyed.

THE WEAVERS CHARGED him at his castle—attacked him in grief and fury.

Rock crushed his outstretched arms; his left dropped, useless. But even mangled and broken, trembling and bloody, his right hand held, commanding the dark as it threaded together the final stitches of his domain.

"You will not take my soul!" he roared.

And the Realm roared back.

AT FIRST, he had counted the days.

Scraped them into his bedchamber walls. Etched them in the pages of a book.

But the living shadows—the monsters, the creatures, the half-ghosts—began to see.

And scream.

SHADOWS CURLED TOWARD HIM, rolling around his shoulders in a hideous cloud. Perhaps a minute passed—or a century. How could he tell? His senses were paralyzed, his hands heavy and numb. But it did not matter.

Nothing mattered anymore.

His eyes were heavy, and his heart was full of hatred.

HE FELT the knock before he heard it.

Felt her walk up the castle steps as if she crawled over his skin.

He snarled, charging across his bedchamber and twisting through his castle's broken innards. After all this time, they had sent someone to kill him. He did not remember who 'they' were—but she did not belong in his Domain—did not deserve to see him like this.

Enemy. Enemy. Enemy.

The Shadow Bringer stood at his mirror and wiped blood from his throat, his chin, his lips—it soaked into the cloth, staining it crimson.

Maker, it is everywhere.

He had forgotten he could bleed.

How dare she—how dare she enter his castle, his fortress, and try to manipulate his power. He had sensed it when they first met. The shadows had bent to her will, loosening around her throat when he had meant to keep them taut.

How dare she.

She was here.

Her dark eyes shone with the light from his candelabras, smoldering with fury as she challenged him.

He was alone—and not.

He knelt beside two skeletons, laid a hand on their bones. How brittle they felt. How empty and wrong.

In a past life, they had called him Erebus.

Not the Shadow Bringer—not the Devourer or the Shadow Bringer.

Erebus.

He did not think about the bones at his feet as he descended into the dark, did not think about her as the walls drew nearer around him. He did not feel

the cold as it seeped into his bones, did not feel the hollows under his eyes growing tighter and deeper.

His anger, his purpose—they had dissolved, leaving behind nothing in their wake.

It was fitting.

He was nothing, and to nothing he would soon return.

He blinked hard, clearing mire from his thoughts. Shook his hands through his hair, kicked the ground with the heel of his boot. Darkness, everywhere.

Save for in there.

He staggered forward, leaning heavily on the wall as the starlit cavern swam around him. It was as he had left it, a shadowed cathedral with a living sacrifice at its altar. Esmer, too, was how he had left her, dark hair curling over the stone and face settled into an expression of serenity. She was beautiful. He had resisted thinking—or feeling—as much, but he couldn't deny it. Hadn't been able to since he first met her.

In a different time, perhaps he would have told her.

Except—

Was that her brow tensing, her mouth twisting into a grimace? The Bringer blinked again, struggling in vain to rip the image from his sight. When she had first closed her eyes, sinking into the oblivion he had so carefully prepared for her, he imagined he would feel hope.

Relief.

Triumph.

Feel something besides the deep, roiling pit of regret and self-hatred.

He stole the glass from her lips, placing it against his own.

She had done well—surprisingly, wonderfully well—for someone without any formal instruction.

It felt strange to feel this way.

To smile and for it to be true.

He took a long drink, longer than he should, letting the unfamiliar feeling settle back into his stomach with the rest of the wine.

ESMER HAD SAVED HIM.

She fought for his life and his redemption, even in the face of the demon, and had emerged victorious.

He clung to her, vision smeared and thoughts torn beyond recognition. Vaguely, he felt his hand drop into her lap.

He did not move it.

HER EYES REFLECTED THE STARS.

Dark and rimmed in artful grey, they shone brightly, brilliantly—at him. Even masked, they held power and weight.

She was stronger than she realized. The shadows listened to her—heeded her will and her spirit. Even now, the darkness inside of him sang to the darkness inside of her.

He danced with her as he instinctively knew how, the precise memory of lessons having long faded from his mind. He worried that he would forget the steps, the rhythm, the sequence. That he would forget what it was like to lose himself to music. But their movements were natural. Easy. He could lose himself in this dance, this music, this night.

He could lose himself in her.

But as he looked back into her eyes, to that power, lingering there, his wonder became clouded by doubt. She could not—would not—be his. Not in this broken world. He first had to change the future.

He had to change it for her.

THE MEMORIES SNAPPED AWAY.

I was back in the Bringer's arms, held high over the Nocturne.

"What was that?" I whispered. The words trembled. The emotions of his memories had slipped through the veil, grabbing ahold of my own with taloned claws. "I saw you—I *was* you."

"That was the power of the Nocturne. Or Somnus. I don't know why that was shared. I—" His mouth worked open and shut, words failing to come, just as gentle threads of vulnerability swept in, breaking in depths of

his eyes. He had wanted to share, I realized. *Wanted* to share these memories—these raw, broken fragments—with me.

So the Nocturne—or Somnus—had stepped in and done it for him.

Remnants of his emotions spilled over, running down my face. Loneliness, anger, desperation, cruelty. But also regret. Longing. Fear. They bubbled up in my heart, sank deep into my skin.

“Do you understand now?” he asked. But then he shook his head. His internal mask was back, even as he ripped his physical own away. “In a few moments, I will step into the Nocturne. Just as the dawn breaks, I will sink my hands into its waters. I will try to purify it, trying to tear away the dark as I did in the demon’s stomach. But I will fail.”

“And the demons will come.”

He shook his head. “The demons are already here. There were demons at the Revel.”

The amber-eyed man, I realized, horrified. *The men and women with wickedness in their words and their hearts.*

“Why didn’t anyone say anything—do anything? How were they there so freely?”

“It was all a part of Mithras and I’s plan. We tricked powerful demons into attending the Revel in disguise, promising them a chance at humanity. A chance to mingle with the wealthy and select their preferred host. In return, the demons would cease their war on the Weavers. No longer would they plague the Nocturne’s dreams.” His hands tightened around me. “It was all a lie, of course. Lies, everywhere. From both parties.” He looked away. Gritted his teeth as he glared up at the Revel. “That’s all the demons ever want—freedom. They want to walk upon the earth and breathe its air, just as we do. But that would be chaos. It cannot be allowed to happen.”

“But it did happen. It still *is* happening.”

“It wasn’t intended to happen, though. There is no meaning to Corruption. No meaning to the loss of dreams.”

“How did Mithras betray you?” I asked, wondering aloud what I’d been meaning to ask ever since I saw Erebus and Mithras together in the coliseum. It was clear that they respected each other both as comrades and friends.

The Bringer’s eyes darkened. “While I was pulling the dark from the Nocturne's waves, Mithras was supposed to gather the revelers—the demons—and lure them down. The plan was to ambush them and destroy

the Nocturne's shadows in one fell swoop, all with the Weavers backing us."

"But something went wrong. I saw it break apart in the memory you showed me."

He nodded. "At my touch, the Nocturne cracked open, releasing every shred of darkness it held. And when I turned back to Evernight, horrified at what I'd done, Mithras and the Weavers were already there, watching me. Mithras hadn't lured the demons down, he'd brought the Weavers. All so that they could witness me summoning demons like a monster." He looked away, noting the faint shape of Erebus on the rocks below. "They didn't even question me. They attacked as one with Mithras leading the charge."

My wings stretched behind me, slowly coming to life. I could feel the Bringer's power working through them, bidding them to move. When they steadied at last, the Bringer let go. "Thank you."

"That wasn't me," he said softly. "This power is yours now, too. It has been yours from the moment we met."

Dawn taunted at the horizon.

"Fly with me," he commanded. No—*pleaded.* "I have to stop this. And if I can't…" He trailed off, looking murderous.

"You'll throw Mithras to the demons?" I guessed.

He smiled. It looked positively violent. "Something like that. I want to see Mithras's traitorous face when he realizes what I've done. Then I want to see him when he realizes I *remember* ."

We flew to the Nocturne, wind sweeping over our bodies and lingering between the feathers of our wings. It felt glorious, this flight. I wanted to savor it. I wanted to stretch my wings as far as they'd go. I wanted to rise high above the Realm and see it all. Every domain. Every secret. Every hidden, quiet place.

But there was no time.

Erebus was a blot on Evernight's shore. He crouched low upon the rocks, wings draped behind him like a magnificent, snowy cloak. They were his only recognizable feature in the half-dark. He didn't hear us coming—didn't see us as we landed behind him. But the skittering of rocks sent him running—*sprinting* to the Nocturne's waters as if a horde of demons were behind him. And maybe he thought that they were.

Erebus's wings dissolved into smoke, propelling him forward. What had made us quick in the skies made us cumbersome on land—and Erebus

knew this. *Recognized* this. The Shadow Bringer willed his wings away, too, but he was too late. Erebus crashed into the Nocturne, arms outstretched.

And he sank them deep within the water.

"*No!* " the Shadow Bringer roared.

Too late , I thought, horrified. *And because of what? Me?*

It was a nightmare replaying itself. A terrible memory unlocked, just to be lived again. The water began to bubble—boil underneath, just as it had done in the Bringer's memory. Then it cracked, snapping apart like a vessel overfull.

Erebus stumbled, shaken by the Bringer's cry and the demons forming into life around him.

He had seemed so composed at the Revel—commanding and strong. In control of his emotions and his path. When I looked at him now, I saw the boy back in the woods. I saw a boy fearing for his life. A boy doubting his purpose and his worth.

And in his fury at his failure, the Shadow Bringer lunged for him.

They met in the churning waters, grabbing for each other's throats. The Shadow Bringer went under—then Erebus. The Nocturne parted, welcoming them—and then swallowed them whole. I halted at the edge of the rocks, stunned. If I jumped in, what could I do? Would I lose myself in the Nocturne, just as the Bringer had warned?

Demons swarmed from the Nocturne, crawling from its violet-blue waters. Others flew overhead, mocking. Taunting. One dipped down—too close—and clipped my hair with its claws. When it flew away again, it was howling. Screeching into the night with a desperation so animalistic it made my skin crawl.

Something wet slid down my face. When I pulled my hand away, it was bright with blood.

Oh, hell.

I was in for it now.

I unsheathed my blade, gripping it with no small amount of uncertainty. Fear had loosened it—made it easier to summon. But fear had loosened my hands, too. Made them weak. Made them tremble. Made them cold all the way down to my fingernails. The sword had worked before on one demon, but what could it do against the might of one *hundred* ?

Another demon dropped toward me, feet skimming the Nocturne. Its wings were stunted and frail—too feeble to hold the weight of its body. It crashed into the rocks with a pathetic cry, shivering as it tried to stand.

Go—kill it. Do what you're capable of.

The thing finally managed to stand. It peered at me, eyes wide and glassy. Water dripped down its wrinkled face, dampening its fur.

Now—before it attacks. Before it shows its true power.

I could feel my blade's power. It thrummed underneath my hands, waiting to be used. *Pleading* to be used. I knew what it was capable of, but I couldn't bring myself to do it. Because the demon looked *sad* . Fearful and uncertain, just as I was. It continued to shiver, glancing between the sword in my hands and my face.

What it saw in me, I wasn't sure.

When it sensed I was no longer a threat, the thing sank to its belly, crawling into a nearby hole and gave a small, warbling cry before falling silent. My sword hung limply from my fingers, scraping against the rocks.

What was I *doing* ?

Tears sprung to my eyes, unbidden and unwanted.

I stumbled back to the Nocturne. I could feel the Shadow Bringer's darkness—the shadows that lingered, even now. Shadows that trailed behind him as he fell deeper, deeper, *deeper* —sinking down into the water until I couldn't see him anymore. And through that darkness, I could feel his pain. The deep, aching sorrow at seeing his past lived out again. The indignation—the *anger* —at fighting himself. The pain of drowning. The fear of being lost to the Nocturne's dreams. And there was something else, too. A longing for something.

A longing for *me* .

I dropped to my knees, numb to the demons dropping from the sky and crawling from the water. The Shadow Bringer was lost to the Nocturne. And if he were to come back, I had to save him. I had to fight for him—*now* —before he fell deeper. This felt real. This *was* real.

I sank my hands into the water, reaching for his threads of shadow. The trail of darkness that lingered behind him like unraveling strings. I wrapped them around my arms. Willed them to me with everything I had. And then I pulled. Mentally and physically. I pulled *hard* . Even as the demons screamed. Even as they howled in fear and agony. I ignored them all—ignored what I couldn't understand—and focused on the Shadow Bringer.

Erebus was there, too.

I could feel him as I called to the Shadow Bringer. He was falling fast, lost between the Nocturne’s dreams and the demons breaking free from it. Again I saw that boy back in the woods. Again I saw that boy fearing for his life. Despite his rank, despite his power—he was just a boy. A boy doubting his purpose and his worth as they crumbled between his fingers.

So I called for them both. Summoned the shadows that spun from each of them.

And when I saw a body emerging from the deep, I lunged for it.

“Hang on!” I screamed, grabbing for his arms, his shoulders, *anything* . Miraculously, I found his hands. And he held on.

But just as I pulled him up, I slipped on the rocks, falling sideways. Something grabbed for my foot, dragging me down. Pain lanced up my leg, red-hot and searing. Whatever tore at my foot was moving up my skin, climbing its claw up my leg as I fought to swim back to the surface. But the thing on my leg was stronger. It viciously pulled me down, down, *down* .

Faintly, I began to hear a song. A whisper of a memory, calling me deeper.

Elliot’s arms, wrapping me in a hug.

Mother’s hands, tying a ribbon through my hair.

Father’s eyes, bright with approval—with joy. At *me* .

Eden’s voice, begging me to play.

Esmer! Esmer—come here. Come see.

Eden, begging me to stay.

Esmer, please. I miss you.

I wanted to follow the Nocturne's call. Ached to follow those voices—those memories—down, down, down. But before I could, the Bringer heaved me up and out of the Nocturne. His wings stirred the water and the air from the effort. A curtain of shadow followed behind, twisting around us like a blanket.

“They were just dreams,” he spoke into my hair. “Just dreams.”

The Bringer was cold and wet, but I didn’t care. I clung to him with all the strength I had left, almost shattering at the contact. I wanted to bury my face in his chest and cry.

“Esmer, look at me.” His voice was low. Insistent. “What do you see?”

What do I see?

I tilted my head up, expecting to see the Shadow Bringer. Maybe a little bruised or torn up from his tumble with Erebus, but *him* nonetheless. But it wasn't him. Or at least not him entirely. His eyes were the same—a brilliant silver with shadows melting from their edges. But his moon-white hair was black as night. His skin was darker, too. It spoke of a life lived away from dreams. A life lived in the sun.

He was, and he was not.

"What am I?" he asked. It was a whisper. A question that feared an answer.

"You're Erebus," I breathed, and the shadows around us tightened, cocooning us from the Nocturne's incessant pull.

"That isn't possible." He looked at his hands, stretching every finger. "I was just a shadow of myself before—" He stopped, looking at me as shock and understanding flashed across his face that was his—and not. "You can manipulate darkness, just as I can. I was a shadow of myself—a shadow missing its whole. *You* merged us. You should have let me go. I would have found my way back to the surface."

I felt the Shadow Bringer as he fell, but I felt Erebus, too, and I had called to the shadows that bound them. But I hadn't *merged* them.

"Only Weavers can merge with other variations of themselves. Their physical bodies are mortal, but their Realm bodies are not. And I am no Weaver. I would *know* —" He trailed off, haunted by this new possibility. "I would know," he repeated, hoarsely. The fight in his eyes was dying. He was fighting with himself.

Mightily.

A warbling, desperate cry made us both jump; the demon I spared earlier was crawling toward us on the rocks. Before we could understand what was happening, it shuddered violently as its wings fell off, its fur melted into skin, its wrinkled scalp grew hair, and its limbs arranged themselves into shorter, more precise variations. Variations that were fully, irrevocably human.

"You saved me," the woman sobbed, grasping at the stone as she tried to stand. "I was trapped in that monster's body, but together you pulled my soul free." She looked down at her hands, which were smooth and no longer clawed, then closed her eyes, smiling widely as her body began to disappear. "I'm being called home," she cried. "I'm home—"

And then, in a burst of star-flecked shadow, she was gone.

“Her soul was *trapped* in a demon’s body—?”

“She looked just like the demons in my castle,” the Shadow Bringer sputtered. “Maker, even her cries sounded like them.”

That’s it.

“What if that’s where souls go after Corruption?” I began, starting to formulate a theory that left me nauseous. “We know demons can take over physical bodies, but where do the souls go? The tales say you devour them, but that isn’t true.” I stumbled on, growing more and more certain that I was right. “It would make sense that the soul would anchor itself to the closest thing resembling a body. And that body would be the demon’s. A soul for a soul, a body for a body.”

The Bringer looked utterly horrified. “Were that true, it would change everything.”

“Those demons in your castle—the demons you were tasked to protect for five-hundred years—what if those were *people* ? The souls of those lost to Corruption.”

He shook his head. “Impossible. They have never shown any resemblance of humanity within them.”

“But neither did that woman,” I insisted. “While trapped, they might forget they were ever human in the first place.”

Overhead, Mithras jumped from the Revel.

He was coming to betray Erebus—coming to show the Weavers what he had done. And once they knew, it would be chaos. We would be hunted, as the demons would be. We’d be banished or killed and sent back to the world from which we came.

But he wouldn’t see us.

Because the Bringer had already sent us away in a flash of roiling darkness.

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CHAPTER 45

We stumbled back to Evernight.

"Hurry," the Shadow Bringer murmured, grabbing my hand and leading us through a hall lit by floating candlesticks. "We need to make it to my chambers before the Weavers see us."

Outside the corridor, the sound of battle pressed in. Demons screamed as Weavers and their legions rose to meet them, the ringing of metal as it met claw and bone punctuated by a great, roaring wind and the crash of booming thunder.

"Do you think those demons are actually—?" I began to ask, horrified to think that some—or all—of the demons released from the Nocturne were merely human souls trapped within monstrous bodies.

"I don't know," the Bringer said hoarsely, guiding me into a different hall. "I truly do not know."

It didn't take long before I was thoroughly lost.

Evernight was a maze teeming with hidden hallways and opulent rooms. It was magic in its purest form—beauty summoned by the wildest and most eccentric of imaginations—but was also convoluted and strange. We turned a corner and began to ascend a glass staircase, narrowly avoiding dreamers and scholars as they raced around us. Many looked at the Bringer, but it wasn't in fear or hate.

No, they looked at him in awe. In admiration, even.

We pressed on, looping around a window-lined hall and up a smaller, cruder staircase cut from stone. Unlike the rest of Evernight, this section felt private and secluded. There were no people, no sounds other than our own. Even the battle had dampened to a dull rumble.

So when we turned a final corner and walked head-first into Xander, Weaver of the Present, I nearly jumped out of my skin.

“Erebus,” Xander said, sounding surprised. He looked between the Bringer and I slowly, as if we were beggars or thieves. “I’ve been looking everywhere for you. I thought you were outside.”

Beside me, the Bringer tensed. If I had to guess, he was a breath away from brandishing his sword and sticking Xander with the pointy end of it.

“What does it matter?” The Bringer snapped. It was nearly a hiss. “Are the demons not subdued?”

“What is left of them, yes,” Xander responded. His features, I noticed, were more haphazard than usual. His shrewd eyes seemed dull, his chestnut hair askew and tangled. It was strange to see him so unpolished. “But several hundred escaped back into the Nocturne or elsewhere in the Realm.”

“Then you have no need of me, just as I have no need for the remaining demons. Have I not already fought blood and bone against any threat to the Realm?”

Xander blinked. “You’re one of our greatest warriors, Erebus. And the Realm is in crisis now. We—”

“*We* were just retiring to my chambers.” The Bringer made a point to look at me. To squeeze the hand he still held between his own. “We have important matters to attend to there. There will be demons to fight tomorrow, and I have a feeling you’ll manage without me.”

I fought hard against a reaction.

This was the Bringer’s grand plan to fool a Weaver? To pretend we were lovers so preoccupied with each other that we didn’t even care about the demons outside? Maybe it would work.

Maybe.

If the person being fooled wasn’t an immortal spirit ordained by the Maker Himself, that is.

Xander beheld us. Slowly, he shook his head. “Do you, now? I never thought I’d see the day.”

At that, the Bringer scowled, pulling me down the hall and through an unmarked door.

“Good night, Erebus,” Xander called after us. “In your haste, do remember to ward your chambers. Else I will do it myself—”

The Bringer slammed the door, cutting him off.

And with that, we were alone.

It was a dark, elegant room, furnished in blue silk, marble tile, and several sprawling rugs. There was a bed on one end, tucked into a corner by three large windows, a balcony, a plush seating area, and several candelabras emitting soft, blue-hued light. On the other side of the room were several bookshelves lined with ancient-looking texts. A fireplace was centered inside the longest bookshelf, cavernous with its carved figureheads of a dragon, a wolf, and a stag.

“Is this your room?”

A fine mist of shadow spread from his fingertips, sinking into the walls and settling underneath every stone, tile, and rug. *The ward*, I thought. Something to protect us—and to keep others out.

“It was.” He stood just inside the entryway, as if unsure of where to go next. “Though I was rarely here to enjoy it.”

I tried not to think about what, exactly, he did—or didn’t do—to enjoy the room.

“It’s still strange to see beds in the Realm.”

“Well, we must sleep out of necessity, even here. If you sleep as a dreamer or scholar, you will wake in your mortal body. It is only when you sleep again that you’ll enter the Realm. But if you sleep as a Weaver or one of their acolytes, sleep is a formality or a comfort. A reminder of what is—and what was.”

What is—and what was.

For a long while, we fought it.

The raw, instinctual desire to sleep. To fall into a soft mattress, curl up in a blanket, and burrow deep into a pillow. To forget the day and begin anew.

But slowly, our conversation faded.

In the low candlelight, the Shadow Bringer’s eyes became dark, pooling shadows. He dragged his palms to his brow. Sat there for another moment, shoulders tight. Waiting. Then he slammed his fists into his knees and stood, prowling to the balcony. He stared into the night, looking out over the Nocturne.

“We can’t keep this up, Bringer. We need to sleep.”

The Bringer spun around, wild-eyed. “We can’t sleep. Not if I don’t know where we’ll be when we wake up.” He took a deep breath, trying to steady himself, but his chest continued to heave. “If I wake up and this was

all for nothing—if I’m back in my castle, alone and unable to walk free—” He cut himself off. Like he had admitted something he didn’t want.

The pain in his eyes was too much.

“Perhaps it would help if you took off your armor,” I blurted. “You need to relax.”

He blinked. “What?”

What *did* I mean by that, exactly? I needed to continue before I lost my nerve.

“I only mean—you’d be more comfortable in bedclothes, surely. I’ve only ever seen you with sharp edges and claws.”

He laughed dryly. “I’ve slept in my armor for as long as I can remember. There’s no use for comfortable things in a pit of darkness.”

No use for comfort?

His bedroom was filled with hundreds of books, elaborate paintings, and plush armchairs. He had a balcony that overlooked a sea of stars. A bath that surely dwarfed the king’s. And I thought of his bed. The luxurious pillows, heavy blankets, and silk sheets.

“Your bed in the castle is comfortable enough. All that velvet and silk.”

The Bringer sighed, releasing some of his tension.

“My bedchamber is one of the only parts of the castle that resets itself. The rest lies in ruin after centuries of demon infestation,” he murmured. “Did you know that it once used to be a place of wonder? I spent years perfecting it. I created every stone and thread.”

“When you were a scholar?”

He nodded. “After scholars are recruited, they are given a dreamscape by which to practice their talents and abilities. Creating things—and destroying them. Manipulating reality so as to one day manipulate dreams. Mine was lost to the demons that inhabit it now.”

“But there are no demons here,” I whispered. “They aren’t outside of this door waiting for you.”

He lifted his head. The shadows in his eyes swam deep and thick. *Like syrup* , I thought.

And then he conceded.

His armor melted off his skin, replaced by a dark blue robe. My eye snagged on his chest. Followed it until it disappeared under a swathe of silk. I wasn’t sure if he wore anything else underneath.

“If I’m to wear this, you must wear something more suitable too, then.”

He titled his head. Slowly, my dress, still wet from the Nocturne and half-torn from our flight, shifted into a soft, flowing robe that mirrored his. His eyes melted as they beheld me. Turned raw and depthless—a testament to some unnamed emotion roiling underneath. Something primal, instinctive.

Something that spoke loudest in the shadows of the night.

I brought my hand up to touch his robe. I couldn't help it. It looked soft, and I was exhausted, I wasn't thinking—

"Why do you insist on doing that?"

Because I want to loosen your shields. Ease the pain from your eyes.

I lifted my hands, embarrassed, only to find him sliding them back.

"My question wasn't an order to stop."

My face flushed as I looked at our intertwined hands. His dark, hungry expression. The way his voice had dropped to a rasp. How his lips parted slightly as he searched my face. All my logic—every rational, careful side of me—became buried underneath something else. Something I wasn't familiar with.

"I haven't held someone like this before," he murmured. Restraint still mixed in his shadowed gaze. "I don't know how."

"I don't know, either," I breathed. "But I want to."

"Why?" There was that question again.

Why indeed.

I grazed his neck with my fingertips, raven hair sweeping over my skin. "You don't deserve to be alone any longer," I said softly.

"So it is because you pity me?" he asked, voice scarcely above a whisper.

I shook my head. "No, not at all." I paused, my lip caught between my teeth. "How could I pity you for something I've felt my entire life, too?"

We stared at each other for a few breathless, quiet moments. All that could be heard was the deep, hypnotic *thrum* of the Nocturne. And he still looked so damnably uncertain, like he wasn't sure he even deserved my touch. He was so broken, so deprived of anything genuine. I wanted to tear those thoughts from his mind—to be the light in the darkness that surrounded him.

"But you're not alone," he murmured. "You have a home. A family. I once mocked you for having those things—and for remaining in Norhavellis." The timbre of his voice dropped. "Truthfully, I envied you.

You had choices. Safety. Clarity in purpose. Hell, not being able to dream seemed preferable compared to the damnation of my castle."

"But I didn't have safety or purpose. I was lost," I protested, gripping his robe. His eyes softened. *I know what that feels like* , they seemed to say. "When I met you that day—when I walked into your castle—I never felt so alive. Even through the fear and uncertainty."

He laughed. "Then that makes you a fool. A complete and utter *fool* . You do not want this. This is nothing you—"

I grabbed his face and pulled it to mine, kissing him full on his mocking, irritatingly beautiful mouth.

He pushed away, eyes wide. Shadows still, for once.

Weighing. Measuring.

Then he crashed his lips back to mine.

He kissed me wildly—darkly. Exactly how I imagined he would prefer it. His lips were cool to the touch, tasting of starlight and velvet shadows. Of a cold breath of night air. I would drown in it, if I could, every bit as starved for him as he was for me. He curled one hand in my hair while the other was at my spine, drawing me closer.

After a moment, he leaned back. The shadows in his eyes simmered, taunting. "I'm a monster," he rasped. "You saw what I could do. What I did. I summoned them, Esmer."

"The man I met at the Revel didn't want to destroy the world. He wanted to help it."

"It doesn't matter what I thought. Or what I want," he whispered. "It doesn't fix anything."

"It *does* , though—"

"I don't belong here. *You* don't belong here. After what happened at the Nocturne, we could be stuck in this dream for years, reliving a past that wasn't ever meant to be."

"But maybe this is what Somnus intended for us to do. Maybe there's a way we can use this to save—"

"You think I need *saving* —"

"Save the *world* from *Corruption* ," I corrected. "Even if we're stuck here, we can use this chance to learn more about Corruption's origins and fix it once we return to our own reality. Or if we wake up and we're in your castle, then maybe we've passed Somnus's test and can walk free. And we can continue the fight against Corruption then."

His hands slackened. “You actually believe this?”

“We don’t know what will happen when we wake up, but we have to face it. And you won’t be alone. *I* won’t be alone, either.” I kissed him again, if not to rip that look of sorrow and dread from his eyes. He could mock, twist, and taunt all he wanted, but his eyes betrayed him. “You just need to surrender, Erebus. Let go of your guilt, your hatred, your doubt—everything.”

He pulled back, lips a breath from my own. I waited, but he did not correct me.

“Erebus,” I said again, twining a hand through his hair as he shuddered. My face burned knowing I could affect him like that. “Can I call you that?”

“Yes,” he breathed. “Yes, you can call me that.”

“Good.” I traced a hand across the shadows forming patterns over his exposed chest. His skin was cool to the touch; smooth, flawless, and a pale contrast to his raven hair. “I want to walk through these shadows with you, Erebus. I’m not afraid anymore.”

“You’re not?” His expressions softened, a hint of a smile playing at his lips. “Then you have convinced me,” he whispered, lips warming as he brushed them against my temple. “And for you, it seems anything is possible.”

Erebus didn’t hesitate after that.

He brought his mouth to mine, twisting his fist in my hair and pulling me to him. Pressed against him this closely, and with nothing between us but the thin fabric of our robes, I could feel every smooth, hard plane of him. Every lean muscle. The power in his arms as he held me. The shifting of his thighs as he brought me closer still.

We made it to the bed, somehow—he stumbled backwards, sitting on the edge, and I moved to his lap, all-too aware of how our robes had spilled open. His had slipped off a shoulder; mine had fallen open at the chest. He tugged my hair back, exposing my throat, and I felt teeth and shadow grazing my neck, tantalizingly slow, before he returned his attention to my mouth. An overwhelming urge burned inside me to do the same. To kiss him there, as he had done to me.

He groaned the second my lips met his neck.

I dragged my lips and teeth leisurely down his skin, pausing at the curve of his shoulder and the hollow of his throat. When I next looked at him, his eyes were clear—bright and filled with wonder. And when we finally

settled into his bed, curling into each other as if we could shield ourselves from the encroaching dark, we didn’t just feel anger, fear, or helplessness.

We felt, for perhaps the first time, a wild, reckless hope.

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CHAPTER 46

EYES OF MOLTEN SILVER, SPINNING SLOWLY WITH SHADOWS AND STARLIGHT, met mine.

Erebus.

We woke in his bed at the castle, no longer at Citadel Evernight, but for a moment we chose to ignore it. It was a mutually understood commitment to delaying the inevitable, but I didn't mind. A moment longer, draped in velvet and silk as Erebus held me against his chest—*that* was what I craved. I ran my fingertips down the side of his face, admiring his features. His hair, no longer black but his usual moon-white, curled over his brow and fell to his shoulders in a tantalizing sweep.

"Your white hair is back," I whispered, brushing it from his temples. He shivered at the touch, leaning into my hand. "It suits you."

"Most would say it makes me look like a ghost. Some bloodless, foul creature not meant to exist under the sun." He lifted part of my hair from where it rested behind my shoulders, rolling it between his fingertips. "I'm not sure when the color faded from my hair and my skin. Maybe it happened the moment I stopped believing I would one day walk free."

But while his hair had returned to what I knew it to be, his eyes seemed different. They were deeper, somehow, and absolutely radiant.

"And your eyes—"

"Are no longer the only ones with shadows in them," he finished, releasing my hair before guiding my hand to his lips. "Look at yourself."

A smooth, glass-like surface appeared in front of me, lifted by tendrils of his power, and I peered at my reflection. Sure enough, my eyes were now

as his were: silver and churning with shadows and stars. They would link me to him—make us truly seem united in power and intent.

But I didn't mind.

In fact, I very much *wanted* to be associated with this haunted man made of shadows and stars. For so long I'd wanted nothing more than to run from the darkness—to escape Norhavellis and carve out a future for myself somewhere else. I'd dreamed of how wonderful it would be to live a life of normalcy and safety. Once, I'd even dreamed of killing the man that lay before me, pressing his mouth to the inside of my wrist.

But a normal girl living a life without hardships wouldn't be able to fight Corruption.

A normal girl wouldn't be able to traverse the Dream Realm, learn its secrets, and emerge stronger because of it.

I needed to fight. I needed to face my purpose with my chin held high, even if the future was uncertain. I needed to fight for Elliot, for what might remain of my mother and father, and for Eden, too.

As soon as I shifted my attention back to Erebus, admiring his mouth and the way his hair fell over the hollows of his cheeks, the mirror retreated back to somewhere else in the room. He held my stare, even when he uncurled my hand and interlaced our fingers, and by his next breath, our hands were covered past the wrist in matching black leather. They were a stark contrast underneath the delicate sleeves of our robes.

"They're softer than metal, at least. Since you enjoy telling me how sharp and untouchable I am."

I flexed my hand, unused to the sensation of my hands being so thoroughly covered. "I'm assuming these are for protection against being 'lost to the Realm'?"

"You're catching on," he remarked, a brief smile lifting his expression. Then he murmured, almost as an afterthought, "But perhaps that is no longer the worst of fates."

His chambers were eerily quiet; there were no demons screaming for their release, no Weavers waiting to question us. It was just us, our spinning shadows, and a faint breeze drifting in from his balcony.

But try as we might, we couldn't hide here forever.

"Let's see if Somnus kept his end of the bargain," I said, beginning to sit up. "I'm thinking we should try the main entrance—"

Shadows roped around my wrists, catching me off-balance and pulling me into a pile of velvet pillows. Erebus leaned over me, quickly replacing the shadows with his hands, and kissed me.

There was no softness or patience in his kiss.

It was all fire, teeth, and tongue—and the vague, aching sense that it might be our last.

“Not yet,” he murmured, covering my body with his. My robe hitched up at the movement, and one of his thighs pressed between mine, pinning me in place. “I say we remain as we are.”

I arched into the feel of him, his surprising heat, and the way his clever lips moved across mine. When I was certain he was perfectly distracted at my neck, I threw the shadows back around him, yanking him out of bed by his shoulders.

“Stop kissing me like it’s our last,” I accused, standing to face him.

His eyes shuttered, betraying raw, desperate emotions clawing for attention. “I’m not.”

I shook my head. “You *are* . And because of that, we’re getting out of your bedroom and leaving this place. Immediately. We can come back to this”—I gave him a searing kiss of my own—“later. When we’re free.”

He thrashed against the shadows, but they held firm.

“Don’t make me drag you downstairs. It’s a long way down.”

He laughed then, the sound deliciously rich and mirthful. It made my face burn; the shadows slid from his shoulders, falling lazily to his feet. “I’d like to see you try.”

Erebus willed the shadows away as if they were as insubstantial as smoke, storming toward the door to his bedchamber. His robe slipped away as he walked, quickly replaced by his usual armor of liquid night and overlapping scales. He looked back at me, expectant, as the onyx crown he wore when I first met him slid into place, threading into his hair.

“What?” he asked, mouth twitching up into a half-grin. “I wasn’t about to face our fate in a robe. Unless that’s what you’d prefer.”

I decided I quite liked him like this.

Smiling, irritatingly beautiful, and *alive* .

I did my best to mirror him, willing my robe to change into a dark, flowing dress with scales like his and a crown to match. Adding a slit to the front gave my legs greater range, partially exposing a pair of slim boots, pointed and sharp, that swept up my calves like a second skin. The only

thing I didn’t like were the gloves he’d attired us with. I formed a new pair over the old, its claw-like fingertips reminiscent of the ones Erebus used to wear.

Catching him looking at me, I clicked the taloned fingers together. “I wanted to feel what it was like to be sharp and untouchable. I think I like it.”

Identical claws stretched from his gloves as he reached for me. As soon as our hands made contact, the metal covering our palms shifted into black leather. This was surprisingly pleasant; even with the harsh metal on top, I could feel the shape of his palm and the length of every finger.

“What a pair we make,” he murmured. Shadows spun around us in a slow dance. “Claws, scales, and onyx crowns. A wicked king and queen who can perhaps use their darkness for good.”

The castle vestibule was as I had remembered it, candelabras twinkling from their grooves in the walls and extravagant furniture beckoning from the shadows. Claw marks still gouged the walls and most of the tapestries and paintings were hanging loosely in snake-like tendrils, but beauty still remained. The castle was surely a ghost of Erebus’s original creation, but pockets of wonder and artistic intent were apparent. The iron doors were as I remembered, too—colossal and brimming with hundreds of meticulously carved figures.

We stopped just shy of the doors, silent as the weight of what we were about to attempt slid over us. Mithras had forbidden me from doing what I was about to do, but what power did his warning truly hold? The monstrous Shadow Bringer wasn’t a monster after all—and the real demons had already escaped, rendering my initial promise useless. I’d deal with Mithras and the repercussions of my choice later. I had no other choice; this *was* the path forward.

As long as the doors opened.

“Go first,” Erebus directed, taking a step back. “You should have no trouble stepping free of this place.”

“You have every right to go first. Or we should go together.”

Erebus made no motion to move, arms stiff at his sides. “I insist. Please.”

His uncertainty unnerved me. If the curse hadn’t been lifted, then what hope did we have? I steeled myself, taking a deep breath. If he couldn’t leave, I’d have to find a way forward myself.

There was no other path forward.

“Fine,” I said, quickly grabbing the handles and trying to hide my unease. They were cool underneath my palms, and the carvings, though shadows curled over their forms, were eerily still. “But I’m taking you with me the second I make it over the threshold.”

I pulled.

Surprisingly, it was as effortless as pushing aside a curtain, silent and smooth as the doors slid across the stone. Then, before I could dwell on what happened to Erebus when he temporarily left the boundaries of his castle, I took a quick step over the threshold.

No burning, no melting armor. No skin peeling from my bones.

Nothing.

“Come on,” I beckoned, immediately turning back toward the castle and holding out my hand. Erebus was still partially hidden in the shadows, firmly rooted in place. “I’m not leaving here without you, Erebus.”

He took a step forward, the toes of his boots dusting the threshold. They did not smolder or catch flame; still, when he grabbed hold of my hand, his was shaking. An ugly, unwanted part of my mind screamed at me, a violent, desperate warning. It hissed at me to drop his hand—to push him back inside the castle and slam the door—but I shoved it away, pulling him toward me instead.

I wanted him to be free. I *needed* him to be free.

Erebus flinched, silver eyes narrowing, but he allowed himself to be guided forward. And, most importantly of all—

He didn’t burn.

Erebus was, after five-hundred years of torment, *free* .

A heavy breath rushed out of him, trembling at the edges. It was night, as it always was, but stars dappled the sky, illuminating the surrounding forest with its iridescent leaves and a courtyard filled with sculptures, sapphire vases, and stone fountains with star-flecked water. Erebus closed his eyes, tilting his head back. Wind ruffled his hair, meandering through what remained of a few shadows atop his shoulders. His grip on my hand tightened.

A sharp *crack* from somewhere in the trees snapped us to attention.

What had been silent and motionless a breath before was now pure chaos; demons swarmed at us from beneath the trees, screeching and howling in a desperate, hideous plea. Some ran, some crawled, some

limped, but they all moved as quickly as their distorted limbs allowed. Erebus and I brandished our swords at the same time, and shadows rushed from the sky, the ground, and the castle itself to form a protective surge around us.

We didn't have time to do anything—breathe, think, move.

So we held our ground.

Surprisingly, the demons stopped just before the lowest stair, leaving Erebus and I towering over even the tallest of the horde. Eyes burned from within skulls and teeth gnashed from bleeding lips as they beheld us, making way for two familiar figures: the tall, grey-faced demon with a mottled cape and the coal-eyed demon with a sharp tongue and judgmental stare. The demons who had kept me company—if that was what it could be called—when I was alone in the castle.

When they reached the bottom of the stairs, they each gave a quick bow.

"These two seem familiar," Erebus said quietly, pressing a protective hand against my back.

"The grey-faced one led me to your castle; I wouldn't have found you without its guidance." I tightened my grip on my sword. The coppery tang of old blood, hot breath, and unwashed fur was close to making me gag. "And they both found me when I was alone. They spoke to me from the woods whenever I was on your balcony."

"What do you want from us?" Erebus asked, eyes sharp and assessing. The demons stilled, listening. "You're all free now. Unless you're back to demand your end—in which case, Esmer and I can gladly oblige."

A chill swept down my spine, brutal and sharp. Erebus and I against hundreds of demons was foolish—an impossibility. But there was no other way out. The sword in my hands seemed to sense my desperation; it hummed, faintly warming my hands.

From its knees, the grey-faced demon's lips twisted into a deformed smile. "*We aren't free yet. But soon we will be.*"

The coal-eyed demon nodded, expression solemn. "*Free us. Cleanse us. Only you know how.*"

The demons rose at the same time, a fiery, demanding hunger burning in their eyes.

And then they charged.

Erebus roared, bringing the surge of shadows down like a scythe. The force slammed the first wave into the stairs with a brutal *crack* that sent

stones flying and hurled dozens more back into the woods. In the middle of the chaos—between bleeding mouths, snarling teeth, and desperate lunges for our feet—Erebus threw us backward into a doorway-sized shadow.

It felt like slipping into a cold, icy pit. Like ice was sliding through my veins and a wind was pouring through the inner workings of my heart and plucking out anything dark or broken. It felt painful, briefly—but then it became a deep, comforting relief. Something that held onto my soul and poured water through its cracks, setting it free.

We stumbled from the shadow, now on the other side of the castle's sprawling courtyard.

"What *was* that?" I quickly asked. The demons hadn't noticed us, but it would only be a matter of seconds before they did. "It felt like my entire being was being cleansed. Or judged."

Erebus's jaw tensed. "I could feel the shadows working to pull something out of you. To examine—as you said—your very being. Your soul, perhaps." He looked at me briefly, eyes flashing in concern. "Did it hurt you?"

"No," I said, giving a firm shake of my head. "The opposite, really. Like a cold bath after a long journey in the sun."

Some of his concern ebbed. "Good."

"Would you be able to create something like that again? A doorway big enough that all the demons could fit?" The demons noticed us; they roared in frustration, hurling themselves from the stairs and the trees. "If the shadows can quell or purify the demons, it might be our only chance at stopping them."

Erebus's mouth tightened. "Yes. But while I'm doing that, I'll need your help containing them. A wall"—the demons were nearly upon us, crashing through the central fountain—"or a tunnel. Now—*hurry* ."

I shoved my fear aside and focused on the shadows; if I couldn't manipulate them, we'd be lost. They felt like a web around me—a web with strings I could pull and shape. I mentally pulled one, two—*it wouldn't be enough* —then grasped for fistfuls and armfuls, forcing them into a tunnel that the demons began to surge through.

Not enough.

I squeezed the shadows narrower and narrower, resisting every part of me that wanted to scream or run. The tunnel was as large as I could make it; I had no more to give.

It has to be enough.

The first demons to reach us lunged for our throats. I flinched, losing my grip on all the threads—and they crashed over the demons like a wave, merging with a pitch-black gateway that Erebus hurled down the tunnel in a frantic sweep.

For a brief moment, all was dark.

And then—

It was as if the shadows had been pulled from the sky itself, rendering the stars as brilliant as I'd ever seen them. The castle and its courtyard were washed in silver, revealing hundreds of demons losing fur, teeth, claws, skulls, wings—hundreds of broken, distorted creatures transforming before our eyes into men and women. They were human.

All of them.

The grey-faced demon had become an equally tall man with dark, honey-brown hair, and the coal-eyed demon was now a pale, lithe man with sharp features and black hair that framed his jaw in a smooth sweep. I recognized them instantly—they were the two men who entered the coliseum with Erebus at Evernight.

"Ceveon—Sorren," Erebus choked out, falling to his knees. "All this time, you were both here—?"

"Always," Ceveon said weakly, attempting a small but roguish smile. A few tears began to slide down his light brown face, but he brushed them away before they could so much as reach his jaw. "For you, always. Though your castle got to be a bit stifling, I'll admit. Especially when you can't communicate properly inside its walls."

"Stifling? That's putting it lightly." Sorren muttered, scowling at Ceveon. But when he turned to behold Erebus and I, his face settled into something that nearly resembled relief. His eyes, like Ceveon's, were glittering, but he did not cry. "Fortunately, five centuries pass like a blink when your mind is tethered to that of a demon's. Now the curse is broken and the real work can begin."

"I—"

"How curious," a new voice interrupted, its silky pitch threading through the courtyard, "that the demons in your castle weren't demons at all. Merely locked up souls, just as the tales declare. But you broke that narrative when you set them free today."

Somnus slid from the trees, hair covering his robes in inky tendrils. He didn't look at all surprised to find us; in fact, I sensed he had been watching the scene unfold from the very beginning.

"Somnus," Erebus bit out, surging to his feet. Around us, dreamers struggled into sitting or kneeling positions. Hundreds of dreamers, some sobbing, some groaning, some staring silently at the stars. Ceveon and Sorren staggered to their feet, flanking Erebus and I. "You knew. You *knew* that these men and women were locked inside the bodies of demons. All of this time—*all of this time* ."

"I had an idea. Though it was not mine alone," Somnus admitted, scarcely touching the ground as he strode toward us. "Aren't you happy I led them back to you?"

"Happiness would have meant being freed five-hundred years ago. Myself and all of these innocent dreamers."

"Impossible," Somnus said with a shrug. "Your entire domain was locked from outside interference until the moment you stepped free from it. You have Esmer to thank for that—whom, by the way, you wouldn't have had the pleasure of meeting *had* you been freed five-hundred years ago."

I found Erebus's hand and squeezed it. Shadows leftover from the dreamers' cleansing drifted around our bodies, winding through our fingers and clinging to our feet like they wished to protect us.

"She is the only solace I've had," Erebus rasped, more to me than to Somnus.

"Either way, I saved you the hassle of collecting all these poor, lost souls. They scattered like mindless beasts the moment they broke free," Somnus continued, giving Erebus and I a withering stare. "Fortunately, leaving the castle allowed them to speak and have a somewhat functioning sense of logic. Otherwise, my task would have been a bit more complicated. A strange curse indeed."

I shook my head. "But they're not mindless at all. They're *human* . All of them."

"That depends on your definition of 'human'. Their mortal bodies have already perished, but their souls remain intact. That will be something to deal with when you begin commanding them, I'm afraid." He added, muttering darkly, "If they will even listen, that is."

"What do you mean, 'deal' with?" Erebus bit out, face paling.

“We passed your test and proved ourselves to be true,” I added. “We owe you nothing else.”

“Oh, this concerns much more than myself,” Somnus said, sweeping his arms wide. “You have a corruptive curse to break, a half-dead army to train, and a red-eyed demon thirsting for your souls. Quite the mess on your hands.”

A serpentine smile slid across Somnus’s lips.

“Best get started, Shadow Weavers.”

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EPILOGUE

CITADEL FIRSTLIGHT HAD NEVER BEFORE FELT LIKE SUCH A TOMB.

Mithras jammed his fingers under his cloak, warming them as best he could. He wasn't sure why he felt so cold. Someone had left a window open —or a guard dwindled at his post exchange too long, allowing the night air in as they spoke with their replacement.

Damn them , he thought, channeling his rage at no one in particular.

His anger had better use targeting a ghost. There was no 'them' in these halls tonight. There was no open window or door. No one to blame, condemn, or lash out at.

But damn them anyways.

Because the more he could focus on a '*them*' , the more he could forget that the cold was coming from *him* .

He could feel it working through his veins. The bitter otherness of the thing that swelled within him. It would soon worm up his throat, stiffening his jaw and chilling his breath.

Hurry .

It hurt to breathe. His feet felt sluggish and dull.

Hurry .

He slammed his shoulder into the nearest door, stumbling inside and leaning heavily against it after it shut.

The third-floor chapel.

How fitting.

He locked the doors behind him, staggering to one of the seven mirrors that towered behind the altar. They were designed to reflect the

congregation; designed to honor the Maker and the seven Weavers who saw all. Tonight, they would reflect only him.

Him and the spirit of another.

When he was ready, or near enough to it, he looked up. The red eyes that met him in the mirror were not his own. He watched, disgusted and helpless as his mouth opened and closed.

"*You are running out of time, Mithras,"* the demon inside him hissed.

He regained control of himself just long enough to speak. "We've found a suitable host," Mithras gasped. A few breaths, if that, were all he was given in these conversations. "As soon as he is ready, I will bring you to him."

Mithras's skin itched. Like the thing inside him wanted *out* .

"*I will be the judge of his suitability. "*

"You always are, my lord."

"*Hmm, "* the creature rumbled. Mithras's hand began to move, and his head tilted down to behold it. He shoved down the overwhelming urge to recoil. The demon had never demonstrated this amount of mastery before. "*The longer I am here, the more I enjoy this body."*

"I am glad it serves."

"*Perhaps you are more of a fit than I realized. "* There was that hand again. Moving without his will. It moved higher, connecting with the muscles and ligaments of his arm, and traced part of his reflection. "*Would you deny it from me?"*

Mithras swallowed and shook his head. It was all he could manage.

"*No, you are too weak. My powers are manifested through your anger and your shame. A god does not belong in the body of a coward and a fool. "* The demon drew his hand away. Mithras's eyes—his own, but not—gleamed in the chapel's blue light, glowing crimson-red and smoking as if they were aflame. "*A god wishes to be in the body of one who commands the dark and makes it bend. "* His eyes smoldered; smoke rose from them in horrible rivulets, burning his skin. "*I think you are hiding them from me, Mithras. I think you are hiding them—and I will devour their souls and wear their skins before you can stop me."*

And in another breath, the demon left him.

Mithras fell to his knees, retching violently as he dug his fingers into the stone and tried to keep himself from screaming. He trembled as his fingernails clawed down, down, down, trying desperately to ground himself

in his body again. It was harder this time. It was harder every time. It used to take him a few minutes—seconds, even—to feel like himself.

Now it sometimes took days.

He did not recognize the tears as they fell. They curved down his frozen face and dripped onto the stone. Some wet the tops of his hands, but he couldn't feel them. He was afraid to think. Afraid to speak. So he wept in silence, tears carving trails across skin that did not feel like his own.

"I'm sorry," he finally whispered, fingers digging into the floor. It was a pathetic plea to everyone he'd ever hurt, betrayed, or tried to protect. Everyone he'd tried so desperately to save from the monster within him. Esmer. Erebus. *All of them.* He was about to break—shatter into dust. "*I'm sorry .*"

TO BE CONTINUED IN BOOK TWO OF THE SHADOW WEAVER DUOLOGY . . .

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GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Absolvers: Men and women given an allowance by the sovereign of Noctis to distribute and regulate the kingdom's elixir supply.
Corruption: A deadly affliction caused by the Shadow Bringer and his demons. A human can become Corrupt after a demon claims them in the Dream Realm. The only cure is through a "purification" ritual performed by the Light Bringer. The soul will be saved, but the mortal body will perish.
Demons: Monsters that haunt humanity's dreams and plague the Shadow Bringer.
Domains: Separate "kingdoms" within the Dream Realm that each host a Weaver. Dream scholars and acolytes are given small domains by which to practice and hone their skills.
Elixir: The only known substance to control Corruption. When consumed, it prevents the user from dreaming. However, it is extremely costly.
Light Bringer: As the esteemed sovereign of Noctis and leader of the Light Legion, Mithras Atrelle Tethebrum seeks to purify the kingdom's Corrupt. However, something twisted lurks behind his golden eyes.
Light Legion: Led by Mithras, the Light Bringer, the Light Legion travels the kingdom of Noctis to purify its Corrupted.
Maker: The central deity of Noctis who manages the Dream Realm and communicates to humanity through the Weavers.
Shadow Bringer: A monster said to have unleashed Corruption upon mankind. Though locked in a tomb five-hundred years ago, the Shadow Bringer still lives, sealed in with the demons only he can contain.
Righted King: A fabled king said to have united the seven Weavers in a battle against the Shadow Bringer's demons. Before his death and the defeat

of the Weavers, he created the elixir and sealed the Shadow Bringer inside a tomb.

Weavers: Immortal, powerful, and anointed by the Maker, Weavers manage, monitor, and protect the Dream Realm. They mysteriously vanished after demons, heralded by the Shadow Bringer, overran the Realm.

Weaver of the Past: Somnus
Weaver of the Present: Xander
Weaver of the Future: Theia
Weaver of Fire: Fenrir
Weaver of Water: Nephthys
Weaver of Earth: Ceres
Weaver of Air: Lelantos

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PLACES

Beyond: The Beyond is the Dream Realm's equivalent of Hell. A horrific, unfathomable place of darkness.
Citadel Evernight : Located in the Dream Realm, Evernight once served as a lavish gathering place for dreamers and an academy to dream scholars and the Weaver's acolytes.
Citadel Firstlight: Located in Istralla, Citadel Firstlight is where Weavers once communicated with earthly rulers. It is also where they slumber in immortal sleep. Now, it is where Mithras and his Light Legion operate from in their quest to cleanse Noctis from Corruption.
Dream Realm: The Realm is where the Seven Weavers once ruled, managing humanity's dreams and bringing divine inspiration to the masses. Now, the Realm is dying and infested by the demons that were unleashed upon it.
Istralla: The wealthy seaside capital of Noctis.
Noctis: A kingdom governed by the Light Bringer. Corruption festers in its shadows.
Norhavellis: A small, Corrupt-ridden village where Esmer and Elliot grew up.
Tomb of the Devourer: A cave-like structure where the living body of the Shadow Bringer is held.
Nocturne: An ancient sea in the Dream Realm that holds humanity's dreams. Demons infiltrated its waters, rendering it a poisonous sea of nightmares and decay.
Visstill: A large forest that surrounds Norhavellis and holds the Tomb of the Devourer.

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Acknowledgments

Ironically, *Dream by the Shadows* began after I dreamed of a white-haired prince caught in a twisted castle. That strange dream, along with a general fascination in dreams and their purpose, inspired me to finally fulfill a personal dream I've held since I was a child: to write and publish a book.

So, to my childhood self: we made it!

To my wonderful husband and two sons: one of you gave me an immense amount of support, one of you gave me purpose, and one of you gave me a strict deadline so that I'd finish before you were born. I love you all endlessly.

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commendable accomplishment. Support your indie authors—they are incredible and absolutely deserve it.

And finally, thank you to my readers! If *Dream by the Shadows* has found its way into your hands, I hope you enjoyed it. It was written for the dreamer in me and the dreamer in you, too. I hope you recognize your dreams and pursue them fervently.

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About the Author

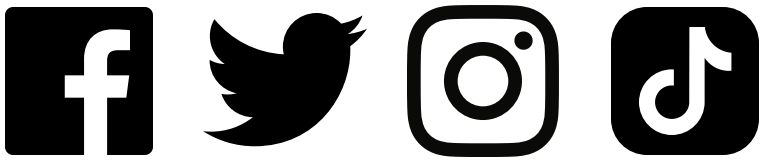
Logan Karlie grew up in the middle of cornfields and under a blanket of stars, surrounded by books, gravel roads, and her imagination.

After high school, she attended college to learn more about English literature, composition, and creative writing. After obtaining her Master of Arts in English, she studied to become a teacher of secondary education.

She currently resides in the Midwest with her husband, two sons, and a long-legged dog. Her worlds (both real and imagined) are largely fueled by iced coffee, unforgettable dreams, Spotify, and the occasional antique store find.

Dream by the Shadows is Logan's debut novel.

Connect with Logan on social media!



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Note from the Author

If you enjoyed reading *Dream by the Shadows* , please consider giving an honest review on Amazon, GoodReads, and/or anywhere else where reviews can be found by readers like you. Reviews are extraordinarily important to both readers and authors alike, and each and every one is appreciated. ***Thank you!***

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